



The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw

Anonymous , George Johnston (Translator)

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The Saga of Gisli was written early in the thirteenth century. It offers an imaginative reconstruction of the story of a man and his family who came to Iceland from Norway about AD 960. Soon after 960 Gisli, the central figure, was outlawed for killing his brother-in-law, and then, for thirteen years or more, he lived in hiding in remote parts of the northwest of Iceland until he was finally caught and killed by his enemies.

Around this imaginative core the author has spun a web of conflicting passions - love, hate and jealousy between man and wife, brother and sister, brother-in-law - intricate emotional bonds which are here seen ironically patterned against a background of inevitable fate. Gisli, the hero, is portrayed not only as a man of strength and courage, but also a poet and dreamer, tormented in his outlawry by nightmarish visions which seem gradually to sap his will to resist. The author's probing into the emotional depths of his characters, the superbly effective architecture of his narrative leading to the central climax, his sense of the dramatic, and his cool, compelling style all combine to make this one of the most memorable of all the Icelandic sagas.

The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw Details

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From Reader Review The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw for online ebook

Lyle says

Last year I took a class on Vikings Through Icelandic Sagas, and read this one. For what it was, I found it to be fairly fast-paced, and I didn't get bored. There is actually a movie called The Outlaw based on this book... so you can just see that if you don't want to take the time to read this. I thought the movie itself was less interesting than the book.

Caroline Torbjørnsdal Engeland says

Didn't particularly like this one. Gisle is cowardly little rat, just look at the stunt he pulled on Tord. And he refuse to take the consequences for his actions. I hate the fact that he is portrayed as this grand man when he is nothing but a creep and a coward. He touches a woman's breasts while she sleeps before killing her husband (who is also sleeping) for crying out loud!

Also, I feel like I say this all the time about these sagas, but the Norwegian transliteration is trash and it should be redone so that it would be easier to understand.

Gentry says

Gisli was a bad man. Or was he a hero? It depends upon where you're standing. The character Gisli is a complex, but not unknowable, one. He loves, is jealous, and has a strong sense of vengeance. We can understand his motives, and even appreciate them in the context of their time and the situations he finds himself in. The mode of the book is dominated by the language of the Icelander, thus by necessity by the translation and the era from which it was told. This mode seems stale and boring at first, and in parts, throughout the book. The ebb moments between action or drama seem to give little development to any of the characters, and the story is told in a sort of matter of fact manner throughout. While this might not lend to a westerner's brand of reading convention, it however does not distract from the story. There is enough action and dramatic pivots to keep the book interesting and the pages turning. The story is short, the concepts are not difficult, and the read was a satisfying one - if for anything, to absorb the subtleties of the Icelander's prose, ways, and to some extent thought process (at least, back then, and through this translation). I'm glad I read it. I don't think I'd read it again, but I wouldn't mind a genealogical map of all the Thor___ names in Iceland.

lu says

This is the story of Gisli. No, not that Gisli. The other Gisli.
Fucking Gisli.

Joseph F. says

This genre of Icelandic saga is called an outlaw saga, and there are several. Years ago I read *Grettir's saga*, and I would give that one 5 stars. This one is shorter, and although I did like it, it didn't wow me like that last one did. There are some fine scenes of tension and drama, and the climax is well worth the wait. *Gisli's* ominous dreams are also a great plot feature.

In addition to the story, there is an essay on Icelandic culture which is worth reading.

The poetry was a tad hard to make out. It may be due to my ignorance of this type of poetry, but I have read verses in other sagas and had no trouble with them. So it is possible that it was this particular translation that I had a problem with. There is also a handy guide to the characters; I found myself constantly switching to it often since there are many characters who also have similar names.

Colin says

A pretty awesome saga, as such things go. There are curses and witchcraft and outlaws and such. And *Gisli's* final stand takes 8 of his attackers with him, so, y'know, he's pretty awesome at kicking butt. Just sayin'.

Carl says

One of the best of the sagas of Icelanders, and in one of the best translation of the sagas (in my humble opinion). The second half of the book degenerates into more of a typical outlaw saga, much more episodic and loose, but the first half is a beautifully constructed tale of secret murder-- it helps to keep in mind that, while most people believe they know who did the killing at the heart of the conflict, the author (at least in the MSS of the saga which this translation is based on) does not actually tell us who did it, and doesn't actually tell us who *Gisli* thinks did it, though *Gisli's* actions seem to indicate that he has decided who did it. All in all an engaging Medieval story of feud and murder-- Carol Clover likes to point out that *Gisla saga* is actually the first "detective novel", rather than *Oedipus Rex*-- in the latter, the audience always knows who killed the king, while *Oedipus* is still trying to figure it out, and the audience's knowledge heightens the tragedy-- but in *Gisla saga* the audience is brought along with *Gisli* in the effort to discover the identity of the killer. But I think it is actually counter-productive to emphasize the similarity to detective fiction, as the saga is better understood as the attempt not so much to solve a murder, but to resolve it in light of the web of conflicting loyalties at the heart of the story. What is more, saga style tends to keep us out of the minds of the characters, so rather than the main character being in the dark (though perhaps he is), it is the reader/audience who must unravel everything-- what evidence counts, what does *Gisli* really think, is *Gisli* supposed to be a martyred hero who defends family honor, a villain/anti-hero who kills his sister's suitors, or just a victim of the web of feud and family, like his sister *Thordis*? *Thordis* herself is an incredibly interesting figure, despite the fact that she is not on center stage like *Gisli*-- but I don't want to go into this too much-- just read the saga!

Matthew says

It took me about a third of the book to get into the story, especially because I found it nearly impossible at first to sort out who all of the Thorgrims, Thorkells, Thorgeirs, Thordises and Thorbjorns were (not an uncommon difficulty with Icelandic literature), but *The Saga of Gisli* turned out to be quite a pleasant read,

and brief at that. The story moves swiftly. It's hard to pinpoint what I enjoyed so much, but I just liked it a lot, and I'm already looking forward to reading another saga.

Hrefna Brynja says

I read this book in school. It's one of the old Icelandic vikings sagas. The book was read for the class 'cause the book is written in a very ancient Icelandic language. I loved the story (can't say the same thing about the movie version called *Útlaginn*)The book is very heroic and the main character Gísli Súrsson is very very very unrealistic, in the book it says that he held a rock so big that it would be called a mountain, really? But it was funny and I really liked it. I'll have to admit that I was sad when the book ended. I do think every Icelandic person should read it but I'm not sure if foreigners would appreciate it. Please try though its quite funny and very short, only around hundred pages.

Mina Soare says

Some guy keeps going to talk to your sister, a bit too often, people are saying.

Now, if you were of the TV drama sort, you might raise a fuss. Or you might keep working as reasonable people do - because food is a thing. Then your pops comes to you, says he heard the people talking and, in his reasonable voice, asks to please kill the guy when you have a free moment. Fine. You get off your ass, find the guy and - lay down the facts and can he please stop. Your dad is not impressed, but the guy listens and goes away for a while. As expected, it doesn't last. Your dad calls you a girl. You try talking one more time, and the suitor's dismissive. So you shrug philosophically as he drones on and chop the pest down. Now, back to work. The land won't be tilling itself, you know. Somehow neither your elder brother, your father or your sister seem very impressed. These people, man.

Gisli's saga is the story of a normal man turned outlaw. Despite appearances, it mixes an Odysseus-like hero to follow his own code and safeguard against his foes with spirituality and tragedy. The characters surrounding him appear in stark relief: the stalwart, strong-willed Auda, the loyal Vestein, the weak-willed Thorkel, the hounding Eyjolf and Thorgrim's presumption. All these are layered between the two poles of faith, old and new. The old faith is woven atop the thrall's curse through Thorgrim's spell and Gisli's dreams. The new echoes at the fringes and haunts Gisli's dreams as the kind wife.

Speedy, efficient character-building, no one-note characters, father-son conflict, internal conflict, murders, more murders, blood oaths and the beginning of a detective novel. What a delight!

Therese says

(School reading. I just wanted to mark a book as read on goodreads.)

Sara Gallardo says

Se cree que pudo ser escrita entre 1240 y 1250. Es una de las sagas de islandeses más completa y mejor estructurada. Denominada moderna por muchos analistas (nada de sentimentalismo, nada de sentimiento religioso, nada de mitología), contiene una fuerza y un poder de atracción que ya quisieran muchas novelas actuales y coloca al ser humano y a su destino en el centro de la narración. Preciosa.

Gustav Larsson says

Wonderfully fast-paced page-turner, dealing with issues of infidelity, revenge and exile!

Lorelie Mansur says

I read Gisla saga in medieval Icelandic several years ago and it still resonates for me in a similar way that the hard boiled detectives of Raymond Chandler do, or the heroes of American western stories, as in True Grit. They are all heroes outside the norms of society, simultaneously admired but always outsiders. Individualists to the core that tug uncomfortably or impossibly at the requirements of civilized society.

There is a particular passage in this old saga that was particularly compelling - it paints the scene of the murder of Gisli's sister's husband. The moonlight, the bedroom, how Gisli wakens the one he is about to murder: chilling, bare bones, stark. And remarkably modern in its writing.

The best of the sagas for modern American readers in my opinion, particularly if you are drawn to westerns or hard boiled detective stories.
