bookreporter

From the Mouth of the Whale

by Sjón

About the Book

FROM THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE is an Icelandic saga for the modern age. The year is 1635. Iceland is a world darkened by superstition, poverty, and cruelty. Men of science marvel over a unicorn's horn, poor folk worship the Virgin in secret, and both books and men are burned.

Sjón introduces us to Jónas Pálmason, a poet and self-taught healer, banished to a barren island for heretical conduct, as he recalls his gift for curing "female maladies," his exorcism of a walking corpse on the remote Snjáfjöll coast, the frenzied massacre of innocent Basque whalers at the hands of local villagers, and the deaths of three of his children. Pálmason's story echoes across centuries and cultures, an epic tale that makes us see the world anew.

Discussion Guide

1. How is Jónas Pálmason the Learned affected by the promises of Christianity and the power of the Virgin Mary?

2. What do the sandpiper and the other seabirds bring to Jónas on Gullbjörn's Island? How do they serve as more than his muses?

3. Ultimately, what made Jónas so threatening to the "serpent brothers"?

4. What is at the root of the Reverend Sigurdur Pétursson's madness? How is his community affected by his choice of fire as his favorite way to purge?

5. Is "Wizard-Láfi" Thórólfur Thórdarson effective as he wages war on ghosts?

6. What did you discover about Icelandic history as Jónas recounted the interactions with Spanish and Basque mariners?

7. How does Jónas make peace with the death of Sigrídur "Sigga" Thórólfsdóttir and their children? Is he living in world where religion offers any solace?

8. Discuss the closing scene. How is it different from other whale tales you've read?

Author Bio

Sjón is the author of, among other works, FROM THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE and THE WHISPERING MUSE. Born in Reykjavík in 1962, he is an award-winning novelist, poet, and playwright. His novels have been translated into twenty-five languages. Also a lyricist, he has written songs for Björk, including for her most recent project, *Biophilia*, and was nominated for an Oscar for the lyrics he cowrote (with Lars von Trier) for *Dancer in the Dark*. He lives in Reykjavík.

Critical Praise

“Sjón is the trickster that makes the world, and he is achingly brilliant. *From the Mouth of the Whale* is strange and wonderful, an epic made mad, made extraordinary.”

—Junot Díaz

“Hallucinatory, lyrical, by turns comic and tragic, this extraordinary novel should make Sjón an international name. His evocation of seventeenth-century Iceland through the eyes of a man born before his time has stuck in my mind like nothing else I’ve read in the last year.”

—Hari Kunzru

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