



Library podcast

Taste of Iceland: Eliza Reid discusses 'The Write Stuff'

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[00:00:36] Hi, everybody. Hello.

[00:00:40] I'm Stesha Brandon. I am the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. It's my pleasure to welcome you tonight. And as we begin, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that we're gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present, and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to Central Library. And thank you all for joining us tonight for our event with Eliza Reid, presented in partnership with Iceland Naturally, Taste of Iceland, Seattle City of Literature, and Elliott Bay Book Company. We're also grateful to the Connie & Gary Kunis Foundation and the *Seattle Times* for their generous support of library programs. And finally, we would like to acknowledge the Seattle Public Library Foundation for their support of library programs and services. Private gifts to the Foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everybody in our community. And so, if any of you are our Library Foundation donors here tonight, thank you so much for your support. Tonight's program will include a presentation by Eliza Reid, followed by a conversation between Ms. Reid and Juan Carlos Reyes. And after their conversation, we'll have time for your questions. And now I'm delighted to introduce tonight's program. So, believe it or not, this is the 12th year that Iceland Naturally has produced A Taste of Iceland in Seattle,

[00:01:59] and, it's always such a wonderful time. Not only is Reykjavik a sister city to Seattle, but they are also our colleagues in the UNESCO Cities of Literature. And we are always delighted to clap, celebrate Icelandic culture here in Seattle. And the events for Taste of Iceland kicked off last week with a Nordic knitting conference, and they continued last night with a panel on gender equality at the National Nordic Museum in Ballard. There's a ton more to come in the next few days, including Cocteau classes, films, Icelandic food at some Tom

Douglas restaurants. And, tomorrow night there's the really popular Reykjavik calling concert at KEXP. And if there's just so much happening. You can look on Facebook, but also at Icelandnaturally.com. And I know there's also a big banner on right outside this door as well that has all the events. Tonight, though, we're highlighting Icelandic literary culture. And I'm delighted to introduce Eliza Reid, who will share more about their unique literary scene. Eliza Reid co-founded the Iceland Writer's Retreat with Erika Green in late 2012, and the first event was held in 2014. Eliza is also a writer and editor. She was a staff writer at *Iceland Review magazine* and editor of Iceland Air's *Inflight magazine* from early 2012 until mid-2016.

[00:03:18] Eliza has degrees from Trinity College at the University of Toronto and from St. Antony's College in Oxford University. Eliza grew up near Ottawa, Canada, and then moved to Iceland in 2003. And her husband, Gudni Johannsson, Johannesson, sorry, Gudni Johannesson took office as President of Iceland in August 2016, and she became the country's First Lady. In that capacity she has been active in the promoting of gender equality, entrepreneurship and innovation, tourism and sustainability and of course, the country's writers and rich literary heritage. I'm also happy to introduce Juan Carlos Reyes. Juan Carlos has published the novella, *A Summer's Lynching* and the fiction chapbook, *Elements of a Bystander*. His stories, poems and essays have appeared in *Ascentos Review*, *K.G.B. Lit*, and *Hawaii review*, among others. He was a 2018 Jack Straw Writer's Fellow and was the recipient of the Artist's Trust's 2018 LaSalle's Storyteller Writers, excuse me, LaSalle's Storyteller Award in Fiction. He's currently an assistant professor of creative writing at Seattle University and the chief editor at *Big Fiction magazine*. And in his copious free time, which he does not have any, Juan Carlos also sits on the board of Seattle City of Literature, the nonprofit which helps manage Seattle's designation as a city of literature. So, after a brief presentation when Carlos will speak with Ms. Reid. But before that, please help me welcome Eliza Reid. [applause]

[00:04:50] Thank you very much Stesha and hi, everyone, it's great to be here. Thank you for coming out to the library on a Friday night.

[00:04:57] Isn't it cozy to be in a library after hours on a rainy Fall's evening? This should be really fun.

[00:05:04] I hope. I'm going to talk to you for about 25 minutes, I guess. But that includes two videos. So you'll get a break from my voice for a little while. As the top topic here says, I'm going to talk to you about why Iceland, about Iceland's literary heritage in general, and why Iceland has this deep literary heritage and how people who want to visit the country, or want to experience some of that, can do so. As Stesha mentioned, Iceland or Reykjavik, Iceland's capital, is a UNESCO city of literature.

[00:05:40] It's actually the world's first non-native English speaking such city. And Iceland has also one of the highest book publishing, book buying, book writing rates per capita in the world. So there's a long tradition here of the writing heritage.

[00:05:56] I'm going to introduce Iceland. How many of you have been to Iceland before and how many of you have not been but want to go?

[00:06:04] And has anyone not put up your hand yet? My son at the back now puts up his hand. That's not counting any.

[00:06:13] So this is Iceland. Island in the North Atlantic, population about 350,000 people. Quite easily reached from Seattle. In fact, there are direct flights by Iceland Air in about seven hours. You can reach Iceland, use it as a stop over to Europe. But we like it when you stay and pay us a visit. The country has no indigenous population, but was settled in around the end of the ninth century by people from the Nordic countries like Norway, who had also picked up some slaves from the Celtic Islands.

[00:06:45] The language spoken is Icelandic, which is essentially Old Norse, but English is very widely spoken for tourists. One of the other informal names that we'd like to give Iceland is [Icelandic language] Story Island, which again shows a little bit about why it is important to us.

[00:07:03] I just wanted to give you a little bit of an introduction to the event that I co-founded and run, called the Iceland Writer's Retreat. As such, I mentioned I started it with my friend Erica Jacobs Green and we ran the first event in 2014. Essentially, if you think about it, it's for writers what say a cooking class in Thailand might be. It's for anybody who wants to sign up and come and take part,

[00:07:25] who likes the written word, whether you are a full time author or like to tinker at home or anywhere in between.

[00:07:32] We invite over well-known authors from various different countries, and they lead writing workshops on various topics and each class has between five and 15 people. And our participants take these different classes on all different kinds of topics. And then we also

combine that with an introduction to Iceland's rich literary heritage. So, we have day tours in the Icelandic countryside. They're led by an Icelandic author.

[00:07:58] For the first few years, it was my husband until he got a better job.

[00:08:03] And we have different kinds of stops. We have a pub night with music and readings by local authors. We have a Q&A panel with the writers and all kinds of different things. And we try to keep the atmosphere very friendly and informal. In the top photo on the left that's my co-founder, Erica and myself. These are some images from the event. And you'll see in the top right, it says, Iceland Readers Retreat, not Iceland Writers Retreat. That is a new sort of sister event that we're launching next April. And that is a similar idea. Some of the events like the tours will run at the same time. But it is intended for people who love to read but don't necessarily want to write. So, we invite people to take part in all of the introduction to Iceland's literary heritage,

[00:08:46] but instead of attending writing workshops, they will go to lectures and sort of seminars with authors. So we have a panel that will be lined up with five Icelandic authors of different genres who will talk about their background and what they do. And we have New Yorker staff writer Adam Gopnik coming over who will talk about his oeuvre and his themes and writing and what he does all in a sort of small group environment. And that event is all taking place next April. We're moving it to later where the days are longer. So it's April 29th to May 3rd next year. And we'll also be running a writing competition to win a spot. If you sign up for a mailing list. So take a look on our website if you're interested in that. I'm just going to show you a short three and a half minute video now, which is from the Iceland writer's retreat in 2015 just to give you a bit of a sense of it.

[00:09:36] I will tell you, though, that we had a blizzard that year in April on the tour, unusually so. It's a little more wintry than we aimed for.

[00:09:44] Ok. That was video number one, video number two comes up at the end.

[00:09:50] The lecture is going to continue now. I wanted to give you a bit of a background on how this literary tradition started.

[00:09:57] I assume that most of you here for literature talk have heard about the Icelandic sagas, Iceland's sort of most major contribution to world literature of which we're very proud.

And as you can imagine, you know, in this country, in the North Atlantic, where there weren't a lot of natural resources, say, with which to build buildings or materials, to create paintings or to do sculptures or create musical instruments, really for people to be able to express themselves creatively, they needed to refer to the written word. And so, for sort of pragmatic reasons that developed that way. And there was always this emphasis within families, within communities and societies, on literacy and on being able to read, and to share these stories. So later on in the Middle Ages and beyond, children who were going to be confirmed couldn't be confirmed into the church unless they learned how to read. And there was an emphasis also on girls learning to read. And this, this tradition really has continued. And people would recite the stories in the dark winter nights to each other and really have been inspired in the modern era from these old tales. They are what David Mitchell, the author, called Iceland's textual treasure, if you will.

[00:11:15] And what the Icelandic author, Hallgrímur Helgason and I look up the quote said, "What gives us confidence as writers nowadays in the modern ages?"

[00:11:27] But obviously, Icelandic literature is more than just the Icelandic sagas. Here you will see the photos in the upper right hand corner. That's a photo of Halldor Laxness, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955. He's Iceland's only Nobel Prize winner to date. And I always used to say that that also means that Iceland has won more Nobel Prizes per capita than any other country.

[00:11:51] We all we have the most per capita statistics per capita, also.

[00:11:56] Having said that, I then discovered a couple of years ago that there is a physicist from the Faroe Islands who won a Nobel Prize, and the Faroe Islands has a much smaller population than Iceland's. So, we don't get to count that anymore. But I'll say we've won the most Nobel Prizes for literature per capita. So that's Halldor Laxness on his left at his home just outside of Reykjavik, which has now been turned into a museum. There are a great number of museums in Iceland that are in the homes of writers. And that's one of the stops that we make on the Iceland writer's retreat in Iceland, readers retreat. But it's also open to the public in general to visit. Some of the images along the bottom there are other books by Icelandic authors. Now we have a great surge in crime fiction books and other novels. And this evening, we have a wonderful and broad selection of books for sale here, thanks to the Elliot Bay Book Company. So please take a look when the talk is finished. And that also reminded me that I completely forgot at the beginning of the talk to mention that I have some swag giveaway. So, if you have a question or a comment, you're probably not going to win if it's a negative comment. I'm going to tell you up front. But something to say, you can hashtag Taste

of Iceland, We are Iceland Writers, make a comment on Iceland Naturalist, Facebook page or on Instagram or these social media channels.

[00:13:17] And our wonderful PR people will maybe give you an Iceland Ranger T-shirt or a book or pair of mittens knit by my mother-in-law which

[00:13:26] I highly recommend.

[00:13:27] Or maybe if you ask a fantastic question tonight, I'll just give them way. Then we'll just see what happens. But please be active on social media.

[00:13:37] All right. Here come the beautiful Icelandic photos.

[00:13:40] So what makes Iceland so inspirational for writers or for people who love the written word or visiting Iceland? Obviously, the landscape is a huge part of that. We all know as creative people and we want to write anytime we go somewhere new, that gives us a sort of that jolts our system a little bit and gives us a new inspiration. But, you know, there really is nothing like sitting in a very tiny little cottage on a cliff edge and hearing the rain lashing the windows and the waves crashing against the rocks to sort of inspire your creativity and see what is going on. So, certainly Iceland's unique landscape and geology is a mine of inspiration for writers, both domestic and foreign. We also have this wonderful respect or tradition, I guess respect is the best word, for creative pursuits in general, and especially I would venture to say the written word, authors and writing.

[00:14:38] So for instance, you can actually apply for what is called Myndlistarsjóður(?), an artist's salary really through the government. And if you are a poet or an artist or other creative people, they're very competitive.

[00:14:50] And you can earn for six months or a year or two years, a salary from the government for your creative output, which shows, again, I think, the societal support for these kinds of endeavors.

[00:15:03] The first year that we had the Iceland writer's retreat, we were fortunate that the then president of Iceland hosted a reception for everyone at the presidential residence. And in

his speech about writers, he said that there are more statues of writers in Reykjavik than there are politicians. Also prioritizes things,

[00:15:22] I hope, in a nice way.

[00:15:24] And that same first year as well, we had a participant take part from New Jersey. And she said to me, you know, when I when I'm back home and I ask people, ask me what I do and I tell them I'm a writer. Everyone says, OK, but what's your actual job? Or they say, well, how can you earn a living or are you like a brochure writer? Or they they're a little bit disparaging about it. And she said she was at a cafe in Reykjavik and someone started talking to her and said, what do you do? And she said, I'm a writer. And they said, oh, wow. What do you what are you working on? Tell me what your new project is.

[00:15:55] And that's something that really stuck with her in terms of this just this sort of pervasive respect and realization that the creative pursuits are valuable contributions to the soul of a society.

[00:16:12] Here comes some more nice pictures. There are also some great traditions associated with writers and writing in Iceland. So now this time of year in the middle of October is the beginning of the Christmas book Flood, The Jolabokaflod, when the vast majority of books that are published in the country come out. The book is still the most popular Christmas present to give, although not as popular it was, but still very popular. And there's all kinds of author. The authors are going out to promote all their books now, and they do readings in, you know, public swimming pools, at law firms and companies and libraries and all kinds of different events. And all the books that are getting published come out in this catalog that gets sent free to every home, and I would say is almost as popular as the IKEA catalog. Just very, very popular in Iceland.

[00:17:04] So these are a few things that writers themselves have to say about Iceland. I can stand here, so I'm not looking up to read it.

[00:17:10] W.H Auden, who is an Iceland friend, said that he was not, while he was not always thinking about Iceland, he was never not thinking about Iceland. You ponder that for a minute.

[00:17:23] Dean Nelson from *The New York Times* traveled to Iceland. Talk about their storytelling, culture and traditions. He had this wonderful phrase that Iceland is covered with thick layers of stories.

[00:17:39] And finally, Geraldine Brooks, who taught at our event in the first year, 2014, said Iceland is the most creatively stimulating place I have ever set foot.

[00:17:50] Just realize this is a podcast, so I should probably read the quotes because people listening later so I will continue.

[00:17:55] The landscape is so otherworldly that it forces you to see with fresh eyes. And being in a culture that's so rich in literature is remarkable. The depth and breadth of the writing tradition and the modern commitment to literature is breathtaking. Writing amazing Icelandic horses over the lava fields, listening to extraordinary live music and some of the friendliest chill-est bars I've had the pleasure to visit. Seeing good sights and gazes. Feeling the tingling shock of the hot springs, I can't mention a highlight because the entire time was a high.

[00:18:28] We were very happy when she wrote that. So, if you like to write, you know what?

[00:18:32] What can you do?

[00:18:33] I mean, one of the great things is that you can visit at any time of year in Iceland, because if you're going for inspiration this summer, the long nights, the northern lights, the snow storms, it can all be fodder for creative writing or non-fiction writing or anything.

[00:18:48] You can also rent different kinds of flats or go through different, you know, residences and places in the countryside.

[00:18:56] There are other festivals other than the Iceland Raise Your Street. There's a crime fiction festival. There's been a science fiction festival. We have a literature festival every two years. It has a lot of free events. And you can also visit the homes of a lot of writers that are now museums.

[00:19:10] They all seem to be set up from former male authors. And that's something that we need to improve a bit on. But you'll see in the right hand side, this is the home of Snorri Sturluson, Prose Edda. He wrote a lot of the sagas or is credited with doing that. On the left is a place called [Icelandic language] in the south east. And what I love about this building that was built, constructed by the people in the community where [unintelligible] lived, you'll see along the side here, those are the spines of all of the books that he wrote.

[00:19:39] And this is the side of the museum. And two of my children are there as sort of for scale post, posing at the front there.

[00:19:49] So those are few words from the authors. I also forgot to mention that I have some, next to where all the books are for sale,

[00:19:54] there's some flyers and bookmarks as well for the Iceland writer's retreat and the Iceland readers retreat. Thank you very much. Looking for the conversation now. [applause]

[00:20:10] Hey, this is on? Hey, Juan Carlos raising a nice to see all of you here. And thank you. That was an amazing presentation. And in the words of the great fictional character, Liz Lemon, I want to go to there as soon as possible. So, the question that I was processing, both learning about you and then listening to you speak about Iceland is: How the country has changed you or how has the country changed you from arriving as somewhat of an outsider and seeing it from that vantage point, and then having it shape you, your life for the last, what, almost 20 years, right?

[00:20:52] Yeah. Almost 20 years. And certainly it's been a part of my life now for over 20 years. That's an excellent question.

[00:21:00] I suppose it's a little bit hard to separate how Iceland as a nation has changed me versus how becoming a wife or a parent or a first lady has changed me or, you know, any of the other changes that one goes through in in 20 years.

[00:21:17] I suppose if I'm thinking about it right away,

[00:21:22] I have I've always had this tremendous,

[00:21:28] I guess envious-ness is not the word, but I grew up just outside of Ottawa, which is not at all near the sea. And now I am surrounded by the sea all the time. And I love the sound of the sea. I love the smell of the sea or the different smells of the sea. And, I see how the ocean and all things aquatic really get in your bones when you live there.

[00:21:52] And I can see how people who are born there.

[00:21:54] You know, it's hard to be separated from that somehow. And that's something that I'm sort of acutely aware of now. So if it's something connected to nature, I would say that that's the first answer.

[00:22:04] If it's something connected to society or character, I think that Iceland has made me more laid back because

[00:22:16] you can't plan anything in Iceland. And I like to plan, so. Or, you know. And I think this comes from this. This long heritage of you don't know. You know, when the fishing catch will come back, or if there's going to be a volcanic eruption where everyone has to drop everything else and fix that.

[00:22:33] And so there's this sort of Icelandic psyche. We often say this phrase, "petta reddast"

[00:22:38] Like a workout, we'll get it sorted out. And when I first moved to the country, I found that very difficult to deal with. Because I always wanted to know, you know, what I was doing or if somebody changed plans. I found that frustrating. And I think I'm better at going with the flow and maybe not quite as good as if I was born in the country. But I'm getting better.

[00:22:57] So in terms of going with the flow, being that sort of planner and having that such a big part of you with this writer's retreat. Take us through the formation of that, from conception of idea to the development of it, and even how that has molded what it is that you think about craft, and how you think about literary culture in Iceland. Well,

[00:23:22] like so many good ideas, it started over a bottle of wine. And Erica, my co-founder, is a writer and editor.

[00:23:30] She's been editing for a number of years and I was working in that in that field in Iceland and we were having a drinking a bottle of wine one night, and she just came back from a writer's retreat, I can't remember which one in the U.S. And she was full of ideas and inspiration and all of this.

[00:23:45] And she said to me, I wish they had something like this in Iceland, because everybody loves writers in Iceland. And this would be fun. And I said to her, yeah. You know I said, hey, we should just do that.

[00:23:54] And I like organizing things, you know? And at first we thought, oh, well, it'll just be an excuse for us to meet for lunch sometimes. And, you know, who knows, we'll come of it.

[00:24:03] And then quite quickly, actually, just we came up with a business plan and, you know, a marketing group and an idea that we wanted to do.

[00:24:10] And I think, you know, as all of you know, with writing communities, you can create all kinds of events. You can create small things, big things, events that you have to sort of audition or become, apply and become accepted to, or that feature all kinds of, you know, get your novel published, find an agent, how to pit you, this sort of business side of writing. And we really saw it as almost like a vacation for like-minded people.

[00:24:35] So. And we wanted to have the tone a lot where people could really be and be friendly and welcoming. And then it didn't matter what your background experience was, that there was something for everyone there that you could get from it.

[00:24:49] So that was sort of our driving force. We had some authors that we thought to be fun to meet and hang out with. So we would invite them to come and teach. And we've had such a wonderful experience since we started it. If you're connecting that to Iceland, one of the most positive experiences that I think I've had with it with creating this, which I think again reflects in a positive way on Icelandic society as a whole, is the reception that we had with various stakeholders for lack of a better term, when we started meeting with it. So we had this idea.

[00:25:21] We needed, hopefully, some sponsors, and we also needed legitimacy. The first year, you know, we didn't have anybody who'd gone before. We needed some proper logos that we could put on our website, all of that kind of thing. And so we called and met with people from Reykjavik, UNESCO's Cities of Literature, from the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Tourism,

[00:25:45] and companies like Iceland Air who are a founding sponsor. And we told them about our idea. And nobody said to us, okay, how many writers or retreats have you run before? You know, everybody took the meeting. Everybody listened and could make a decision quite quickly as to whether or not, you know, they wanted to work with it. Everybody was positive overall. And I think that that comes with this idea that Iceland is a small society where just 350,000 people. And so you have to wear a lot of hats. You know, you can't just be a writing festival organizer. You have to do lots of different things. And because of that, people go through all kinds of professional iterations. So they you know, people are used to this, these different ideas and this adaptability and are quite creative in a business sense as well. And so people are open to those new ideas. So we had a very positive experience in that sense. And then it's just incredibly personally rewarding to see people, to see something come to fruition.

[00:26:47] You know, the like probably like publishing a book, which I haven't published a book. But I can imagine that, you know, all this work that you put into it and then it comes out and that the people enjoy it. And that's just very, very rewarding.

[00:27:01] I love that story because it points to a sense of trust in the community with each other, so it isn't just about wearing many hats, but trusting that you can. When the time comes, and that sense of trust is sort of lingering in my head now as I'm thinking and formulating this question because it's about crime fiction. It's about crime fiction in a nation or from a nation that doesn't experience a lot of crime. So where does that spirit come from to create those kinds of stories?

[00:27:30] That's a good question. We have, not only do the crime fiction now, we have this great festival, Iceland Noir, which has been going on a few times. We get a lot of crime fiction authors. I mean, there's been a trend for Nordic noir and obviously Iceland's nature and location. It's atmospheric. I mean, lots of isolated locations, lots of darkness, lots of wind and bad weather. Taciturn individuals. All the seeds of noir, right? Right, exactly. Exactly. So maybe that's in human nature to delve into the darker side of people's psyches. And you know, I think people pick up on trends and not I don't think that authors go out, you know, to write books to think what kind of a book can I write that's going to sell well. But, you know, the more

books that you see of a certain genre, maybe then you think, oh, that would be kind of interesting to write that, or you get other ideas that way as well.

[00:28:19] So, you know, the Icelandic noir has also come along with all the Nordic noir sort of books and things.

[00:28:27] Oh, so I guess this leads to then the next question. So, one of the most popular questions to ask an author or somebody involved in literary world is what are you reading right now?

[00:28:36] I'm going to tell you the straight up truth and you may or may not laugh. I mean, this is not a contrived answer.

[00:28:43] I am reading the memoirs of Madeleine Albright.

[00:28:48] Why would I ask if that's contrived? You wouldn't have asked. I don't know.

[00:28:50] I don't know. I'm kind of, I go through phases, so, I mean, I sort of. I really like non-fiction and I like memoir and I like politics and I like reading about women in public life.

[00:29:02] I don't know why that would be so. So, I'm reading her memoirs right now. I am in a, recently, a book club and they're reading *American Gods* in like a week. So I guess I should start that soon. So there's, I've got quite a few on my on my wish list.

[00:29:21] Cool. So we'll stop here for a moment and pause if there's any questions from the audience.

[00:29:27] Please feel free to raise your hand, like a gentleman over here, and I will bring a mike to you. There we are. I will bring you a mike to you for the podcast.

[00:29:39] Hi there. Last year, my wife and I started to the practice of Jolabokaflokkur because I'd read about it, but it was since it was our first time, we you know, I didn't know quite the

intricacies of, you know, buying, you know, buying books for someone like that. Is there anything specifically regarding Jolabokafloð that you would suggest in terms of the way you, you know, celebrate it? The Christmas book Jolabokafloð?

[00:30:14] You mean, yes?

[00:30:17] No, I think it's more of a process over the three months and I personally see it as sort of just a lead up to advent in the Christmas season.

[00:30:26] And that overall I confess that I've so much less time nowadays that I don't go to so many book launches and readings and things like that at this time of year, because I just go to so many other public events. But I always walk into bookstores, find out what's you know, find out what's for sale.

[00:30:45] Both my husband and I are always excited to get books on Christmas Day and start to read them during the day and go through them. I like a good crime fiction book for Christmas. You know? It's a step, way too late at night because the murder is still on the loose.

[00:31:00] Don't lie. You just said memoir a second ago. I know. I know. Memoir and crime fiction.

[00:31:04] Those are kind of my two, two things.

[00:31:08] So as we sort of, please feel free to raise your hand and Sesha will walk the microphone over to you. But right before we get to that question, so I did put it to Twitter to see if any questions would come my way for you,

[00:31:21] and one friend of mine from L.A., sort of Asian-American writer, had mentioned something about the Thai diaspora in Iceland. Right? That it's sort of like extensive out there. What are sort of that the diaspora communities that we would find in Iceland when we travel there?

[00:31:37] So and I will, to sort of expand your question a little bit, to connect that to literature, because it's an interesting question. So Iceland now is about 12 percent of the population living on the island is foreign born, which I believe, or I understand, is similar to that of the U.S.. So, in fact, Iceland is much more multicultural now than people might think. There is, and that has changed in you know, certainly in the 16 years I've lived there. It's a lot different. But that by far the largest community of people who are foreign born come from Poland. And then there's a number of people from Thailand, the Philippines, the Baltic countries, you know, various different countries. The way in which I think that this relates to literature a lot, though, is because these immigrant voices aren't necessarily being reflected yet in literature coming out of Iceland. And that has to do with the Icelandic language. So people most you know, I think almost 100 percent of people that immigrate to Iceland do so, not already fluent in the Icelandic language, certainly not fluent enough to be writing something originally in the language. And I think that we will have to wait really until the next generation, the people, the children born to these immigrants start to write themselves in Icelandic. But having said that, we are now I am remembering his surname, Mazen Maarouf. I believe he's a Palestinian writer who was a refugee in Iceland. And he published a book that he wrote in Arabic that's been translated into Icelandic and short stories. And it was nominated for not forgetting which rather large book prize. So and, you know, Iceland is reflected in that. So we are seeing more of those voices and hopefully will in the future as well. But, you know, that always takes a little time to do with the language.

[00:33:25] That's amazing. Thank you. We have a question here.

[00:33:30] Hi. Thank you for being here tonight. So I've read books written in Iceland and enjoyed them. I'm a fan of Sjon and maybe I'll find some more tonight over there. My question, though, is, are there any books that are written in Icelandic originally that haven't been translated that you've enjoyed,

[00:33:44] and maybe you could tell us a little bit about them?

[00:33:47] There's a lot of books that haven't been translated into English. I mean, there's actually there's such a demand for more translation now that we need more translators.

[00:33:57] So if any of you want to go and learn Icelandic really well and then translate books into English, you would probably have some work lined up for you. I'm going to confess straight up to you that I tend to read the books in English translation just because, you know, when I'm doing my reading, I am tired and it's a night. And so I end up reading in English. I'm trying to be more diligent, as we would say in Icelandic of reading,

you know, in Icelandic originally, because that's how you get faster at reading it. You know, it builds on itself. Probably what I would be reading more if it came out is memoir. Memoir is a big genre in Iceland because it's a small society. And so it's very common, say, for families or people who you know about somebody who's lived a public for your life to publish their memoirs, someone else to publish a biography of them. And that's a great insight into the individual and into society as a whole. And those books, of course, because of interest, aren't generally translated. I probably start with the numerous books that my husband has written. That word translate.

[00:35:05] Wait, is that a secret? Oh no, he knows. I read bits and pieces, but never.

[00:35:10] I should sit and read through, of course.

[00:35:14] Another question. Is that a hand up there? Okay, I'll be right there.

[00:35:26] Yeah. Hi, my name's Mark. I guess one of the questions I've got speaking to the other side of your heritage is how does your Canadian or outsider status influence your Icelandic writing concerns, curiosities? And I guess the last and most important question is, when is Canada going to bring back a cup?

[00:35:47] Seriously? I know.

[00:35:51] Are you Canadian? OK. OK. So was Detroit Canadian now? No, no.

[00:35:57] Well, if you're asking about the second question of the cups of Steve Eisenman went to my high school, so that's her.

[00:36:03] That's a hockey joke for anybody else. Nobody else.

[00:36:08] But I'm glad you get a hockey question at an Icelandic literature event. That's a first. And now I've read the first question, which I knew how I was gonna answer. You were asking about. Oh, as a Canadian and an outsider, how it sort of reflected my writing.

[00:36:21] So Icelanders have a phrase [Icelandic language] to see things with a guest's eyes. And of course, I can't compare it to anything else because that's the only way in which I see Iceland. You know, I always came there as an adult. But certainly I started doing a lot of travel writing when I was there and I did a lot of travel writing about Iceland. And I had the opportunity to travel around the country very often and meet people and do different activities and write about it. And that was something I always liked in the sense that I lived in the country. And so I felt like I was getting to know the society and the people.

[00:36:54] But because I came from somewhere else, it gave me a perspective that I could help identify maybe some of the things that were unique or special or worth talking about, that people who had grown up in Iceland saw as so commonplace that they didn't really think anything of it. And I think, you know, things like this respect for literature is one of them. Some of the other issues to do with, say, gender equality or other ones where people like, wait, what is it like that in Iceland? And everybody it's such a sort of commonplace thing.

[00:37:24] So I would say overall that that that's how that's affected my writing, I guess, or I tend to write it.

[00:37:34] It enables me to maybe search out areas or things that I can write about and highlight

[00:37:41] things that aren't really that every day that the people who are born in Iceland might think are more every day.

[00:37:46] Was there any fear associated with those early encounters with Icelanders and writing about them and being an outsider and in a way, interrogating, investigating them? Was there any fear on your part in getting to know this new culture and getting to meet these folks and potentially telling their stories in a way that,

[00:38:08] again, from the outsider's perspective, was there any fears? Well,

[00:38:11] I don't know if I would say fear, but there's always I think there's a fine line that you walk when you are. So I feel Icelandic as well, you know, spent my adult life in Iceland. I have Icelandic citizenship. I speak the Icelandic language. So, you know, I speak about Iceland in in the first person.

[00:38:27] But I obviously wasn't born and raised there. And I think that there is a fine line when you're talking about a country, especially if you want to say anything negative, which, you know, I would say something negative maybe about Canada, so that it can sound you know, it can sound patronizing or something like that.

[00:38:43] And I think I think that's a very fine line that you have to be careful of that, that you're not saying, well, why? Why do you do it like this? Where I come from, we do it like that. And, you know, that's obviously not a message that you want to do. And I think as a writer, when you're writing for a broad audience, when I was doing travel writing, you have to be very careful about that, the comparisons that you're making because you have this sort of global audience, so you don't want to limit yourself too much in terms of in terms of references.

[00:39:11] You know, if I said that Iceland is the same size as Kentucky, I mean, maybe Americans know that, but a lot of people have no idea how big Kentucky is or not,

[00:39:17] so those kinds of situations, I don't even think most Americans know how big Kentucky is. [laughter]

[00:39:25] Another question.

[00:39:27] Hi. I was wondering what you considered to be unique about the Icelandic voice and the Icelandic literature as compared to the rest of the world.

[00:39:36] What do I consider unique about the Icelandic voice? There's lots of different things. I think that this is a very good question. I think that, you know, Iceland's unique nature always impinges on that in a way. And the fact that Iceland, as shown mentions in the video, is an island.

[00:39:55] And so were this, you know, the small society where everyone knows each other, the family familial ties are very important. But I think what is also interesting is, is despite maybe, you know, unusual circumstances. So this tiny, sparsely populated island in the North Atlantic, volcanoes or is poverty if you're setting a story. Yet somehow these stories have resonance with peoples around the world. I mean, that's why they're being translated and sold and read and purchased in different countries around the world, because I think that the

human story is so relatable. If you've got a good story, if you've got a good narrative and characters, you can be living a completely different life somewhere around the world and you can still find it interesting. You know what? [unintelligible], after *Summerhouses* is doing an *Independent People* for Halldor Laxness, even though that is not relatable to a lot of people. And that's just the story of the human condition, if you will. I think.

[00:40:53] Yeah, it's interesting, too, because it also speaks to the authority of the voice and the comfort there, knowing that we all know each other and so speaking to a community and at the same time having that comfort translate internationally. I know that Icelandic authors are often asked, you know, with translation, especially the bigger selling authors who know pretty much that their next books are going to be translated into different languages.

[00:41:15] People often say to them, do you consciously write thinking, Oh, I better not talk about this particular tradition or this particular store because no one in Germany or France or the States is going to know what I mean. And they always say, no, I just write I write for an Icelandic audience. And if we need to clarify something in translation, we do that.

[00:41:32] But they write for the home audience and they don't have to do the backstory or anything.

[00:41:37] Well.

[00:41:43] So in terms of the relationships that the authors themselves have and that Reykjavik and Iceland as a society has, how important is it to be part of these international networks or to have the connections like with sister cities and the cities of literature and the sort of common literature centers and things? How does that play into your work? Into the work you see?

[00:42:08] I mean, I'm not working with the city of literature, but I know that they're really active and maintain these connections. And a lot of those I think, are just sharing of different ideas and perspectives in terms of activities, promoting literature, as I'm sure you guys all know, everyone's doing different initiatives and ideas.

[00:42:21] And so I'm sure that that's, you know, absolutely important. And, you know, that's a great it's a great way of authors getting to know each other. So they and they get they make different contacts. They get invited to different literary festivals and different kinds of countries.

And that's really important as well. It's a great way to share the different cultures of these different countries.

[00:42:42] So if you ask a writer in any particular city in the world, they'll tell you about like a literary haunt. Right. Some bar, some way out of the way plays that only writers would know.

[00:42:53] So is there a place like this in Iceland, in Reykjavik, in a in a town that you become familiar with and have come to know and love?

[00:43:01] Well, there's different I mean, there's lots of cafes in Reykjavik.

[00:43:04] There's a great cafe culture there. And there's different ones that, you know, you will find different writers.

[00:43:11] And I do want to say which one? All the *Lonely Planet*, in fact. Not really.

[00:43:16] But but I mean that, you know, there are different places where people go as writers. And then, you know, the writers union has a number of houses around the country that you can rent for weeks at a time and you can go and stay and write there. I think, you know, Iceland loves writers so much that every where's a writers hang out.

[00:43:32] Where is your writers hang out? I mean, when you want to feel creative.

[00:43:37] My lazy boy. [laughter]

[00:43:40] No, I mean, I have an office at home. I like to work from home mostly. And, I'm writing a lot less nowadays.

[00:43:47] But if I'm ever when I am writing something new, I tend to not like to sit at my desk. I tend to like to put my feet up and sit in a lazy boy and put the laptop on a pillow. I can revise at my desk, but...

[00:44:03] Do you ever feel a compulsion to know that you're traveling extensively to take one of these experiences and essay it?

[00:44:12] And beyond just journaling, right? Beyond just for yourself? Experiences as a first lady, you mean? Yeah.

[00:44:19] Well, I guess that's right. Because you can't be a private citizen for at least for these.

[00:44:24] I did just write a thing in *The New York Times* as a first lady. So that was probably last,

[00:44:28] that's the most recent thing that I've actually written, which was just. Yeah. Which I also partially wrote on an airplane,

[00:44:34] she said. Yeah, and would you tell us a little bit about that? Because I was able to read it. Right? And I'm sure you had a little conversation maybe earlier today about it, but I thought it was an incredible, clearly important piece. Right? Thank you.


[00:44:46] Yeah, I wrote it. So I wrote a piece that came out in *The New York Times* at the beginning of the month.

[00:44:51] Obviously, we don't write the headlines. The editors do that.

[00:44:54] And it was called, *I'm a First Lady. And it's an incredibly weird job.*

Yeah, I just I just remember the weird job part. Yeah, it was it was weird because I remember I looked at I was like weird. That's a weird word to put in, but it's actually quite attention grabbing. So there they obviously know what they're doing there.

[00:45:08] But a yeah, it was really just my way of reflecting on this sort of nature of a role, not role, especially when women are playing these roles of the spouses of head of states and the expectations that that surround them or not surround them. And how I've been trying to sort of confound expectations and also make my own decisions about what I want to do or not.



Because ultimately, I love being first lady and I love all the work that I get to do with it. And it's an incredible privilege and honor. But it's also, you know, it's not a job and it's not a position. And so I want to build to choose what I want to do, not sort of have expectations pushed on me with regards to it. And at the same time, I also want to sort of confound stereotypes about what especially a female spouse of a head of state should see or be or do. I think in 2019 we need more women who speak up, not fewer. Thank you. [applause]

[00:46:24] Audience questions.

[00:46:27] Well, I think if there aren't any other questions, maybe we'll, that's a wonderful note to end on. Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:46:35] Thank you so much to Taste of Iceland. [applause] Thank you so much. Eliza, Juan Carlos, and thanks to all of you for coming out.

[00:46:46] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

