



The Old Man and His Sons

Heðin Brú , John F. West (Translator)

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These are the Faroe Islands as they were some fifty years ago: sea-washed and remote, with one generation still tied to the sea for sustenance, and a younger generation turning toward commerce and clerical work in the towns.

At the post-hunt whale-meat auction, Ketil enthusiastically bids for more meat than he can afford. Thus when Ketil is seventy, he and his wife struggle to repay their debt.

Heðin Brú (1901–1987), novelist and translator, was considered the most important Faroese writer of his generation and is known for his fresh and ironic style.

The Old Man and His Sons Details

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From Reader Review *The Old Man and His Sons* for online ebook

Carolyn says

Ein ganz merkwürdiges Buch, zumindest fuer jemanden, der noch nie ueberlegt hat, was es bedeuten wuerde, 1940 auf den Faeroer Inseln zu leben.

Ketil und seine Frau haben einen Haufen Kinder, aber nur der etwas trottelige jüingste Sohn wohnt noch bei ihnen und sorgt fuer comic relief. Das Zentrum des Romans ist aber, dass die aeltere Generation mit der juengeren nicht mehr mitkommt. Ketil und seine Frau wohnen in einem kleinen Dorf, das Ketils Frau zumindest seit 40 Jahren nicht verlassen hat, und sie leben das altmodische Dorfleben - die 3000 Einwohner zaehlende Stadt Torshaven ist fuer ihn wie eine riesige Metropole. Aber ihre Söhne und Schwiegertochter folgen dem Fortschritt, was den Alten als pietäetslos, herablassend, niedagewesen vorkommt. Besonders interessant ist der Generationenkonflikt wenn man sich klar macht, dass Ketils Soehne der Generation meiner Grosseltern angehören (der aelteste Sohn wohl fast der der Urgrosseltern). Dass sich deren Eltern ueber das Verkommen der Jugend beschweren finde ich ziemlich witzig.

Das Glossar hinten im Buch ist sehr hilfreich, es enthaelt Hinweise zu Geschichte und Aussprache, jeweils so erkluert, dass ein deutschsprachiger Leser der Handlung auch besser folgen kann. Insgesamt fand ich dieses Buch grossartig, wuerde es aber nur Lesern empfehlen, die generell schonmal an Klassikern interessiert sind. Das Nachwort erwaeht eine von Hedin Bru zusammengetragene Sammlung Faeroeischer Maerchen, die ich unglaublich gern auch in Uebersetzung haette.

Rusalka says

This was one of those books that leapt out of the huge list of the books people had already found for their own Around the World list. Scrolling down the page: Estonia, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Faroe Islands, Fiji.... Hold on what? The Faroes? There are books written about or in the Faroes? I have to read it!

So on I went, and ordered the book and it arrived in the giant shopping spree of parcels I had delivered to work (the postman was very grateful I was solely keeping him in a job). And then it sat patiently waiting until I managed to get to it.

I will state first of all, this is one of the nicest covers on any of the books I own. It's gorgeous. I frequently took it off the shelf over the last 9 months just to look at it. Not only I think this, but Lexx in his grumpy, judging, Graphic Designer way even said it was a really nice cover. Get it for the cover. Make it a coffee table book. It's pretty!

Story wise though, I didn't love it. It was another story of a country fighting with modernisation and the problems with loosing ones own culture while developing as a country. And that is sad. It must have been heartbreaking for these old Faroe people to see their children doing what they deemed as rejecting their heritage and culture. I am sympathetic to that. I think it is important while developing and modernising to still keep your identity and culture in check. Those are the things that make you and your country different and interesting. For example, while not the same in any way shape or form, it annoys me that Aus is getting more and more Americanised. So I am sure these people felt this annoyance and then sadness a thousand times more than my feelings.

However, I feel that if their children, all of them, are that big a jerks that they insinuate, then maybe, just maybe, they may need to work on their parenting skills. They just went on and on about how ungrateful, and rude, and horrible, and whatnot their children were. And how their grandchildren were always begging from them. Well maybe, one of the reasons ALL of your MANY children are horrible may come down to the common factor with all those children? And you can say “No! Go home!” to your grandchildren once in a while. I couldn’t sympathise with that. It bugged me.

But as much as that annoyed me, this did not even compare to the son who was still living at home, Kálvur. Dear god I wanted to slap him upside his face and tell him to get the hell over himself. He was a complete and utter drip. 24ish years old and crying all the time because things were scary. Seriously boy! Grow a pair! Living at home (in a 2 room house) with his parents, and then lying in his bed yelling at his mum to bring him food because he couldn’t be bother getting up. Then getting pissed off as she wasn’t there as she had gone out. Once. Ever. I’d tell you what would happen if I ever tried that with my Mum, there is very little chance I would still be here writing this.

Whinging aside, both mine and sniveling boy’s, the book was very well written. I wanted to keep reading it, even though I found the people not overly engaging. The way of storytelling was, and the culture and customs were intriguing. And it was only a short book, so you knew that even though the snotty-nosed boy was crying again, you only had another 50 pages with him.

The whale hunt at the beginning of the book, and the premise for the whole book was really interesting and eye opening. I had always thought that if people could hunt whales traditionally with a spear and a wooden boat, good on them. I had the idea that these cultures only kill as much as they need, therefore being much more sustainable than the horrible commercial whaling that has just started up in the oceans below me as we speak.

This book changed that way of thinking though. It was so real and evocative. I was so upset for the whales, and I am not sure if I was supposed to be. I have a feeling that is a product of reading the book with my background and in my time. 70 years ago I may have identified with the hunters more, been on their side. Not now, I was so drawn in to the book, hoping a whale would get away or take someone with them. It almost made me cry this hunt.

Also there wasn’t that idea of sustainability I thought went with it. They killed as much as they possibly could, which allowed Ketil to get into the mess he did by accidentally buying some obscene tonnage of whale meat. It really opened my eyes.

So with saga-esq storytelling, a rare insight for me into the lives of another place in the North and Norwegian Seas, another story of the struggle of traditional vs modern ways of living, and an eye opening account of traditional hunting methods, that I will admit has changed my thinking immensely, I felt outweighed the frustration with annoying characters. One day, one day I will read a book with characters I like. Or I’ve just become a cantankerous old lady who hates everyone already... oh dear...

Mark Staniforth says

Heoin Bru's 'The Old Man And His Sons' is a beautiful, gripping chronicle of the daily struggle for survival on the Faroe Islands, a huddle of storm-ravaged specks of rock in the north Atlantic.

First published in Faroese in 1940, the book was translated into English by New York publishers Eriksson in 1970, and has been unearthed and re-published this year, to their tremendous credit, by translation experts Telegram.

Like the book itself, it's a venture worthy of great praise. This is a stunning and strangely comforting book, best read tucked up warm while the wind howls outside and a pot of whale meat blubbers away on the stove downstairs (okay, maybe not the last bit).

It tells of the growing inter-generational conflicts between the elderly Ketil and his wife, and their sons and daughters-in-law - who have "been to Torshavn, and picked up daft notions" - and who resist the traditional fishing, scavenging and seabird-catching slog of their forebears.

"I don't know how the world's got this way," bemoans Ketil's wife as she prepares to leave her home village for the first time in forty years to attend a funeral. "The older folk scraped and struggled every day, and tried to get good value out of every penny, and there was nothing to spare. You were reckoned to have done well if you gave every man his due. But now! The young folk spend their working days the whole year round in idle amusement. But they seem to get by somehow."

The central plot strand of the novel pursues Ketil's struggle to repay a hefty debt accrued after the community's annual whale kill, which is regaled in all its bloody, frothy glory in the opening chapter.

Ketil's stubborn pride does not permit debt, so, with the help of his last remaining home-bound son Kalv - who has preoccupations of his own with the daughter of the local con-man and sometime suicidal preacher - he sets out on a series of increasingly risky escapades to bring in the money before the District Sheriff seeks to settle his books.

But it is the struggle - Faroese style - between change and tradition which forms the books' main narrative. When a storm threatens to blow the turf roof off Ketil's home, the old men of the village spend the whole night lying across it to prevent it being ripped away by the squalls.

His sons are annoyed. "Are you running around after your roof again? Put corrugated iron on your roof and then we'll all get a bit of peace at night! Fancy having a damn roof that you have to sit and hold onto, every time there's a real use for it!"

But the old men are unrepentant: "'For all that, a turf roof's the best roof," was the first thing they said when they had got warm again and recovered their powers of speech.'

This is a beautiful book which recalls the savage glory of a simple life by now (we presume) long extinct. It's enough to send you out for a bracing cliff-top walk, to gaze at the sky-line and wonder how many other treasures those rugged north Atlantic rocks might still hold.

Craig Rowland says

The Old Man and His Sons by Heðin Brú is another classic of Faroese literature. This novel was first published in 1940, and unlike *Barbara*, which was originally written in Danish, Brú's novel was written in Faroese. It was translated by John F. West. I read it over three days as I could not put it down. It had me

laughing as I turned the pages and that was probably one of the main reasons the Faroese voted it their Book of the Twentieth Century.

Ketil, his unnamed wife and youngest son Kálvur live in a tiny two-room house with a dirt floor in Seyrvágur. Ketil gets into trouble by buying too much whale meat at auction. He and his family spend the rest of the novel trying to find ways to pay their debt. Comic relief is provided by their son, who at twenty-four years old is still afraid of the dark and whimpers like a toddler. Kálvur is the baby of the family yet carries this endeared privilege into adulthood. He is at times whiny like a crybaby and at others a sexually active adult who sleeps with his girlfriend.

Before I got halfway through the book I wondered why the English title was translated as *The Old Man and His Sons*, with emphasis on the sons, plural. We rarely meet any of Ketil's other sons. The original Faroese title, *Feðgar á Ferð*, means *Father and Son on the Move*, and since Ketil and Kálvur are always roaming the Faroes in their quest to earn money to pay back their whale meat debt, it seems more fitting to have kept it.

Brú makes use of gallows humour in a literal context when he confronts a friend about to commit suicide by hanging himself from the roof beams. Ketil shrugs it off by telling the friend:

"Come on down now and get back to bed. Next time, do your despairing in the daytime..."

These crossbeams are the source of much humour as Ketil's hens live inside his house and perch up there. One is always dodging falling excrement:

"But he also reflected that it would never do to look straight up in the air in this way in their old-fashioned house, because the hens sat on the crossbeams, and at any time you might get an eyeful."

Whenever the hens needed to relieve themselves, West translated with the verb *to mute*, which I see from Merriam-Webster means "to evacuate the cloaca (of a bird)". Knowing the humour and tone of language used elsewhere in the novel. I don't think it would have been inappropriate for West to have used the vulgar term *to crap*. The verb *to mute* created ambiguity when I first encountered it. I honestly thought that the clucky hens just fell silent.

I laughed many times while reading, and Ketil's cutting one-liners were right out of a comedian's stand-up routine. His wife is obsessed with what the neighbours think as she has lived in the same small Faroese village--one that she hasn't left in forty years--where everyone knows everything about her and there is no sense of privacy whatsoever. Ketil knocks down her paranoid obsessions with lines such as this:

"Ketil wanted his wife to get up and ride, but she refused until they were past the infield wall. 'I wouldn't dare to sit astride a horse anywhere where folks might see me,' she said.

"Don't be so silly, talking like that. Your legs are no uglier than anyone else's, and these days, every woman's skirt shows half her thigh."

I am returning to the Faroe Islands in July and will look for more Brú novels in translation. I loved *The Old Man and His Sons*.

Steve says

It was hard to read this portrait of modernity encroaching on tradition in the Faroe Islands without recalling other, perhaps better known novels that have grappled with similar material (and happen to be among my own favorites). Not for long, though, because Heðin Brú's *The Old Man And His Sons* is very much its own book. Its fatalism bears a lighter touch than the bleakness of Halldór Laxness' Iceland, and is more down-to-earth than the religion and mysticism of George Mackay Brown's Orkney stories, and that lightness is reflected in the matter-of-fact style of its prose (as translated by John F. West).

Though early on Brú sets up what seems to be a binary, generic critique of the younger generation by the older, he masterfully subverts that expectation as characters develop further and each generation—and more importantly, each person—reveals particular strengths and shortcomings. That's what ended up being really compelling in the novel: whereas Laxness, Brown, and others often frame the decline of tradition as the victimization of island life by larger systems and forces of history, technology, capitalism, etc., Brú leaves far more room for individual will: his characters are as capable of being hardworking and generous as they are of being lazy and selfish, and the conflicts or problems in the novel come from individual choices or actions far more often than vast unseen forces. Characters don't always have the same ideas about what being a good neighbor or islander means, but they are equally capable of aspiring to those qualities—or not—regardless of generation. So the conflict is a "gentler" one so to speak, if no less important (and no less high-stakes), so Brú's straightforward style and emphasis of ordinary if complex undertakings like fishing, funerals, and food preparation over more elaborate plotting are perfect for bringing that philosophical rather than polemical perspective to the fore.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book was too short, and over too soon! It took a long time to track down a book written in the Faroe Islands that had actually been translated into English. This was written in the 1940s, depicting a quickly fading "old way" of living as a Faroese Islander. Brutal whale hunt, brutal living, but debt-free!

This is a simple story with memorable characters, but tends to drive home the message of the old ways having value and being disregarded a little too forcefully.

Because the Faroe Islands are at the top of places I dream about visiting, I stopped every time a specific spot was mentioned and looked at pictures of it before moving on in the story. It became easy to picture, and easy to place, when you consider that the main characters think of Tórshavn as "the city," and haven't been since children. The Faroe Islands are not that big to begin with!

[image error]

Richard Derus says

My review for Translation Thursday: THE OLD MAN AND HIS SONS by Heðin Brú (good luck pronouncing that one!) translated from Faroese (no really, it's a language).

I'll leave the whole review on my blog <http://tinyurl.com/jjxwkvk> for a week or so.

Antonomasia says

Gives a brilliant, human and succinct insight into an obscure world: that of a family and community living in the transition out of one of the last subsistence economies of Western Europe, seventy years ago in the Faroe Islands. As a premise that sounds academic, but this book is as easy to follow and as eventful as a soap (an interesting and non-sensationalist one: more Archers than Corrie). The writer was born in the Faroes in 1901 and lived there all his life.

The changing times are illustrated naturally as a part of life, as choices made by local people rather than things imposed from outside by corporations. The account of a whale-hunt which kicks off the story somehow makes it evident that for these people, a practice most of us only know as a barbaric occurrence mentioned periodically in the news, was the local equivalent of strategically hunting a herd of wildebeest or woolly mammoth in other places and times. The hunt sounds ostensibly primitive - but some hunters with injuries or broken spears ask the local authority for compensation afterwards and the meat is distributed by an organised ticketing system: the movement towards the organised Nordic political model is underway.

There is a fascinating co-existence of the older generation's sparse turf-roofed wooden houses where hens are kept in the living room and there are holes in the roof for smoke to escape, alongside their daughters-in-law's homes full of items bought from shops on the proceeds of employment in commercial fishing. It's as if history has jumped hundreds of years in one generation, at least when seen through British eyes.

This is a story about a particular time and place in history - but it's also one that is very pertinent now: that of a man trying to do, make and sell whatever he can to pay off a big debt and avoid losing the roof over his head, and all the strokes of luck and setbacks that happen along the way.

"The Old Man..." often seems to be compared to works by Halldor Laxness and George Mackay Brown - books I own but have not yet read. One of the advantages this book has over those longer works is its brevity: the story is balanced in its structure, and can immerse you in another previously unknown world, despite having only 160 very readable pages.

Vicky says

Around the world = Faroe Islands.

The Old Man And His Sons by Heðin Brú is an account of the daily struggle for survival in a rural village on the wave-washed Faroe Islands, set against creeping modernisation of the society. The opening chapter details the *grindadráp*, the communal whale hunt, in all its bloody magnificence. Drunk and adrenaline-fueled by the kill, Ketil, the old man of the title, buys a huge chunk of whale meat beyond his means, and with the assistance of his (as he sees it) feckless youngest son sets out on a series of adventures to ease the debt.

I picked this up in Stromness, in a tiny cupboard of a shop stacked high with Scottish and Scandinavian authors, with particular reverence for local hero George Mackay Brown. Brown's Orkney stories, rising from a bare, bleak landscape rich in history and myth, seem a natural comparison for this Faroese novel.

With conflict between generations, the new and the old, change and tradition, forming the theme of the book,

Brú eschews the spirituality and mythology used by Brown, detailing events with a straightforward simplicity that enhances the comedy of the central conflict. The book is a beautiful insight into a way of life that was on the brink, without hiding the harshness of the existence or the foolishness in refusing to change.

Bettie? says

Opening - A school of blackfish is in Seyvrágs Fjord - two or three hundred small whales, swimming silently round in little groups, and longing to be back in the broad ocean again, for this is not the way they intended to go.

Paul says

Faroese novel, published in 1940, following an elderly couple bamboozled by all things modern, particularly debt. Their sustainable lifestyle in a tumbledown house, making do and mending, is laughed at by the younger people. With a great deal of dark humour it paints a vivid picture of a remote community at a time of change.

Bill Murray says

This was a specialty read, preparatory to a trip to the Faroe Islands in two months.

Set vaguely in the first third of the 20th century, *The Old Man and His Son* is a vivid snapshot of island life among the common, rural folk of the day.

The narrative returns again and again to a comparison of the way things have always been done with the newfangled, high-falutin' ways of kids-these-days through the eyes of Ketil, the main character. In Ketil's world the sea provides, roofs leak and conveniences are few.

The book cover says the Faroese chose this book as their 'Book of the Twentieth Century.' At 162 pages it's short enough to read in a single dedicated day.

Ian says

Really nice discovery this one. Set in the Faroe Islands and written in 1940, it tells the fascinating, touching, at times amusing, often bemusing but ultimately extremely revealing story of Ketil, the Old Man and his wife the Old Woman. Ketil is a loveable old Faroese man whose brutally hard, traditional way of life has been unchanged for centuries. He lives with his wife and youngest son in a two room leaky, turf roofed house where chickens roost in the beams of the kitchen, where spitting on the floor is the norm and where the cow next door is separated from their bedroom by just a thin wall. He still wears the garb of his forefathers which includes traditional shoes with long stockings, completing the look with a filthy beard right down to his waist.

The story opens with a bloody whale drive, when the village boats drive a whale pod into shallow water where the whales are then killed and pulled ashore. This initially seems foul to a modern reader but it becomes clear that in 1940, Ketil and his community remain subsistence whalers, with the resulting meat being their primary food source. All the people seem united as the village celebrates a successful hunt but a clash between the generations about the old and new ways of life soon becomes apparent. Ketil regards his many other sons with a disdain bordering on contempt as they have eschewed the old ways and traditions in favour of working as crew on fishing boats with engines, rather than using a row boat like Ketil and his friends. They have moved their families into more modern houses with weatherproof tin roofs but the other lifestyle changes enabled by an increase in income for the young are hinted at but largely and rather cleverly left unsaid. We are left with the sad bewilderment at change of old Ketil and his wife, a narrative of ageing in a modern world that is timeless and multicultural.

Calzean says

A book that subtly describes the coming of the modern world and the slow disappearing of the old ways of living for the Faroe Islanders.

The book is a series of events - the hunting and killing of a whale pod (the most dramatic part of the book), the anguish of the father saddled with a major debt, a fishing trip, scavenging for driftwood, the borrowing of a horse, the death of an old friend, the scheming of a lazy neighbour, the shooting of a seal, trading for a piece of wood to make an oar, etc - there is no major plot other than the simple tale of an old man who has survived 70 years, brought up a big family but is now facing an unaffordable debt.

A hardy group of fishermen and farmers that is for sure.

Forrest says

What a strange reaction I'm having to this book.

"Tragicomical" is the first word that comes to mind as I flail around for an explanation. If *The Old Man and His Sons* does anything, it makes the reader uncomfortable. I didn't know whether to laugh or cringe as I read the book. As I approached the end, I thought that my feelings might resolve themselves, but now, in the post-reading pondering, I'm still baffled. Was the novel supposed to elicit pity for the pathetic characters or some kind of quaint longing for a simpler life?

While the setting of the work is important, for the sake of providing context, geography did little to influence the plot (such as it was) outside of the opening scene wherein the old man Ketil and his idiotic son Kalvur participate in a whale hunt. After the whale hunt, Ketil foolishly incurs debt for a large portion of whale meat.

This indebtedness serves to accentuate the decline of traditional Faroese culture, as contrasted to the rise of more modern culture. A lack of skills, unwillingness to travel, and a deeply ingrained fear of public shame, all of which seem to be part and parcel of old Faroese culture, push Ketil, his wife, and Kalvur into a tighter and tighter economic pinch. It's a clear case of the poorer getting poorer, and while darkly comical, the "one step forward, two steps back" progression of the family's fortunes is painful to see.

Now, I've never been in as bad a set of circumstances as this family, but I have known poverty and how difficult, seemingly impossible, at times, it is to climb out of the hole of deep indebtedness. Maybe that's why I couldn't enjoy the work as much as I would have liked, because it brought back memories of some times in my life that I'd like to forget. I suppose that if I had been raised on a silver spoon, as they say, I would have been rolling on the floor laughing watching these ignorant people fumble their way around in the dark, blinded by stubbornness and cultural assumptions that they don't even understand.

The simple prose of the book reflects the simplicity of the characters. The slow, meandering plot reflects the unsteady and aimless trajectory of the lives of Ketil and his family. Even the subject matter of their dialogue is banal, focused on immediate gains and longer-term fears.

Despite all of this, there is a certain sophistication of feeling that affects the reader. By seeing the characters so helpless and, frankly, stupid in their extremities, one feels something akin to pity, but a sort of pity wrapped in warmth. While I feel sorry for the characters, I don't grieve for them. And while I enjoy their well-meaning banter, I have to shake my head at their foolishness.

This pull between emotions, though, is not extreme in either direction, leaving me a bit ambivalent about the book as a whole. It's "a good book, well written," as the saying goes, but lacked the punch that I had hoped I would find. Not a bad way to spend time reading, and maybe my opinion will change as I have more time to reflect on it. But for now, I'm left, like the old Faroese, aimless and wandering, searching for some kind of resolution.
