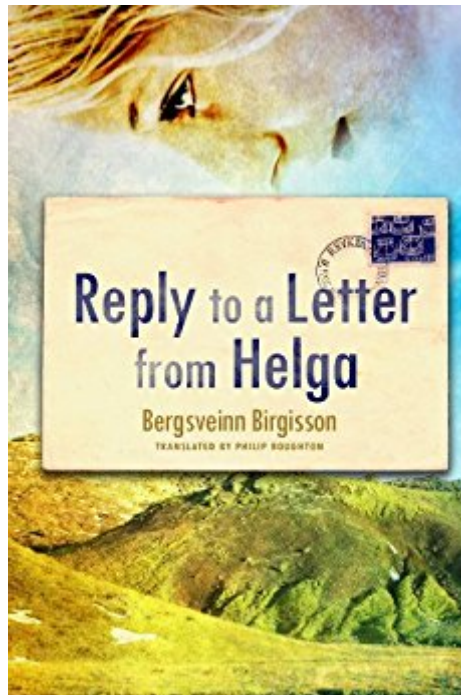




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Reply To A Letter From Helga



Synopsis

Bjarni has long held onto a letter from former lover Helga, with whom he shared an illicit, impassioned love and whom invited him to leave his wife and his farm and follow her to the city. Years later, as he reflects on a long and simple life shepherding in the Icelandic hillsides, he finally finds himself ready to explain why. With retrospective clarity and poetic affection, Bjarni pens his Reply to a Letter from Helga, weaving a life of longing for Helga's sensual presence and the visceral pleasures of daily exposure to the elements. He has knowingly avoided the glamorous choices of modern living and taken comfort in the measured cadence of nature's cycles "and thus he reduces the human condition to a series of mating seasons, passed on the land toiled by his forefathers. Nominated for the Icelandic Literature Prize, this story of unrequited love has been shared among readers in Europe, and now makes its English debut.

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Customer Reviews

Even after having read this book twice, I'm not sure what to make of it. The premise is straightforward enough. The book is Bjarni's letter to Helga, his true love though both were married to others. Though in the form of a letter, the novella is fairly linear, taking us through the pair's

relationship and the lost chances they had. Bjarni's desire for Helga seems to be equal parts love and lust, and with regard to the latter, the language struck me as somewhat odd. The descriptions of sheep and those of Helga seem uncomfortably close: About sheep: "Then I turned to their backs and felt down along the loins and then the rump to check for any gauntness" About Helga: "I'm out in the sheep shed feeding the sheep. Your loins are silhouetted against the hay trough." (Other comparisons can be more precise but also more graphic.) To some degree, these comparisons are appropriate. Bjarni is a farmer, and he declines the chance to move with Helga to Reykjavik because, despite his love for her, he cannot leave the farm and retain his identity. So the fact that his love for Helga takes an earthy tone is perfectly natural in some ways and entirely consistent with the story. That said, the book does push the limits, and there is one scene which no doubt will turn off many readers. (Saying more would constitute a spoiler.) Aside from that, though, the story is alternately lyrical, philosophical, and allusive. A great deal of Icelandic mythology, poetry, and storytelling is alluded to and incorporated into the story. In the end, I found a great deal of power in the novella, from Bjarni's brutal honesty about his thoughts and actions to the interwoven folklore.

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