



Tómas Jónsson: Metsolubók

Guðbergur Bergsson

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A retired, senile bank clerk confined to his basement apartment, Tómas Jónsson decides that, since memoirs are all the rage, he's going to write his own—a sure bestseller—that will also right the wrongs of contemporary Icelandic society. Egoistic, cranky, and digressive, Tómas blasts away while relating pick-up techniques, meditations on chamber pot use, ways to assign monetary value to noise pollution, and much more. His rants parody and subvert the idea of the memoir—something that's as relevant today in our memoir-obsessed society as it was when the novel was first published.

Tómas Jónsson: *Metsölubók* Details

Date : Published 1989 by Forlagið (first published 1966)

ISBN : 9789979533498

Author : Guðbergur Bergsson

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From Reader Review Tómas Jónsson: *Metsölbók* for online ebook

Björn says

Lovely peek under the facade of appearances.

Govnyo says

Saw this on a Guardian article and thought I would read it. It really is not very good, or at any rate I will not do it justice. It is intended as the ramblings of a blind man writing on unlined paper, so about 50% of its 400 pages make absolutely no sense. He is also clearly losing his mind, so characters switch names and behaviours in mid-sentence with no explanation. The writing is by no means exquisite, though it might have been in the original Icelandic. Lastly, a lot of the themes - America, urbanisation, etc. - recur, and they recur a good 50 times each, with nothing new said about them.

Stylistically, there is absolutely nothing to get excited about, which of course is entirely normal with a translation.

I think much of it is meant to be funny, and some things genuinely are (a sentence that alludes to Nordics as people who milk cows and write sagas made me chuckle). A lot of it is incomprehensible though and thus unfunny.

As a caveat, I really do not like stream-of-consciousness and tend not to buy any books that contain it, here I did not do my research. So if you are into that kind of thing, you probably should not be deterred.

Another one, I basically wanted a long read to get me through a hungover Saturday in bed. I suspect this book might be more rewarding if one truly does make an effort to understand it, though that person is definitely not me.

Icíar says

Le he puesto dos estrellas, aunque soy consciente de que pudiera merecer más. Es un libro curioso, utiliza el lenguaje de forma ingeniosa. Me ha pasado lo mismo que a uno de los grandes como Samuel Beckett, que con todo ese lenguaje intimista, de cómo los pensamientos van y vienen por la mente de una persona, del absurdo, pues me agota. Lo dejo aparcado para otro momento que tenga más paciencia.

El género del absurdo no debe de ser lo mío.

Lo dejé en la página 72.

Kaija says

Such an absolute trip, but in the most classical-literary way I could ever imagine. Ulysses-meets-Memento-meets-painfully-adult-version-of-Diary-of-a-Wimpy-Kid (approximately).

Ted says

stranger than Palinuro Of Mexico... a slow read.

Jason says

Esteemed as, the back cover of the Open Letter will have you know, the "Icelandic ULYSSES," Guðbergur Bergsson's TÓMAS JÓNSSON, BESTSELLER definitely strikes me as splitting the difference between James Joyce and his slaying-the-father quasi-protégé Samuel Beckett. As in the Joyce of ULYSSES we have a densely variegated, teeming litany of literary games and approaches (the novel as whole, big, diverse world, radically unto itself). As in Becket (especially the novels) we have a pretty-darned-mad narrator whose obsessive musings and digressions speak to a contained consciousness that contains a great deal indeed. (Even when Beckett isn't writing from the inside of one consciousness, he always presents us w/ figures desperately locked-up in their own experience of alienated cogitation.) The tendency might be to declare Beckett the minimalist to Joyce's maximalist, but I would hold that Beckett (especially, again, as a novelist) is just a different, more streamlined kind of maximalist. I thought of Beckett's MOLLOY at least as often as I thought of ULYSSES whilst reading TÓMAS JÓNSSON. Think of the complex comic logic of Molloy's circulation of sucking-rocks in his various pockets (what Deleuze and Guattari call the "rock-sucking machine"). It is passages such as this one that Beckett demonstrates a connection to 'pataphysics w/ its elaborate and self-consistent theories born of something like nonsense. TÓMAS JÓNSSON likewise contains a lot of righteous comic nonsense, often w/ attendant theorizings. The novel also made me think of Beckett's play KRAPP'S LAST TAPE. Whereas Krapp manipulates a number of tapes made over time in a fundamentally asynchronous fashion, TÓMAS JÓNSSON, BESTSELLER takes the form of a number of "workbooks" that have been kept by their eponymous author over time, and which likewise appear to be presented to us out of sequence. What brings Bergsson closer to Joyce, however, is the panoply of formal regimes, modes of stylistic experiment, and thunderous volubility. Sometimes the prose is something like conventional, sometimes it collapses all known rules of punctuation or abandons it all together, sometimes it even reverts to poetry. The novel is notable for its delicious and childlike scatology. Lots of farts, belches, and the pissing of pants. Often I imagine translation as an exhausting and demanding undertaking, but reading TÓMAS JÓNSSON, I often thought how much fun the job of translating it must have been for Lytton Smith. Thought this strikes me as the kind of book (of which ULYSSES may well be the towering example) that may very frequently go unfinished by baffled readers, I thought it was a disorienting, raucous hoot. You sort of have to just go w/ it. Not everything will be categorically assimilated.

Gunnar Hjalmarsson says

Guðbergur Bergsson er bestur!

Connor says

This was described as the Icelandic Joyce, but in reality this is the Icelandic Gass. So many similarities in

theme, style, structure to Gass' the Tunnel. Decrepit old man, rotting away in the basement with unchanged diapers, who had been previously accused of raping a 12 year old girl (his defense is that he was peeing and just fell over when she entered the room, which is later questioned by the fact that there was semen discovered between her legs). Its the story of a terrible human, who steals from his job, thinks he deserves a promotion, rapes or at least stalks women, and believes he is an undiscovered genius.

Structurally, its composed of an intial blurb from the 'current' Tomas Jonsson, at his advanced age, and then its a piece from one of his many notebooks. Plays, operas, scientific treatise, fables, all are included, mostly only with one chapter completed of each. Its a book composed of ""unfinished"" works.

Thordur says

Tómas Jónsson Metsölubók var gefin út fyrir meira en hálfrí öld síðan. Þegar það þótti gegjjað að vera hippi og vera frjálslegur. Þessi bók er líka einkar frjálsleg og án línulegrar frásagnar. Það er talað í fyrstu persónu og þriðju og sveiflast þar á milli. Það er samt ekki formið sem er aðalmálið heldur einhvers konar tilfinning fyrir því hverju sé verið að varpa fram. Og þetta er torræð bók.

Þetta er með óskiljanlegustu bókum sem hægt er að lesa. Það tók mig mikið meira en ár að klára þetta. Í dag væri býsna erfitt að ætla sér að gefa út bók með þessu formi. Þar sem að t.d. reglur um punkta, kommur, eða hvar stór stafur ætti í raun að vera er ekki endilega á boðstólum. Þar sem að þú nær að lesa heilan kafla en ert engu nær um það hvað þú hafir í rauninni verið að lesa. Bókin minnir því klárlega á Ódysseif eftir Joyce. Mörgum hefur reynst erfitt að klára hana líka enda frásagnarmáttinn flókinn og torræður.

MJ Nicholls says

A beguiling and baffling Icelandic monolith from the peak of the postmodern era (the 1960s). The *Ulysses* comparisons are tantalising, as are the cover-blurb descriptors 'Rabelaisian' and 'picaresque', however, this is a work more embedded in cultural, nationalistic and folkloric notions of nation than a naughty romp of staggering formal innovation. The novel presents a series of fractured notebooks from the titular bestseller, a man with senile dementia whose writings are erratic, nonsensical, and borderline bats. Some last several pages, others spool into thirty or more, and each unleash various torrents of mental catarrh in typographically diverse forms: s-o-c patches, untabulated paragraphs, italicised stories, accounts from the narrator's nursing home present, his past, old mythical tales (real or invented?), and huge thickets of unclassifiable and illogical prose, captivating in its nordic weirdery. A true understanding of Icelandic history, its myths, culture (Laxness is blasted on several occasions), and the sixties zeitgeist is probably required for a full understanding of this densely referential novel. The prose, translated into stylish English by poet Lytton Smith, has a majestic weave, and each notebook unleashes a spume of challenging, fascinating, hilarious, disturbing, and headscratching digressions, making the novel an essential read for anyone interested in exploratory and original writing from anywhere outside their own backyard. An EVENT, this novel, dammit!

Vel Veeter says

So I recently received a subscription to “Open Letter” books as a gift. Their premise is translating and publishing a variety of texts from locally well-known writers and helping bring them to the English speaking reading world.

This book was initially published in the mid-1960s, and has not been translated into English before, as far as I can tell. The whole book is the product of a narrator writing a book, but also resisting the idea of writing a book. It’s incredibly fractured as a reading experience, contains lots of “extra-text” such as editor commentary, annotations, and rehashing of previous material. There’s not an explicit narrative as far as I could make out. The narrator is an older, senile man of indeterminate age. He casts himself as the age of the century itself, which would put him in his earlier 60s, but his general unreliability, the possibility that he’s a fabrication, and other factors suggest that could be wrong. He rails. He rails against anything and everything he can think of. He has very strong opinions about sick leave at work, crossing national border, his penis, women, using the bathroom, and especially writing.

He hates Haldor Laxness, with a great and terrible vengeance. I don’t know much about Halldor Laxness, but he won the Nobel Prize (Iceland’s only) previous to this novel and like a number of winners, his win was seen as a way to shed light on the quality and nature of Icelandic literature. But like any literature, no single author, no single work, can stand in for a diverse, even if small culture. And so the mission of this novel, at least as far as the narrator is concerned is call bullshit on this.

If Laxness is the writer of a national ethos, of the contents of daily struggle, of sheep, of the people, then Tomas Jonsson will take a big old dump on all of that and show them. In the same way that Gabriel Garcia Marquez was trying to resist becoming the mouthpiece of South American literature (and accidentally did through this act of resistance), this novel attempts to disrupt all sense of unity and cohesion.

It’s a tough novel to read. It’s often quite funny, but so much of it feels like disconnected rants, disconnected vignettes, and digressions, it’s frustrating and tiresome. This was not fun to read, but I am glad I have read it. It’s been called Iceland’s Ulysses and maybe it is, and maybe all it’s done for me is get me ready to read Ulysses (coming to you in CBR 10).

Jordi Via says

Le pondría tres estrellas y media, pero no es posible.
Lo he disfrutado, he tomado muchas notas.
Lo mejor es perderse entre sus páginas sin más.

Paul Dembina says

Wanted to like this more but by the end was thoroughly confused. Tomas was called Hermann plus multiple Tomas(es). Not sure if its the translation or Icelandic tradition but in some scenes a character's pronoun would switch genders. Not really my cup of tea

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Perhaps everything pub'd by Open Letter is worth your while. This one is.

Imagine if something like this wins the btba.

Imagine if something like this actually threatened the bestseller list.

Imagine if you had to make up your own mind about this one rather than the latest gone girl.

"the-xyz-ulysses" ; I will second that motion. The world needs more ulyssi.

see MJ's blurb=job above.

Yossi says

Una locura, un caos con destellos brillantes, un personaje inolvidable, grotesco y capaz de despertar algo parecido a la ternura en ocasiones, un libro inteligente que descarto para puntuación aunque no para relectura.
