

WOMAN AT 1,000 DEGREES

The Woman in the Garage
An essay by Hallgrímur Helgason

Questions for Discussion



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BEING A NOVELIST IS a bit like being a doctor, a journalist, or a firefighter. At work or not, you always have to be ready.

In the spring of 2006, municipal elections were held in Iceland. I was living in Reykjavík with a woman who had just entered politics, and she asked me to help out her party in the campaign. I went down to the headquarters of the Icelandic Social Democratic Party and joined their team of volunteers. They handed me a list of phone numbers and told me to ask people to vote for the Social Democrats. I started calling and it was going well, until I got an elderly lady on the line who told me flat out that she would never vote for “those damned communists.”

Still, she got to me, with her honesty, stubbornness, and clever humor. I was curious and started chatting with her.

She turned out to be an eighty-year-old woman who was bedridden by a lung disease and living in a garage all by herself. She had been living there for over a decade. The garage did not belong to her family—she just rented it from strangers. Yet, she was not isolated at all: she had satellite TV and a PC. She was constantly watching news channels, movies, and historical documentaries, all while being online around the clock, communicating with people all over the world. She even ran her own language school, teaching Icelandic to young men in Argentina and Malaysia. (I later learned that one of her students showed up in Iceland and wanted to visit her “school,” but got the answer from her that it was “closed for summer.”) At one point she explained to me the difference between Yahoo and Google, informing me that Yahoo was “a much better search machine.”

I was blown away by this fascinating woman, by her no-bullshit attitude

and the original way she described her life. I ended up talking to her for almost an hour, wrote down her name, and seriously thought of visiting her in the garage.

For two years I could not stop thinking about her. I was fascinated by the idea of someone who was completely cut off from the world but still a participant in it. For me she was almost like a human god, invisible and above, but still very active and omnipresent.

Maybe here was an idea for a novel? At least it was a wonderful setting. When I had finished the book I was writing (*The Hitman's Guide to Housecleaning*), I finally decided to check up on the woman in the garage. I had forgotten her name and could not find the piece of paper where I had written it down, and I had only a vague idea of the street where she lived.

After some phone calls, I sadly found out that she had passed away in 2007. I had missed the chance to meet her. But I would always remember our conversation. I was desperate to find out more about her.

I discovered that she had once been a prominent figure in Icelandic society, and that her family was one of the best known in the land. Her grandfather had been elected the first president of Iceland, when we gained our independence from Denmark in the summer of 1944, and her father had fought on the side of the Nazis in World War II, a fatal decision that had been kept as a state secret in the decades after the war. This dark chapter in the life of the president's son had also affected his daughter's life a little too much. It had uprooted her childhood, forcing her to live with strangers on a foreign island during the war, and sent her to South America after it was over. She never found home again, until she made the garage her home.

By making calls for the Social Democrats that day in 2006, I had stumbled upon a remarkable story, a story that would enable me to write a broad historical novel that would take the reader from the innocent but primitive times of prewar Iceland to the continental horrors of World War II, to Germany, Argentina, France, and the affluent years of postwar Iceland, all the way to the garage.

But first and foremost, circumstance had presented me with an

incredible character, a larger-than-life woman whom I have tried to do justice in *Woman at 1,000 Degrees*. I named this heroine Herra Björnsson. In Icelandic, Herra is both a woman's name and our word for "mister." As Herra sits in her garage with a laptop computer and a hand grenade, recalling the events of her magnificent life, she decides that when she dies she will be cremated—at the temperature of 1,000 degrees.

Yes, this story was inspired by real events and people, but in the end it is a work of fiction, taking all the necessary liberties to make a good story even better.

Writers, beware: sometimes your next book is only a phone call away.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the book's title. Do you feel that the 1,000 degrees have meaning beyond the temperature of the furnace in the crematorium?
2. The book opens with Herra discussing her name. Her nickname, Herra, short for Herbjörg, means "mister" in Icelandic, and her last name, Björnsson, is a male patronymic (ending in -son instead of -dóttir). How might Herra be shaped by her name? How has your name shaped you?
3. *Woman at 1,000 Degrees* is a first-person narrative, with Herra telling us her own life story. How does the life she's lived influence the way she tells us about it?
4. The author describes Herra as "very much an Icelandic woman." What might this mean? Do you think Herra's personality or life would be different if she were American? Would her story still make sense?
5. Herra can be both sarcastic and mean-spirited. Were you as a reader offended by any of Herra's actions or remarks? Did that affect whether or not you were rooting for her as you read?
6. Why does Herra hate her daughters-in-law? Might she envy them because of their long-term relationships with her sons, whom she is unable to love?
7. Although *Woman at 1,000 Degrees* is narrated by a woman, its author, Hallgrímur Helgason, is a man. Is Herra's character affected by this fact?

8. Herra's relationship with her father is tumultuous. She is abandoned by him during the war, and suffers because of him at its end. Yet she goes with him to Argentina after the war. Why?

9. Why does Herra find it so hard to adjust to life in Iceland after the war?

10. On page 94, Herra talks of herself as always having been somehow *wrong* everywhere she went. She also talks about having found inner peace only in the garage. What could be the reason for this? Where do you feel the most at peace?

11. Most of Herra's relationships with men are short-term. Do they suffer from superficiality on her part or is her love simply too hot? Do the relationships burn up in an instant or never get warm at all?

12. Who or what is Herra's true love?

13. Herra is present for several of the most important moments of the twentieth century. Why do you think the author chose to tell her story this way? How is her experience of World War II different from what you've read in other novels?

14. Herra makes fun of men throughout the book and often speaks of their inferiority. One review of this novel even used the headline, "A Bomb Attack on Malehood." How did you react to Herra's descriptions of men? Do you think Herra is a feminist, or is she something else?

15. *Woman at 1,000 Degrees* is partly based on a true story. How much of this story feels true? If someone were to write a novel based on your life, what might they change and why?