



## Aan de voet van de gletsjer

*Halldór Kiljan Laxness, Marcel Otten (Translator)*

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De bisschop van IJsland stuurt een jonge priester, Gebi, naar de pastoor van een afgelegen parochie aan de voet van de Snæfellsgletsjer om de klachten over pastoor Jon Primus te onderzoeken. Zo zou de man de doden in zijn parochie niet meer begraven. De bisschop drukt Gebi op het hart om objectief te werk te gaan: 'Ik vraag om feiten. De rest is mijn zaak.' Daarom neemt Gebi een bandrecorder mee om zijn gesprekken met de priester en de parochianen op te nemen. De onderzoeker raakt verwikkeld in allerlei vreemde situaties.

## Aan de voet van de gletsjer Details

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Author : Halldór Kiljan Laxness , Marcel Otten (Translator)

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## From Reader Review Aan de voet van de gletsjer for online ebook

### John David says

The other day, I was looking for something out of the ordinary to read and, on opening Susan Sontag's collection "Reborn," saw an essay on Haldor Laxness' "Under the Glacier." Not wanting to give away too much to myself, I read only the first couple of paragraphs, was intrigued enough to pick it up, and set the rest of the essay aside for later.

The novel tells the story of a nameless bishop's emissary (he is referred to only as "Embi," short for "emissary of the bishop"). Embi is sent to a distant part of Iceland to investigate the odd behavior of the people there. Among other things, the local pastor has given up burying the dead, the local church has been boarded up, and the views of the community have become decided less orthodox in nature. Much of the novel is simply a detailed record of Embi's continuous confused frustrations at the behavior of the people. When Embi asks Pastor Jon about the importance of delivering sermons, he says, "Oh, no, better to be silent. That is what the glacier does. That is what the lilies of the field do." Instead, Pastor Jon spends most of his time travelling around the village, shoeing horses and repairing old electric stoves.

During his face-finding mission, Embi happens across the truck-driving poet Jodinus Alfberg and his boss, the New Agey and oddly con man-like Godman Syngmann (note his name). Syngmann is leading a group of Hatha Yoga practitioners and acolytes from Ojai, California through Iceland on some sort of a mission to "find themselves" (that grating exhortation of the New Age). Syngmann, in his attempts to harness the hieratic powers of the universe, wishes to reanimate the dead. At one point, Embi meets the resurrected Ua ("oooh-a," the sound that men make upon seeing her), who was once married to Pastor Jon before she died, or was possibly turned into a fish.

Despite its subject, "Under the Glacier" has the occasional humorous moment – but I didn't find it the hilarious, profound novel that Susan Sontag claims that it is in her essay, or that several other reviews found it to be. This may speak to the time when it was published - 1968 – a momentous year for Europe, politically and culturally. It was also a chaotic time that you probably needed to live through in order to understand the immediacy of its importance. But my parents were in still learning algebra in 1968. I'm a child of the nineties – a world of mix tape cassettes, Carmen Sandiego, and giant cellphones. Revolution was the furthest thing from our minds.

Is this novel a rollicking attempt to poke fun at the American, and largely clueless, embrace of the Eastern religious traditions? Or maybe it's just discontent with institutionalized Christianity? Or maybe my problem is that I'm looking for something it should be "about." I ought to give "Against Interpretation" another look, since I seem to be retrogressing in regards to the advice it gives.

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### Christopher Kelsey says

Unlike anything else I've read. Quick, witty, and very strange. The story is ostensibly a face-value report of a clergy investigation in a rural Icelandic town...where the slow approach of the Glacier seems to have replaced religion. There, life has become more practical but truth less important, and, ultimately, life more mysterious.

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## Ray says

A rollicking rambling mess of a book. A complete shambles, but somehow it works.

A bishops emissary is sent to a remote part of Iceland to investigate rumours of unorthodox religious practices. What he finds is bewildering and profound, absurd yet eminently sensible, earthy and obscure.

I enjoyed the book but felt that it was always just out of my grasp, that things were going over my head - just like the young emissary.

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## Ema says

Here's an Icelandic writer of which I've heard nothing about, despite the fact that he won the Nobel prize for literature. I found the book by chance, the synopsis sounded interesting enough, so I began reading and... helplessly fell in love with the novel.

This is Halldór Laxness' only book translated into Romanian, but I'm anxious to read some of his other works, especially *Independent People*.

*Under the Glacier* is truly an amazing book, which made me laugh (or at least giggle), think and wonder. It is a delightful blend of fantasy and reality which immerses the reader in a mysterious, yet earthly dimension. Even now, when I think of it, the magical world of the parish by the glacier is still vivid in my mind and prolongs its fascination upon me.

The way the dialogues are presented is a little bit strange: instead of the usual lines, there are the names of the interlocutors. It was a bit distressing at first, but this annoying fact was gradually forgotten since the dialogue became absurd anyway, yet so savory and funny that I could no longer find it the least fault.

The writing is full of humor (I found myself laughing many times) and the absurd situations that emerge are extremely delicious. The blending of reality with fantasy is in the perfect dose for me - at the end I was left in a state of reverie, wondering how much of what had happened was real. Some facts are confirmed, others are left unexplained, but this doesn't diminish the magic atmosphere of this forgotten place at the end of the world, governed by the glacier and the sea birds and populated by a bunch of more or less bizarre people.

## Iceland through the lens of photographer Ragnar Axelsson

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**The old man may well be the priest from the parish near the glacier (photographer: Ragnar Axelsson)**

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## Lydia says

It's not fair for me to give this book a low score. It's the kind of book that you would like, if you liked this kind of book. It's deconstructed and strange and has lots of digressions. There's religion and Icelandic myth

and lots of descriptions of the glacier. Mysterious people come and go, and are not as they seem. My linear and lumpen brain struggles to be patient with creative structures so after 90 pages i had to put it down. But give it a whirl if you enjoy being confused!

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### **Jan-Maat says**

Four Laxness novels read so far and his style and approach has been different in each one so far. This is to be expected. At various points in his life Laxness was a Catholic priest, a Communist, the boy from the backwoods (or rather the icelandic equivalent thereof).

In Independent People we have the ironic homage to the nineteenth century realist novel or fulfilment of it in the light of Marxism, in The Atom Station a comedy of morality as Iceland steals itself, Paradise Reclaimed - something of a combination of folk tale with nineteenth century family disaster story with added Mormonism. And what of Under the Glacier?

A seminarian is sent out to investigate odd goings on in a distant parish. Sent as the representative of a faith-based organisation, yet records his conversations with witnesses on a tape-recorder - much of the dialogue is presented as a transcription of these tapes - so something not faith-based, but precise, technical and mechanical. The local priest who is under investigation is much respected for his technical and mechanical skills - he's the best man to go to if you want your primus stove repaired - however the church is boarded up.

Here we have something of late twentieth century life. Organised, technical and mechanical. There are primus stoves, tape recorders and buses that arrive and depart according to time-table. At the same time there is a hunger for myth and mystery, personified in the figure of Ua. Faith without organisation. The dialogues reveal a Journey to the Centre of the Earth.

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### **Abi says**

A novel ostensibly about an emissary of the Bishop of Iceland, who is sent to the remote town of 'Glacier' to investigate the rumour that Pastor Jon is not burying the dead, that the church is boarded up, and that in general Christianity is being 'tampered with'. The investigation leaves the emissary mired in confusion and improbability as he discovers that the church being boarded up is one of the least strange things about Glacier. One of the characters is a woman named Ua who may or may not have been killed, turned into a fish, frozen under the glacier, and then later defrosted and resurrected by a group of travelling American hippies. If that doesn't sound like a fun and interesting read to you, then what does? Even if it doesn't, trust me, it is.

This is fast becoming one of my favourite Laxness books. Although the issues that concern Laxness are closer to the surface than in much of his other work, they remain intriguing and the upside is that Laxness appears to give his own philosophies a freer rein; it's more obviously a book about thought rather than things. Not in a crude, force-it-down-your-throat way though, and not to say the plot isn't charming, because it is. It is a commentary on history, art, literature, identity, mythology, science and religion. There's a lot to get out

of this little volume, and the novel is highly rewarding for the reader who allows themselves to be swept up in the baffling but amusing eccentricities of the Glacier community. The novel as a whole is bewildering, but pleasantly so, leaving the reader feeling refreshed and enchanted, if more than a little uncertain about how to feel. The joy of the unfamiliar is uplifting, like walking the first footsteps into fresh fallen snow. Any preconceptions you bring to this novel are almost certain to be proven wrong, even if like me, you had already read a number of Laxness novels (this was my fifth). I know I wasn't expecting to enjoy it so much after the reviews I had read of it. It's also very different from his other novels, the one that shows the scantest disregard for the boundaries between Icelandic sagas & folklore and reality. The writing is classic Laxness, though: wry, laconic, beautiful. Embi is one of his most endearing characters, Pastor Jon his most philosophical, Jodinus Alfberg one of his most interesting, Ua definitely one of his most confusing. I hope I've done a better job of translating the wonder of Under the Glacier, but it is unlikely. Under the Glacier is a minor classic and deserves a lot more attention than, sadly, it will ever get; even less than the glorious Independent People.

Sidenote: Bringing a knowledge of the sagas and of Icelandic folklore will enable a reader to get a bit more out of this particular Laxness experience. It's by no means necessary, but they are a fairly important layer in the novel.

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## Emily says

glaciers and absurdity

who doesn't judge books by their covers? i was in kramerbooks, soon to be headed to iceland, when this one called to me. i reached past the reds and blues and modern arts for a lovely green book with a title that pulled at my heartstrings. even though it was "ordinary people" that won halldór laxness the nobel prize, i went with "under the glacier" because of its title and because the subject matter seemed so fascinating.

how do i describe it? there's an intro by susan sontag that labels it as: science fiction, a philosophical novel, a dream novel, a comic novel, and a visionary one. that's a fairly good start. it involves a young emissary from the bishop of iceland who is sent from reykjavik to investigate odd rumors about the pastor - and town - of snaefells glacier. in short order, this becomes an investigation of all things considering "christianity at the glacier." and that investigation is hilarious. there were times, reading it, when i thought it very well might be the funniest book i have ever read.

christianity, taoism, hinduism, reincarnation, hatha yoga, nature poetry, biblical verse, mythical fish, intergalactic communication, horse abusers and imported french biscuits ... all come together in the narrative, yet there is cohesion in the absurdity. i think what i liked best about it were the ruminations on literature itself, such as the bishop's instructions to the emissary:

"no verifying! if people tell lies, that's as may be. if they've come up with some credo or other, so much the better! ... remember, any lie you are told, even if deliberately, is often a more significant fact than a truth told in all sincerity."

there are so many other gems that are underlined in my copy, but here is the first that truly hooked me, from a letter from the parish clerk to the bishop of iceland: "In conclusion, it's quite true that our church is a little worse for wear, although in fact there haven't been many complaints; but God is said to be great. No need to elaborate further on that. Your Grace's loving and obedient servant ..."

for me the high point of the book comes about halfway through, in a long discussion between old friends pastor jon primus and dr. syngmann (mundi), the angler and businessman and mystic who returns to perform biotelekinesis - life induction - in the energy field of the glacier. the chapters that outline their discussion, through the notes of the emissary, play two different but captivating philosophies against one another. the chapters also hint at regret and nostalgia, the way our lives change separately from those we were once close to. the climax, then, for me, is pastor jon's soliloquy at mundi's funeral.

i'll leave the final words to pastor jon:

"It's a pity we don't whistle at one another, like birds. Words are misleading. I am always trying to forget words. That is why I contemplate the lilies of the field, but in particular the glacier. If one looks at the glacier for long enough, words cease to have any meaning on God's earth."

## Beka Sukhitashvili says

?????? ?????????? ??????: <http://popularpopcorn.blogspot.com/20...>

## No Books says

Halldór Laxness ha attraversato l'intero ventesimo secolo (1902-1998) ricevendo il Nobel circa a metà strada, nel 1955. Del 1968 è questo romanzo, un *unicum* non solo nella sua sterminata produzione (che finalmente sta avendo una diffusione anche in Italia) ma nel canone letterario *tout court*; tanto da meritare un saggio monografico di Susan Sontag, che Iperborea si concede il lusso di pubblicare come postfazione. La Sontag nota innanzitutto come Laxness mescoli e superi i generi letterari, in un'epoca in cui il postmoderno era ancora nella sua fase pionieristica.

Il ghiacciaio del titolo è quello stesso Snæfell reso celebre da Jules Verne nel 1864 come origine del suo *Voyage au centre de la terre* e quindi, in senso lato, della fantascienza moderna. In un periodo cruciale tanto per l'immaginario quanto per il progresso scientifico, Laxness gioca a smontare il genere fantascientifico riportandolo alle sue origini di *conte philosophique*, per poi divertirsi a smentirlo e a sovvertire le aspettative.

“Il Cristianesimo sotto il Ghiacciaio”, come recita il titolo originale, versa in condizioni disperate, stando alle voci che circolano: il parroco non adempie ai suoi doveri ecclesiastici, non fa manutenzione della chiesa che al contrario è stata sprangata; pare abbia perfino consentito il seppellimento di un cadavere nel ghiacciaio, in terra non consacrata. È sposato ma non ha mai consumato il matrimonio, e pare conviva con un’altra donna. Il vescovo d’Islanda incarica quindi un giovane e svogliato studente di verificare queste dicerie inaccettabili; non avendo autorità in materia, egli dovrà limitarsi a registrare quanto gli verrà raccontato dai parrocchiani con la massima fedeltà (come “quel fonografo, o come si chiama”, “lo chiamano magnetofono”) e senza

interpolazioni di sorta:

*“Non verifichi niente! Se si dicono bugie, bugie siano. Se se ne saltano fuori con qualche superstizione, superstizioni siano! Non dimentichi che normalmente sono poche le persone che dicono più di una piccola parte di verità; nessuno dice gran parte della verità, figuriamoci poi la verità intera. Le parole sono fatti di per sé, vere o false che siano. Quando uno parla, si rivela, sia che dica il falso che il vero”.*

Il giovane accetta, mettendo le mani avanti: *“Non mi chieda di compiere grandi imprese. Anche perché mi si dice che non si compiono grandi imprese alle tariffe dei funzionari civili”*. Nel suo resoconto, che poi è il libro stesso, egli fa riferimento a se stesso in terza persona unicamente come *“l’Emissario del Vescovo, EmVe per abbreviazione”*. Il testo d’altro canto pullula di considerazioni personali e osservazioni metatestuali.

Perché il viaggio iniziatico di Emve sotto il ghiacciaio minerà alle fondamenta il suo ruolo paradigmatico di protagonista come giovane esploratore. Le sue domande saranno sistematicamente disattese o evase; il suo ruolo ignorato, con effetti anche comici. Il parroco, Jón Jónsson detto Primus, sembra avere sviluppato un’autentica avversione verso i propri doveri pastorali, tenendosi occupato come tuttofare per la comunità. Una comunità, come nota la Sontag, che è già oltre il cristianesimo, se non è rimasta al paganesimo: convinta che il Ghiacciaio sia il centro del mondo, trova naturale che un vecchio amico e rivale del parroco, Guðmundur Sigmundsson detto Godman Syngmann detto Mundi Mundasson, giunga dalla California per riportare in vita la sua amante e figlia adottiva nonché moglie di Jón Primus, che egli aveva precedentemente tramutato in salmone per poi conservarlo nel Ghiacciaio. Syngmann si servirà di tre *bioinductors* (*“una parola che proprio non sono riuscito a trovare in diciassette vocabolari d’inglese, ma che dovrebbe far parte del gergo quotidiano dei santoni e dei superoccultisti della California”*, osserva Emve): un californiano, in indiano e un nativo brasiliano forse cannibale, che si comportano come santoni buddhisti e usano una terminologia new age. Uno di loro suona il liuto con una tecnica addirittura preconizzatrice dei tintinnabuli di Arvo Pärt.

Laxness non teme di contaminare la fantascienza positivista con la propria contemporaneità, inanellando in un ironico anticlimax riferimenti più o meno esplicativi all’Età dell’Acquario, alla corsa allo spazio, alla fascinazione per il buddhismo, alla psichedelia (uno dei capitoli più importanti, *Intergalactic Communication*, ha un titolo degno di un’outtake di *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*), perfino alla guerra in Vietnam.

Ma è il personaggio femminile il più affascinante e perturbante del romanzo, la misteriosa ed elusiva Úa: *“Sorella della Solveig del Peer Gynt di Ibsen e della Indra del Sogno di Strindberg, Úa è la donna irresistibile che si trasforma: strega, puttana, madre, iniziatrice sessuale, fonte di saggezza. Úa sostiene di avere cinquantadue anni [...] ma in realtà è metamorfica e immortale”* (ipsa Sontag dixit). A lei è affidato il finale aperto, inatteso e meditabondo di questo capolavoro dai molteplici livelli di lettura: filosofico, religioso, epistemologico, narratologico...

I feedbacks su Cabaret Bisanzio sono molto graditi!  
<http://www.cabaretbisanzio.com/2012/1...>

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**Mark says**

It's not that I hated "Under the Glacier" or didn't get a chuckle from it occasionally (OK, more like a wan

smile). But to call it, as Susan Sontag did, "a marvelous novel about the most ambitious questions" and "one of the funniest books ever written," is a stretch. (And btw, I'm glad I was never invited to comedy night at the Sontags).

Written by Icelandic Nobel Prize winner Halldor Laxness, "Under the Glacier" is the story (using the term loosely) of a bishop's emissary who hunts for the truth (using the term loosely) about what has gone on with the parish pastor (ditto on the loosely) of a remote district next to a glacier. There are rumors that Pastor Jon has not held church services in years (true), is long separated from his wife but has refused to seek a divorce (maybe) and may have hauled a dead body onto the glacier without a proper burial (very maybe).

The entire mercifully short novel is written in a style I would call Scandinavian magic surrealism, where hardly any character is what he or she seems, no one is "normal," and where a mysterious woman may be dead, or alive, or a bit of both.

The narrator, in keeping with his instructions to merely be the eyes and ears of the bishop and render no opinions, designates himself either "the undersigned" or "embi" (for emissary of the bishop, get it, wink wink?).

Mixed in is a housekeeper who makes only baked goods, a self-defensive truck driver, a man who perpetually loses horses, a wealthy expatriate who returns with three latter day hippies to oversee a resurrection, and a casket which it takes several chapters to open and then reveals its contents to be .... well, you'll have to enter the maze to find out.

The theology in this novel is profound in a way that would impress Shirley MacLaine; the humor has not a side split nor a knee slap in sight, and the bottom line is, well, let's see ... maybe not to tramp around through a bog at night without shoes on? -- that's as good a guess as any.

It does have its moments, but not enough to get me up the side of the glacier to three stars.

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### **Calzean says**

A very strange book. I felt that for the first half of the book Laxness was just having a bit of fun and then needed to find some sort of ending that made a bit of sense.

When the Embi arrives in the Snaefells Glacier his conversations were like a Monty Python skit; nonsense statements, asides that reoccur and impossible analogies abound.

There is the magnificent Pastor who with his "parishioners" have decided living is about doing your own thing, helping others and minding your business. There are strange characters, a resurrection of a salmon and the return of a woman who may or may not have ever existed.

Not sure what the whole thing was about (maybe Laxness wanted to enter a creative writing competition).

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### **Ed Petersen says**

If you ever needed to see the stark difference between city and country life, look no further than this book. The Bishop of Iceland sends a young emissary (cleverly referring to himself as "Embi" throughout the book) to a rural parish under the long-famous Snaefells Glacier from Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth". His mission is to uncover controversies, but what he finds is a quirky collection of characters, all of whom resolutely refuse to answer his questions directly and seem to delight in making him uncomfortable.

What I liked most about this book was the author's excellent way of describing the landscape and people his narrator encountered. The scenes really came to life with intriguing metaphors and turns of phrases I'd never seen before. He gave the young narrator a strong sense of purpose and determination, which stood in stark contrast to almost everyone he met.

All the other characters in the story were just about as inscrutable as possible. The dialogue the narrator had with them was very frustrating to read, because as I stated, they never gave a straight answer. Quite often it would be on a totally unrelated topic, or it would incorporate unorthodox philosophies that just further complicated the issue. I think this could be an all-time classic short novel if some of those eccentricities had been smoothed a bit. As it is, slogging through Pastor Jón's mysterious pontificating is incredibly laborious, with only a few exceptions (the funeral scene being one).

[Possible spoilers ahead]

When the woman identified as Pastor Jón's wife finally appears near the end of the story, the reader begins to feel like a resolution just might occur at last. "Embi" had tried (and failed) to leave the village so many times already, perhaps this would be the time? But no, the novel took a decidedly unexpected turn, leaving even more unanswered questions and the narrator stranded in the middle of nowhere. At first this felt like a very unsatisfying ending, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was a wholly appropriate to close this strange little book on such a bizarre note.

I decided to read this book because I'm preparing for a visit to Iceland in June 2015. While I have no expectations to meet such a daft menagerie, I'm sure some of the people I run across will have personality traits unique to this frigid island in the North Atlantic. :-)

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## Christy says

Found it hard to condense my still tangled senses of this book to a staff pick card, since I only truly enjoyed the last part, when Ua returned. But here was my (very boring) try:

"Following a host of strange rumors, a young man is sent as an emissary of the Bishop of Iceland to investigate the parish at Snaefells Glacier, a landscape which profoundly roots and underlines the novel. Written by Iceland's premier author, Under the Glacier is a novel both comic and metaphysical, mythic and odd."

Then I read Adam W's card and must shake my fist at his powers of elegant condensation:

"In a village beyond the edge of the civilized world, a minister is challenged on grounds of heresy even while bona fide miracles lurk around every corner of his parish. In fact, reality seems to have become largely negotiable, even pliant, at the foot of Snaefells Glacier. A funny, fast-paced, dialogue-oriented book that is as bizarre as any otehr magical realism novel I've read."

Oh well. I did give it to my friend Patrick who is a sometime philosopher/thinker and who enjoyed Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

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## Leif says

My introduction to Laxness: I intended to read *Independent People* first, but something took me. Maybe it was Susan Sontag's wild and appreciative review (the last she wrote), maybe the sense of lightness and weight yoked to a clear plot, maybe the relative brevity, who knows.

Anyway: I ended up with the bishop's representative's report, a.k.a. the tapes and notes of the undersigned, *Under the Glacier*. What a ride! Given what seems a simple task, namely to investigate Pastor Jón and see if a body was left on the glacier, the protagonist winds up in a muddle of metaphysics and regional politics where international businessmen, local corruption, and pragmatic men of god whirl his head and leave the report a beautiful, glorious mess. That's the plot. Its delivery is breathtakingly graceful. Short chapters develop an illusion of ease while conversations twist and turn with *bon mots* and word salad fiendishly intermixed. "I've heard that heroid deeds are never performed on civil service rates", the "Undersigned" commits early on in his bold stupidity (a thing, while true, may not often be said). Or here, the bishop's advice before the "Undersigned" sets out:

Never speak ill of anyone in a report. Remember, any lie you are told, even deliberately, is often a more significant fact than a truth told in all sincerity. Don't correct them, and don't try to interpret them either. That's our responsibility. He who would hold his own against them, let him take care not to lose his own faith.

Try to produce a report after that!

And then there are the reflections of Laxness' own wit in his reflections on novel writing and philosophy. Frequently, these are the high points of surrealistic passages where you're never quite sure what's grandiloquence at the expense of a character or wisdom in difficult contexts. Then their punchlines are delivered and the whole structure is validated. Take the following critique of bird flight:

Nevertheless, there has perhaps never been a bird that flies as correctly as an aeroplane; yet all birds fly better than aeroplanes if they can fly at all. All birds are perhaps a little wrong, because an absolute once-and-for-all formula for a bird has never been found, just as all novels are bad because the correct formula for a novel has never been found.

Hopefully you know what you're in for now.

On reflection, one of the most fascinating characters is pastor Jón. Here's the passage that unlocks this pragmatic soul: "Philosophy and theology have no effect on him, much less plain common sense. Impossible to convince this man by arguments. But humour he always listens to, even though it be ill humour. A typical Icelander, perhaps. Sometimes your emissary would have given a lot, however, to be able to see the world from the standpoint of pastor Jón Prímus." My candidate for the novel's "hero" right there.

There are other things: a headhunter, a strangely large fish, a mysterious woman, and all the rest. You may know enough now to go on.

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## Aloke says

I enjoyed this but it was incoherent. It reminded me a bit of *The Sellout*: dreamlike in parts, poking at convention, full of references. But I liked *The Sellout* much more because it held together and came together and this didn't for me.

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## Jim Elkins says

### Covert Returns to Christianity

This novel comes with impeccable credentials: Laxness, a Nobel laureate, is one of Iceland's major twentieth-century novelists; the translator is Magnus Magnusson, "Mastermind" television presenter, and authority on the Icelandic sagas; and the book has a late introduction by Susan Sontag (2004). For me, it had the additional attraction that it's set at Snaeffelsjokull, an Icelandic volcano I had just visited, and one of the characters comes from Hafnarfjordur, where I was staying in Iceland.

It is a fantastical story of the parish priest "at the glacier" (under the volcano), and the mysterious things that happen in his parish; but it is also very much of its time and place, the late 1960s. I found it tremendously disappointing, and I barely got through it. Sontag's ecstatic introduction links the book to a whole list of sorts of novels:

Science fiction  
Tale, fable, allegory  
Philosophical novel  
Dream novel  
Visionary novel  
Literature of fantasy  
Wisdom lit  
Spoof  
Sexual turn-on (p. vi)

That's her list, and she links "Under the Glacier" to all but the last one. She also says it is "one of the funniest books ever written." She gives a good account of the elements of comedy in literature, including "defect of affectivity" (the protagonist doesn't feel much, or express it if he does), "repetition," "deficit of understanding," and others. That's a good characterization, but it doesn't mean the novel is funny. Here are two examples of what counts as humor to Laxness. At one point there is a possibility that a corpse will be stolen by a South American man who will take it up onto the glacier and shrink the corpse's head. Laxness mentions this wild possibility in the most offhanded possible way:

"I promise to do everything in my power to prevent the body being taken up onto the glacier, its head removed and shrunk, etc." (p. 155)

The "etc." is supposed to be humorous here: it's part of the deadpan strategy of comedy. On the next page, the narrator considers some damaged paintings:

"I would point out that I have prevented the old paintings... from being scrubbed with caustic soda with the

kind of scrubbing brush that Hafnarfjörður people use for scouring the scales off haddock." (p 156)

The strategies of repetition, affectlessness, naivete, and so on, are exactly as Sontag says: but the effect, for me, is not at all comic: it is tedious.

But the main difficulty I had with this book, and the revision I would like to have made in its reception, is that the book is clearly about a kind of post-Christian mystical communion with nature. It's a meditation on what spirituality might look like after Christianity. The parish priest who is the subject of the narrator's investigation has boarded up his church, and spends his time shoeing horses. (An echo, risky in its obviousness, of Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet.) He can barely bring himself to read anything from the Bible. (In one passage he is called on to read a prayer, and it takes him several minutes to find one he can agree with.) He has an elusive wisdom and happiness, and he is often called "he richest person in the world."

As Sontag says, in a footnote (!), the original Icelandic title can be translated as "Christianity at the Glacier," not "Under the Glacier." One of the models for this post-Christian spirituality is 12th century Franciscan natural revelation. There are, for example, many pages devoted to observations of birds. Birds follow the pastor around, almost in the fashion of St. Francis, and the narrator observes strange and also natural bird behavior. There are also paragraphs devoted to a calf, lambs, the fields, horses, and the weather. Laxness is careful not to include any actual miracles, but the implication throughout is that nature itself is continuously miraculous. It's a kind of low-energy visionary nature poetry, with the revelations omitted and the rhapsodies are refracted through twentieth-century natural history. As a post-theological position, or even a hint of one, it has a pervasive softness and indecision, and it is animated by an unremitting but low-energy hopefulness.

It is true, as Sontag says, that the "deep questions" of life are raised here with "impudent lightness," and it is almost true that it is "a satire on religion," and nearly a "spoof," and it's clearly the case that it carefully avoids the supernatural: but it isn't accurate to mention those things only in passing, on the last page of the introduction. The novel is about naturalistic religion from the very beginning. It hides indecision about the sacred under the lightness of its allegory, and it hides a hapless sincerity under the lightness of its satire. It's not necessary to wish this were either religious or anti-religious to be disappointed by its blurred sense of what is, actually, possible.

The book may very well be unlike any other Laxness wrote (Sontag says that twice in her introduction, making me wonder how sure she was). I hope that's true.

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## Marissa says

I couldn't find *Independent People* in my library (which I had only read half of and really wanted to finish) so I picked of this book of Laxness's instead and I am glad I did. I was expecting something slightly more magical realist so I was maybe a bit disappointed that it was not but was glad the "crazy" beliefs, stories, people, etc. became what they did.

The first 3/4ths of the book seem to be filled with silliness. The pastor isn't doing his job and the women don't sleep or eat. The church is boarded up and a bungalow is built right next to it, someone might have been buried in the glacier, there is nothing to consume but cakes and coffee, the people speak of bizarre happenings and have strange explanations for the things that have happened. You ALMOST believe that you're supposed to believe in these things, you're not sure, but by the last quarter of the book it doesn't matter.

As the book winds down and the plot starts turning faster you can finally see the deep and beautiful love and

humanity that supports all of these previously viewed craziness and silliness. You can finally understand the characters as real, weak and fragile along with being deeply beautiful (this is mainly about the priest.) So yes, if you read this book, enjoy the beautifully written incomprehensible and comprehensible craziness of the beginning and keep reading. It will all become meaningful in the end.

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### Jim says

This last novel by the Icelandic Nobel-prize-winning Halldór Laxness is more than a little difficult to classify. In a way, it is similar to the same author's **Paradise Reclaimed**. In both books, Icelanders are lured away from their beliefs by, in one case Mormon missionaries from Utah, and in the other, a group of New Agers and quasi-Buddhists from California and other points of the compass.

Under the Glacier was originally called **Christianity at Glacier**. It tells of the Bishop of Iceland sending a young emissary to investigate a strange parish in the area of Snaefellsness in the west of Iceland. Now even in the 1960s, Snaefellsness with its glaciated mountain was considered a center of New Age beliefs. Even in Jules Verne's **Journey to the Center of the Earth**, which begins there, it was considered to be a magical place.

The unnamed emissary of the bishop, who simply refers to himself as EmBi and then Embi, is treated to a bewildering array of characters who pretend to be poets, sages, and even, in one case, the Buddha himself. The only one who seems unbothered by the phenomena is the parish priest, who calls himself Jon Primus, and who seems to muddle through by, instead of ministering to his parish, shoeing horses and repairing machinery.

Laxness was, for most of his life, on a spiritual quest of his own. From Icelandic Lutheranism, he became a convert to Catholicism and Communism, Escaping from the attentions of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the United States. Eventually, most of his beliefs fell away from him. In **Under the Glacier**, we are treated to a charivari of mixed religious beliefs. The book ends with our Embi lost in a bog hearing what appears to be the laughter of Iceland's "hidden folk," or elves.

This is one Icelandic novel which could have been filmed by Federico Fellini.

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### Erika says

My experience with this book:

This is supposed to be funny?

What's going on here?

Am I getting it?

This is supposed to be funny.

What's going on here?

Am I getting it?

This is sort of funny.

What's understanding?

On some level, I am getting it.

This book is funny, absurd funny.

What's up with the effing fish and the yogis from Los Angeles?

Ok.

My reaction upon finishing the book:

It was amazing. I think I got it. It was hilarious. It's unlike anything I've ever read. Check back with me in 5 years when I read it again.

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