



**Address by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at  
the opening of the  
Frankfurt Book Fair  
11 October 2011**

Honoured ministers  
Mayors  
Board of the Book Fair  
Writers and publishers  
Ladies and gentlemen

For thousands of years it waited in isolation in the Atlantic Ocean, a world of wonders never seen by human eyes; its landscape transformed by eruptions and the crushing weight of glaciers; each spring valleys and grasslands clothed in green but remained untouched in the autumn; migrant birds the only visitors; the occasional fox crossed the hillsides, and a lonely polar bear arrived on an ice floe from Greenland, a castaway on a nameless island.

Iceland, the latest project in the Earth's creation, received its name when the Vikings arrived from across the sea and chose it as their home. They named mountains and moors, waterfalls and wastelands, rivers and gorges, fjords and bays, hills and meadows. They clothed the land in the mantle of language; their descendants, bards and tellers of tales, could reach back to the beginning: the memory of the first centuries lay within their reach, not lost in a remote past.

Unlike writers in medieval Europe, those who recorded the old Icelandic sagas could trace their ancestry back to the first settlers, to the men and women who had staggered up onto the beach, unsteady on their feet after days of sea-sickness, rocked on the rough sea in tiny ships. With them, they brought the memory of battles and adventures in far-off lands.

The first books on Icelandic history, the Book of the Icelanders and the Book of Settlements, contain accounts of these early times handed down in living memory from generation to generation; for the farmers it was necessary to know where property boundaries lay and to be able to trace family origins back to those who had first claimed moors and valleys, lakes and marshes as their private land.

The island which poor fugitives had taken as their own became transformed in their tales into a sort of paradise, with lush and prosperous regions, with woodlands stretching from the coast to the mountains, the rivers full of fish, driftwood available for the taking and ample catches in every fjord.

It was the Icelanders' great fortune to have such records of our origin and through literature discover our identity.

These ancient sagas later became an invaluable asset in the centuries of poverty, foreign oppression and natural disasters. They were a source of inspiration and vigour that finally crystallized into the demand for national sovereignty. Without our literature, it is doubtful whether Iceland would have become an independent country.

In former centuries our people furnished the turf farmhouses with fictions that grew out of the world of the ancient sagas; with poetry and a rich fabric of texts, which made tolerable their poverty, the harsh struggle for survival, their despair and isolation.

But our sagas and the poems of the *Edda* also left their mark on European culture. In operas and painting, in literature, tapestry and other arts, both here in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, complex echoes and transformations of the Icelandic heritage can be found. Many artists have treated it a source of discipline, inspiration and content.

Such is the richness and power of these ancient writings that new productions based on them appear each year in Iceland: plays, novels, dance and music.

Moreover, the Book Fair here in Frankfurt has now provided the stimulus for the publication of Icelandic sagas in a new German translation. All those who have been involved in this venture deserve our sincere thanks and appreciation, and it is satisfying to know that all native speakers of German now have access to fresh translations and can acquaint themselves with the legacy that our small nation has given Europe. People in Scandinavia will soon be in the same position, as new translations in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish have now been scheduled. All these publications come as welcome supplements to the

complete edition of the sagas in English that appeared to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the Icelandic voyages to the New World.

For us it is also a source of pleasure to see in the range of books that have been published in the run-up to the Book Fair, the continuity and cohesion that is to be found in Icelandic literature. Here we have works by writers who were active at the dawn of the modern age and also by the new generation that is tackling the challenge of writing about the turmoil of the past few years.

What makes a small nation so active and diligent in cultivating the garden of the written word, in poetry and fiction, history and folklore?

Can such a society measure itself against others in a forum where the great currents of the world's literary culture come together?

These questions are not only relevant for us in Iceland but also for the whole world, where hundreds of languages have to struggle hard for existence and recognition.

Iceland's position here in Frankfurt is therefore both an honour for our nation – for which we are sincerely grateful – and also a message to all people, wherever their homeland: that the garden of literary creation embraces a great variety of plants. Some are small and delicate, some tall and spreading; some are young, some are old, but new growths have as much right to exist as do the ancient tree trunks.

Iceland's position as Guest of Honour in Frankfurt is a recognition that even the smallest garden may give the world decorative blooms and plants with a purpose; in literary terms, writings that can stand side by side with the products of much larger language communities.

In a way, Icelanders are, and always have been, obsessed by writing. Our attitude is that nothing actually happens until it has been recorded in words. The need to set down in writing every event, each moment – even the biography of each and every individual – is a strong element in our make-up. Every day, a long-established and respected newspaper in our country devotes a large part of each edition – many pages – to obituaries about ordinary people. They are written by their friends, children and relatives, and often include poems, either freshly composed or quoted from the works of famous poets. Each individual's life is seen as deserving such memorial in print. Every year sees the publication of biographies, memoirs, genealogies and works tracing the history of local communities. Writings of this type serve as a foundation, a compass for approaching the present and the future.

This is the seed-bed from which our writers grow. They learn the skills of their trade under the watchful eye of readers who expect high standards: literature flourishes first and foremost in the minds of the people, in homes where young and old read together, where the bookcase is a sacred place.

Iceland also makes this statement here in Frankfurt: pictures from the homes of ordinary people and those with university degrees. Books on all sorts of shelves; books upright in neat rows, books lurching at angles; books tattered by use or still in festive jackets.

**(video)**

To be subjected to the tough criticism from readers in their home community has been the training ground for Icelandic writers. It was this schooling that brought Halldór Laxness the Nobel Prize, and it remains the force that now spurs many Icelandic writers to aim for success on a larger stage.

In turn, the writers have rewarded us for this discipline by producing books that continually enhance and deepen the nation's image of itself. They serve as stabilizing ballast in the rough seas of change, and point the way in new directions. With each passing year they contribute to what Sigurður Nordal, in his monumental work on Icelandic culture, *Íslensk menning*, called the problem and the privilege of being an Icelander.

Independent People, Halldór Laxness' book about a farmer's struggle for existence on an unproductive upland, a work which many consider to be worldwide one of the greatest literary works of the last century, and The Bell of Iceland about the convict Jón Hreggviðsson, the manuscript collector Arnas Arneus and the bewitching and strong-minded heroine Snæfríður Íslandssól have had greater influence on the nation's view of itself than thousand speeches.

Characters from many works of fiction have entered into the life of the nation and become by-words in everyday discussions. For years now, the policeman Erlendur, from the books by Arnaldur Indriðason, has been a figure familiar to most people in Iceland. He is Icelandic through and through, with a touch of Old Iceland about him in mood and manners, but has gained millions of fans in other countries: proof that literature which is true to its home ground can win popularity in the world at large.

Writers also use actual people as the basis of their creative works. A poor and downtrodden poet from the lowest level of society in the West Fjords of Iceland, was the model for the hero of Halldór Laxness' World Light; unknown names from church records have become immortalised in

novels. A common household amusement is to identify the originals for the characters in each year's crop of modern novels. This is often rather easy, and the first President of Iceland can be found here in Frankfurt in the German translation of a new Icelandic novel.

Thus, the web is spun in both directions: people welcome characters from books into their daily lives and give them a position in the local community, while writers seek models and materials in the everyday environment and transmute them into literature that strikes a chord with others.

One book can for centuries shape the destiny of a nation— or the fortunes of individuals; staying with us throughout our lives.

Books are both our culture and our nourishment; our roots and the source of creation. They are us.

On behalf of the Icelandic people, I wish to express my deepest thanks to all those who have prepared and contributed towards this Fair.

Iceland's position as Guest of Honour is a tribute that we appreciate deeply. It is a statement of friendship that we will long remember, a monument to those who, centuries ago, wrote the sagas on parchment and a recognition of the efforts and achievements of the writers who have moulded the times in which we live. It is an inspiration and an encouragement to our young writers to grapple with their art and to measure themselves by the yardstick established in the world at large, remaining at all times true to their people.