



Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories

Anonymous , Hermann Pálsson (Translator)

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They date from the thirteenth century and fall into two distinct groups. Hrafnkel's Saga, Thorstein the Staff-Struck, and Ale Hood are set in the pastoral society of native Iceland, the homely touch and stark realism giving the incidents a strong feeling of immediacy.

The remaining four -*Hreidar the Fool*, *Halldor Sorrason*, *Audun's Story*, and *Ivar's Story*- were written without first-hand knowledge of Scandinavia, and describe the adventures of Icelandic poets and peasants at the royal courts of Norway and Iceland. Pagan elements tightly woven into the pattern of Christian ethics give these stories their distinctive character and cohesion.

Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories Details

Date : Published 1976 by Penguin Classics (first published April 30th 1971)

ISBN :

Author : Anonymous , Hermann Pálsson (Translator)

Format : Paperback 144 pages

Genre : Classics, Fantasy, Mythology, Fiction, Historical, Medieval

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From Reader Review Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories for online ebook

Scott says

Hrafnkel is a saga writ small, but with all the propelling blunt force of its lengthier cousins. This simple story told in starkly realistic prose draws a vivid picture of tenth-century Iceland's snow-capped mountains, mires, and grassy slopes dotted with the homesteads of tetchy farmers, who hold honor more dear than life. The story begins with a murder of a poor peasant, who yielded to the temptation to ride his master's sacrosanct horse. From this grim beginning, the saga branches into a swiftly told series of intertwining episodes involving torture, revenge, and complex legal alliances that lead to an unexpected ending.

??The chieftains and smallholders of medieval Iceland placed great value on esteem, self-reliance and grim humor in the face of provocation. A man who felt he had been offended had recourse to the courts; but because of the legal system's limitations – there were neither prisons nor police, so the execution of judgement was left to the plaintiffs – proper procedure was often ignored, twisted, or broken outright.

Hrafnkel's Saga is rife with abuses spawned both by man's pride and by the law's shortcomings. You won't turn many pages before you find someone else with an axe in his head.

??*Hrafnkel's Saga* is the place to start before wandering off into the snarled thickets of one of the major Old Norse sagas. Here, you'll find a rich sampling of the themes and styles perfected by the thirteen-century saga writers. But unlike *Njal's Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga* that sprawl over decades and swamp you with a cast numbering in the hundreds, Hrafnkel's story is mercifully short – it takes no more than an hour to read – and it deals with barely a dozen important characters. Along with *Hrafnkel's Saga* this thin Penguin edition offers five more very short stories, two set in Iceland and three in Norway or Denmark. My favorites were *Audun's Saga*, a tale of a boy and his bear; and *Ivar's Saga*, an unexpectedly poignant tale of a lovelorn Viking. If this trickle of Old Icelandic literature captures your imagination, then you're likely to love the maelstrom of the mighty sagas.

Jacob Lang says

An interesting little collection of sagas and stories from the old Icelandic peoples. I'm glad I read this as a primer to *Njal's Saga*.

There are hints of pagan spiritualism in Hrafnkel's story, but it is not romanticized. The author definitely threw in a few Christian ethical spins (or maybe they would have accumulated naturally through the passing of these tales through medieval Iceland). There are great moments of sacrifice, honour, and a subtle sense of humour in some of these stories. It's a quick read, so if you have a few hours, give it a go.

I particularly liked little moments of description and lineage in Hrafnkel's saga and some of the other longer ones. It conjures a lot of "Viking" imagery and history.

Anyways, I have high expectations now for *Njal's saga*, and I hope I get a bigger glimpse at the native spirituality as well in that story.

Rhys says

Back in my teens (during the 1980s) I collected Penguin Classics. I bought a dozen Viking Sagas but never

got round to reading any of them. At long last I've decided to remedy the situation and this is the first of them. *Hrafinkel's saga* is one of the shortest major sagas but it's a remarkable work... nonetheless, one of the first examples of "realism" in world literature, though it's a curiously alien realism by modern standards... This book contains six other stories dating from the 13th Century. They tell of an age when men were willing to die for the sake of a point of honour; and they were prepared to kill for much less than that. Superb and fascinating!

microlith says

Has some cool joints. Everyone's killy, dark, completely homicidally into horses. Plus "Hrafinkel" is almost identical to my crudely elided work email!

Jackson Cyril says

The great medieval Scandinavian Sagas continue to shock and beguile. Such stunning naturalism, such depth of character psychology, such broad humanism!-- they are, in my view, the best kept secret in Weltliteratur.

Nick says

Weirdly enough, I was just discussing Norse sagas with someone when this turned up in my book collection. I have no memory of obtaining it, but there it was.

These are short prose translations of medieval manuscripts, ranging from very short stories to the longer title piece. They unveil a few of the things we understand [or often misunderstand] about the Viking period, and the world of Iceland. In one case, the character is Icelandic, but the action takes place in Europe.

Characters in this world don't always get what we think of as "justice," and their idea of a court of law isn't ours, but several of the stories are centered around legal cases.

The book is short enough that you won't get bogged down, and the snippets of history that crop up in the footnotes are interesting enough that you will want to read those, too. The stories are good but not great, simply because some of them are very straightforward, and are about characters that are hard to like, by modern standards. Still, the book is worth reading if you're interesting in Viking history.

Matt Poland says

A good, short introduction to Icelandic sagas. The stories, especially "Thorstein the Staff-Struck," emblemize those things that are so good about the sagas: the collocation of Christian and pagan ideas (and the tension between them), clear-eyed realism and seriousness of tone, and wry humor. I would argue that anyone who grew up in a rural area, in Iceland or elsewhere, will recognize these hard-headed people, and feel at least somewhat welcome in their community.

Richard says

This is the book I ought to have started with when I began to dip into Icelandic sagas again recently. The stories are shorter, the plots are tighter with less winding and sidetracking. The cast of characters is usually smaller, so that there are fewer names, patronymics and relationships to keep track of. The characters are sparsely but vividly drawn, and even the features of land and sea get some attention when they contribute to the plot. Overall, these tales are easier to digest.

Most of the same themes I've encountered elsewhere are here too. There is the sense, on the one hand, that good conduct (peacefulness, helpfulness, support of friends and relations) attracts rewards. On the other hand, evil conduct (malicious attitude, excessive violence, vindictiveness, murderousness) attracts punishment.

And yet, some characters have different ideas of what exactly constitutes good conduct. This probably has to do with the conversion of Iceland (and other Scandinavian lands and territories) from the old religion to the new. This is most obvious from Hrafnkel's Saga in which a series of unfortunate and tragic events is unleashed when someone dares to ride Hrafnkel's favorite stallion which was dedicated to the god Frey.

Janis says

The stories in this collection of Icelandic sagas date from the 13th century but take place centuries before that. They're fascinating! I expected Homeric but they're a little more...homey. They're full of characters named Thord and Thorarin, Thorhall and Thorvald (many of whom have bad tempers and handy weapons), and tell of fights among relatives, lawsuits, drinking contests, and staged horse fights. I liked the flawed characters, and I liked that some of them grew and changed while others didn't. I was especially drawn to the sense of place in these tales, and how places became tied to events (when Freyfaxi the horse is killed on a bluff, it is forever after known as Freyfaxahamar). Bogs and moors are described in great detail, as if the reader were being told how to get to Thorkel's farmstead. It was great to experience this new world of literature.

Adam McPhee says

Hrafnkel's Saga is about a feud and the vicious killings and legal drama that go along with it. There's a Varangian and the lava fields are featured. One of the epithets of King Harald Straight-Hair's ancestor is 'the farter'.

The other stories are much shorter and more straightforward.

Thorstein Staff-struck was okay. Apparently when they weren't feuding and duelling the Icelanders used to make horses fight each other to relieve men of their pastoral boredom, but then the men would get angry and fight the horses and each other and this lead to feuds and duels. I like how Thorstein and buddy kept taking breaks during their duel to the death. Water break, tie my shoes, let's get new weapons. Of course they call it off and settle their dispute. Reminded me Roland taming the giant in one of the chansons de geste. The moral of the story is don't punch horses in the face.

Audun's Tale is about a guy who brings a bear from Greenland to the king of Denmark, in order to pay for a pilgrimage to Rome. But he has trouble with the Norwegian king, who wants the bear for himself. I'm assuming it was a polar bear.

Halldor Snorrason gets on the bad side of the Norwegian king and has to hightail it out of Trondheim.

Robert says

The title story is much more consciously literary than the other stories in this short collection. It's a tale of broken oaths, murder, revenge, legal drama and redemption in medieval Iceland.

Several of the other stories have similar themes but have a somewhat different tone, being more like a cross between a short biography of an individual and the anecdotes about him that would get told down the pub on a long winter's night.

The latter-most stories take a wider look at the Norse world as they tell of Icelanders who travel abroad. One character goes so far as Rome, escaping the North altogether for a while.

Both types offer a fascinating glimpse of the prevailing culture in an entertaining fashion.

Alatea says

Read this mainly for Hrafnel's saga, but I have to admit that others, which I have never even heard before, were quite interesting, too. Also, great introduction that touches upon the biggest questions and problems about Hrafnel's saga and others in this collection.

Jessica says

If you're looking for the inspiration for Shadowfax, Gandalf's noble steed, look no further. Freyfaxi the Wonder Pony, noble steed of Hrafnkel is the horse you're looking for. This, and the other stories herein, are marvelous in their own right. But let's face it: it's super fun to see where Tolkien got some of the material for his books.

Alex says

I have not actually read this whole book, I just read Hraknkel's Saga in the larger collection of Icelandic Sagas I am going through and wanted a venue to review it on its own. This is a much shorter tale than Egil's Saga, which I read a few weeks ago, and probably much more accessible for that. If Egil's is a novel, then Hrafnkel's is a short story and all the better for it. Told with an economy of information that makes the material timeless and appealingly opaque, this is one of the best pieces of writing from pre-modern times that I have come across. There are no heroes or villains in Hrafnkel's Saga, only proud men doing irreparable harm to one another because of the philosophies of pride, honor, and devotion which guide their society. The

reader's ultimate reaction to the material depends as much upon his or her own perspective and philosophies as anything in the text. Great, great, great stuff.

Joseph F. says

Okay, I'm a bit biased here. I LOVE Icelandic sagas. My first was Njal's Saga. This was followed by many others. There are different types of these sagas. Most people are probably more familiar with the legendary ones: stories of heroes, monsters and gods. The most popular of this type is the story of Sigurd(Siegfried) and the dragon.

But there is another type: the family sagas. These are much more real to life stories, and much more prosaic. They take place during or just after the Vikings settled in Iceland, but they were written a few hundred years later. Here you will find stories concerning various families and what life was like on a farmstead in Iceland during a time that was hard and gritty. there are here some great grim stories of murder, betrayal, revenge, sorcery and the notorious blood feud. But there is also much kindness and humor: kinship, friendship, generosity, ribaldry. It is amazing that even though this is a different world that we may not relate to, we can't help but feel for the characters and situations. This is mainly because no matter what time and place, humans undergo suffering, no matter how undeserved it may seem.

Hrafnel's Saga, the first of the stories, tells how a powerful and rich farmer is cut down to size because of a murder he committed. But just when you think he is beaten, his fortunes are reversed for the better, thanks to some hard work combined with a little humility.

I'm not going to go into the details of the other stories, just that they are all great and deserve a wider audience.
