

Alessandro Zironi interviews Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir



In your novel you describe a sort of pilgrimage through Iceland searching for the origin of family's roots, whose genealogical remembrance seems to fade. Would you explain your relationship with your family's past?

Yes, I have strong connection to my family. Families are very important units in Iceland, as in Italy, but I sometimes feel that my family is extra Italian, so to speak, maybe because my mother stayed in Italy and was strongly influenced by it. She comes from a big family that kept many traditions alive, very cultural family, that strived to remember all the rites from the country-side where they came from, when then living in Reykjavík, the city. Her father and his siblings where very good at giving their past a meaning, but her mother, my grandmother, that came from a big and strong family in the east fjords, almost never mentioned her family, partly because she did not want to throw a shadow at her husbands grand family tree. Her family being even more cultural and almost aristocratic, even though a proper aristocracy does not exist in Iceland. My grandmother's past still came through her singings and telling absurd stories. But we just did not realize until much later that she was deeply rooted in a strong culture of telling stories. Then on the other hand my father's family. He was brought up with his foster parents in the north, his mother being the sister of his real mother. His foster father was a farmer but his real father was an odd one out, a teacher and a musical and poetical person that came from a family of a famous poet and rhyming scald. But everybody in this family are or were unfortunate and poor. Yes, I wanted to know all about my grandparents when I was a teenager and then to know about their grandparents... It's difficult to grasp.

It's a national sport to make family trees and when I looked at mine online I was amazed how many different people where my grand-grandparents and that they lived all over Iceland in all sort of circumstances. They surely did all kinds of errors in their lives but they seem to have managed to give their lives some kind of poetic meaning! I believed that I would learn something deep by going to the places those peoples tried to live a happy family life. I thought I needed to get in touch with their spots. With the earth where they were. And I learned that people that migrate tend to desire to return to the very spot where they originated and to really touch the earth even though it's a total ruin of a home. And I learned that very often people start crying as they touch the ground.

My mother always used to look for tendencies or elements and to see it go as a thread throughout the generations. My father used to say that this was bullshit and one should think about doing something on one's own and something new. Both of them try to capture the now and the new and make it last into future, make it a past for the future, my father as being an active radio program creator, and my mother as a visual artist, following the ever-changing Icelandic nature. I guess I

wanted to do something on my own and follow my own path. To find my own motivations. But then there was a moment when I was in a personal crisis, and my country was also in a deep crisis, and I needed to know my motivations from another perspective. To look for those elements in my past, in my family, and in the past of Iceland in general. My family tree somehow interwoven with other family trees as Deleuze described. I needed to find my strengths and my weaknesses. To touch them and start anew from there. From the earth and the archive.

I was very fortunate to get the change to stay for longer periods with my grandmothers. One lived up north and we stayed together the two of us for several summers. And I was very close to my other grandmother as well. The third one, I visited her and she told me she had just burnt her diaries but that she would have loved to give them to me, when she got to know me. This was very shocking to me. This burning of diaries.

Another aspect that touches deeply in your book is the symbiotic relationship with your brother. It seems that partners cannot completely satisfy existential needs. In other words, is it only the person with whom you have been growing up who can know you deeply?

No, I don't think that only persons that you grow up with can know you deeply, sometimes those people just don't know you at all. I happened to be born into a family that likes intimacy. Or let's say that my parents, having lacked some kind of an intimacy, tried very much to built a family that was close, or let's rather say that my mother tried and then my father woke up to that mission. We lived in the south of France when we were little and as this was a very difficult period for our parents I guess our relationship got even stronger, we were sticking together no matter what. I remember this strong feeling of having to protect him for this outer world when we did not even speak the language. And later he did the same for me, he tried protecting me when I was surrounded by people that did not understand what I was saying. We have somehow always understood each other's language. And this is so rare and important that it makes your innermost core laugh and cry in joy. But for years I was afraid that something would happen to him, that I would lose him. I've tried to relax.

Isolation in contrast with the town. How much are Icelanders attracted to countryside and desert solitudes?

We are spoiled with space. We don't know what we've got. We're yes attracted to the wilderness and the desert solitudes. And some say this is something new, that this is a luxury thinking. But my brother has this theory as an archaeologist, that in the uppermost north, where our father was brought up, people did not settle down out of desperation because of a lack of land. But also because of the need to be far away and in beautiful surroundings, spacious panorama.

In Reykjavík, our capital, we are very close to nature, we need to walk for few minutes or drive for some minutes to get into nature, by the sea or by the mountain. Many climb mountains every week. When I say that we are spoiled, I mean that maybe we don't quite realize how lucky we are, and how our nature is terrific. We think we can gamble with it, both sell it under industry and keep it. But I think we'll have to choose.

In the novel you show possibilities for the future, in particular you propose a reconciliation with nature and a self-sustainable way of living, in many cases in new-constituted communities. Don't you think that your vision could be considered a new utopia?

Yes I think you're right, it's some kind of new utopia. And I still believe in it.

What does the medieval Icelandic literary past represent in your literary production?

It's there like the wasteland, it's there by my back, it's my source, even if I haven't read it all. You don't always know the water source your water comes from, but you know it's there and you don't want it to disappear from your world. My father used to read out loud the sagas and my brother knows some of them by heart. I, on the other hand, always fell asleep, not because they were boring, but because of the soothing voice of my father.

Remaining on the topic literature: throughout the world, Iceland is celebrated for its sagas and Eddaic texts. Very few is known about many other authors that you quote in your novel. Is it the Icelandic language that stops the reception of those literary works or Icelandic authors are far from world-wide interests?

Good question! difficult question! Maybe both and maybe neither. I think it's maybe some kind of canonical thinking (canonical, does this word exist? I mean the trend to look for canons in literature) that excludes a lot of good literature from being re-published in Iceland and then from being translated. I trust readers from all over the world to appreciate some of those writings that some say are too Icelandic. But I don't know, I'm not a salesman. And some of those quotes in my book are there because I wanted to remind people of it, because it's lost. I'm an obsessive book collector so I sometimes read books that were published for many years and for few, some by women, forgotten. And I liked the idea to add them to my book so my book would somehow be an archive.... :-) in fact I did not imagine that anyone would want to translate my book, I didn't even imagine that anyone would like to read it in Iceland. I saw the publication of this book more like a task of an archivist, that must do her job.

In Iceland, due also to the great success of 'Nordic crime stories' there is a plentiful production of novels of various literary value. Why are Icelandic publishing houses so acquiescent in printing so many books?

I'll have to call a friend to answer this one. I'm member of the writer's union and I was in the heart of it for a while, trying to protect the rights of writers in this storm of publication. But still, I don't know, I'm sorry. I'll let you know when I know... I think it's maybe just one of those national characteristics, to do everything seasonally, to go get the grass when the sun shines, and the fish when there is no storm. And when there is total darkness, to publish lot of books to be busy doing something important instead of just being depressed...

In the novel you are disgusted by the presence of foreign tourism. Why? Is it a question of mass tourism or of a type of tourist who is searching only a stereotyped representation of Iceland, namely Nature, wildness, cold weather, etc.? Or anything else?

I'm sorry if you and other readers have understood it this way. I'm sorry if I wrote it this way. I'm not at all disgusted by the presence of foreign tourism! No, on the contrary, I'm very happy that there are people that come to see our nature and get to know our culture. If I'm disgusted, it's rather by us, the Icelanders. We tend to do "tourism" as everything else, in an exaggerated manner. And sometimes there's greed involved. We need to remember the wonderful hospitality instead of seeing tourism as a source of money. There is my concern. But I understand that maybe you're referring to

my reluctance concerning the Chinese business man that wanted to buy the huge piece of land up north where we stayed during the lambing season me and my brother. Yes, I think this wasteland, this beautiful land, should have been bought by the state and made part of the National park. But now it's sold, to a British man that is famous for environmental accidents. I was soooo disappointed to get to know this the other day! And for sure: I have nothing against British people or Chinese people. or foreign people, no, on the contrary. But I'm against huge corporations that don't give a shit about the land or the water for our future children. And when something happens, if something bad happens, it's impossible to sue them, they have all the best lawyers. In Argentina I was walking with people to protest against the lack of responsibility of a huge industrial factory. Many children had been born with defects because of the pollution but even though this people, the common people of this area, walked year after year and hired hundreds of lawyers, they never got the corporation to be responsible. There is not response. But we still have to ask for it. To walk for it.

A last question. Iceland, in some ways, overcomes the 2008 crisis. Do Icelanders overcome the crisis in their minds? Have they rebuilt a social community on new pillars or the future is still obscure? Are Icelanders imagining a utopian or dystopian future? Or nothing?!

Yes, we've overcome. But some say that we'll have another crisis soon. We've the tendency to live ahead of ourselves, which is very refreshing but also dangerous. Now, we're all into tourism, so happy that so many people want to come. But we're not ready for it, there are not enough toilets, not enough roads, not enough sign-posts. But very many hotels. Some say there will be no crisis no more. I hope not. Let's see.