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## Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir

“Equal rights were at the top of my mind when I began writing novels,” claims author Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir. Her works highlight a mostly neglected part of Icelandic history: The lives of its women, and the disparity between their aspirations on one hand, and their predestined roles on the other.



Photo: Kristinn Ingvarsson



“Equal rights were at the top of my mind when I began writing novels,” claims author [Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir](#). Her works, popular both at home and abroad, highlight a mostly neglected part of Icelandic history: The lives of its women, and the disparity between their aspirations on one hand, and their predestined roles on the other.

There is evidently a demand for just such stories. In Germany, she has a devoted readership, and her German releases have sold tens of thousands of copies – yet she claims that her first work to be published in the country, *Mávahlátur* (*Seagull's Laughter*) made it into the market “practically by accident.” A few years later, the translation rights to *Karitas án titils* (*Karitas, Untitled*) – a story describing a young woman's struggle to pursue an artistic career in the early twentieth century – were sold before the novel was published in the original Icelandic; a rare occurrence, and a sure sign of Baldursdóttir popularity in Germany. Indeed, all of her works have since been published in German, and her books have also appeared in Swedish, Danish, French and Dutch.

### **I used to dream of a housekeeper, now I dream of a secretary**

**How does it feel to have started out writing for a small population of islanders, and then seeing your readership expand dramatically after your work was translated?**

Kristín: “It feels very good. Having your books read, however, means work – more than I imagined. You don't get out of the office much. Good letters need to be answered. I used to dream of a housekeeper, now I dream of a secretary. But gaining a foothold as a foreign writer takes time – I've been toughing it out for the past twelve years. In the beginning, no one wanted my book. Then a German journalist got her hands on it, practically by accident, and recommended it. That started things off a bit.”

**One of your books has also been “translated” into other mediums: *Seagull's Laughter* was staged and then filmed. What did you think of the transition?**

Kristín: “I was a bundle of nerves while it was going on, but looking back, it was a fun period. I got to know the exotic world of filmmakers and actors. It was also interesting to see how my own internal images were translated into something everyone could see. I think they handled my story well – both Þórhildur Þorleifsdóttir, who directed the play, and Ágúst Guðmundsson, who made the film. I'm very grateful to them. Having good memories is important.”

**The arts play an important role in your books. Where did your interest in paintings originate?**

Kristín: “I became interested in the arts when I was a child. I would sit with my father while he painted, and he would talk to me about art. He would take me to exhibitions, at the Listamannaskálinn [the first specially built exhibition space in Iceland], and would talk to me about colors and technique as if I were an expert. Later, when I traveled abroad, I wasn't interested in anything but the art museums. Over the past thirty years, I must have seen over eighty of them in Europe. Looking back, I must have been a frightful bore as a travel companion. But maybe the reason for this addiction was that I would often have good ideas when I looked at art. Even if the canvas was just black. After I finished my two novels about the painter Karitas, the compulsion subsided a bit, as if those books had served as an outlet for certain emotions. On the other hand, I still go to concerts and operas. I don't have any ideas to speak of while I'm going to concerts, but music opens up certain dimensions. As does good literature.”

## **The illness must be diagnosed**

**Equal rights are a recurring theme in your work. For instance, your “big” books – *Óreiða á striga (Chaos on Canvas)* and *Karitas, Untitled* – highlighted the condition of women at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Does your work consciously comment on the current state of affairs?**

Kristín: “Equal rights were at the top of my mind when I began writing novels. However, I try to avoid preaching. Instead, I’ve striven to adapt the message to the art. Looking back, I’m not sure my world-saving did much good. I think that in the nineties, when I started writing, women weren’t very interested in equal rights. They had other things – such as their appearance – on their minds. Maybe that’s why I felt compelled to write about the woman artist Karitas, who has to work for everything she gets. I’ve often thought about female solidarity: on the surface, there seems to be a lot of it, but when push comes to shove it doesn’t amount to much, except in a few isolated instances. As Karitas says: “In the patriarchy, the men make a fuss of each other. What’s worse is that the women make a fuss of them too, because if they’d start making a fuss of each other, who would do the country’s laundry?” But if my books have a place in the fight for equal rights, that’s good. In my mind, equal rights are synonymous with human rights.”

**Your latest book, *Karlsvagninn (The Big Dipper)* has been interpreted as a psychoanalysis of Iceland in the aftermath of the economic collapse. What role do literature and other art-forms play after the collapse, in your opinion?**

Kristín: “The collapse was a benchmark of Icelandic history. Not only did it lay bare financial fraud and corruption in Icelandic society – it also revealed its inherent vulnerabilities, which can be compared to a latent disease. The illness must be diagnosed and treated if the people are to find a purpose in life here. The devil has to be talked down. Literature has a big role to play, there – few people are more adept at analyzing, interpreting and creating than writers. In the next few years we’ll no doubt see countless artworks about the country’s mental state appearing.”

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