Útrásarvíkingar!

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Whereas the world continues to experience a (welcome) deluge of monographs on medieval Icelandic literature, and occasionally studies of individual contemporary Icelandic writers, this book is one of only a handful of monograph-length studies of contemporary Icelandic literature.¹ Even within Iceland, while the country’s numerous periodicals sustain a lively commentary on the literary scene, monograph-length analyses are rare. Through its thematically driven sample, then, this book has provided the first wide-ranging account of the Icelandic novel in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, critics are still at a fairly early stage of putting together the story of how art has responded to the Western financial crisis of 2007–8 and the world’s biggest recession since the 1920s, making this book one significant case study in an emergent history of our turbulent times.

As I have said above, for a book about the financial crisis, there is surprisingly little in here about finance—a dearth

which, as I recapitulate below, provides telling insights into how fiction has become integrated into the worldviews of finance-capitalism. On the other hand, this study — particularly Chapter 3 — reveals pervasive concerns about Iceland’s relationship with the developing world, and provides insights into how the Islamophobia and racism that became prominent in Icelandic politics in around 2014, and more widely in Western politics around the same time, were evident in literary writing already shortly after the Crash. This observation emphasizes how Iceland can provide important perspectives on wider cultural questions. Icelanders experienced considerable economic hardship in the wake of the Crash, but there was no serious doubt that the Crash was caused first and foremost by Icelanders — many of whom had, moreover, been lionized in national discourse as icons of Icelandicness. Insofar as blame could be directed elsewhere, it was at financial and political elites in majority-white, rich countries, like Lehman Brothers or Gordon Brown’s Labour government. And while the Crash caused considerable economic distress in Iceland, the economy bounced back more vigorously than in most of Europe. Although Iceland has in the last few decades become a destination for immigration in ways never hitherto experienced, the country has faced no plausible risk of Islamist terrorism and was geographically and politically well insulated from the 2014 refugee crisis. The country is, however, intimately familiar with both Anglophone and Scandinavian media discourses. An insistence in Icelandic writing, then, on weaving characters from the Islamic world into Crash-fiction, or otherwise working in encounters between Icelanders and ethnic others from the developing world, emphasizes that the anxieties of identity sweeping Western politics at the moment can reflect discourse as much as material reality.

Just as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the later financial crisis have proven inseparable in American fiction, Iceland’s Crash-Novels argue that the story of the Crash is just one crisis point in an international scramble to cope with the cultural pressures exerted by economic and demographic globaliza-
tion.² The crime novels of my Crash-corpus tend to contemplate them through the presence of Eastern European migrants, who in this writing usually bring criminals in their midst. The rest of the Crash-novel corpus contemplates them through characters associated with the developing world, most often the Islamic world. At times these fictional encounters between the Icelander and the Other are clearly part of a self-consciously progressive political response to cultural anxieties that authors must have been perceiving around them — as for example in Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s Gæska or Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir’s Hjartsláttur. At other times, the portrayals are more ambivalent, as in Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurðar saga fóts or Böðvar Guðmundsson’s Töfrahöllin. Either way, these novels often wind up replicating well embedded xenophobia and racism. But often too, they develop interesting and challenging efforts to find new understandings of Icelandic culture in a globalizing context, recognizing the historical roots but also the irrationality of some of its cultural anxieties and exploring the ways in which the country has not only been a victim of colonialism, but also a protagonist in and beneficiary of the neo-colonialism of the neoliberal era. We are left in no doubt that Iceland, a near-microstate frequently navigating the world order from the interstices between larger political and economic blocs and structures, finds itself exceptionally reliant on cultural capital, and that its cultural investment in whiteness is both deep in domestic culture, and powerful on the international stage. As the power of national sovereignty continues to diminish in the coming decades, larger countries may find their existing reliance on cultural capital growing in ways that echo the Icelandic experience.

As I have explored how the Crash, and Crash-writing, can only be understood with reference to Iceland’s nationalism and post-colonial anxieties, I have investigated how Icelandic discourses narrate the nation with reference to medievalist images.

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Specifically, Icelandic writing flits between what I have called “nationalist medievalism” (which figures Iceland’s medieval past as a golden age that legitimates its independence and international prestige in the present) and “Orientalist medievalism” (which figures “medieval” traits imagined to linger among backward cultures as barbarisms, the rejection of which in Iceland legitimates its claim to modernity). Though often mutually incompatible, both these discourses are prominent in Iceland, producing a fascinating tension in Icelandic identity as it claims, rejects, and abjects the medieval. Indeed, past research has overlooked what a historiographical feat it has been that an Atlantic island so far from the Roman world, where humans seem not to have set foot before the ninth century, has become so central to Western medieval studies, while the southern and eastern littorals of the Mediterranean basin have been so comprehensively excluded.

Looking back on the relationship between history-writing and the boom, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson wrote that “by 2008 it seemed clear that historians had lost the history wars.” He went on:

it would be easy to blame the Venture Vikings, statespersons, and the gullible public. Even so, historians should take a critical look at their own approach. It simply was not enough to find fault time and again with an outdated, glorified, nationalist version of the past. Historians should have provided an enticing, readable, and entertaining alternative. In this they failed. They did not produce popular works on the Vikings, the settlement, or even the sagas, and when they did, they were not sufficiently promoted.3

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This gloomy assessment is important, and is relevant to understanding the work of novellists as well as historians. Novellists struggled to provide alternative visions of Icelandic culture during the boom, and either to map what had gone wrong or to explore what might happen next after the Crash. That said, the work of post-Crash novellists does seem to show the influence of recent history-writing. This shows that history-writing has managed to exert influence beyond historians themselves, albeit more slowly than Guðni would have wished. Indeed, I have been impressed at how often one bumps into Icelandic writers at academic seminars and conferences at the University of Iceland: the capacity for historians in Iceland to get their messages out at least as far as novellists seems to me quite striking. Thus although I have shown at various points in this study how Crash-novels recapitulate conservative nationalist-medievalist narratives, I have also shown how plenty of them present a much more critical and incisive engagement with the past. Crash-novels tend to reflect the post-nationalist wave of academic research that (at different speeds in different regions) followed the Second World War. Recent decades have seen a lot of academic work calling attention to medieval Icelandic genres that were marginalized by the National-Romantic movement, and Crash-novels have turned to this material quite enthusiastically as a way to criticize the nationalist ideologies emphasized in the boom period. Of course, to conclude that historians have been influencing novellists is not to say that those novellists have themselves been very influential on the general public. But the novellists are at least unlikely to have developed the medievalist responses to the Crash that they did with such alacrity had revisionist histories not been reaching beyond narrow circles of professional historians. Accordingly, it is worth noting that during the 2016 presidential election, Guðni was criticized for his insufficiently nationalist approach to Icelandic history by his competitor (and chief proponent of the deregulation of Iceland’s banks) Davíð Oddsson; but Guðni won with 39% of the votes to Davíð’s 14%. And the possibility remains that it is the more substantial artworks that emerged in the wake of the Crash that will come
most to shape its memorialization and so Iceland’s longer-term responses to it.

More interestingly again, from the point of view of Guðni’s critique of historians, the medievalism of Icelandic novels, as revealed by Chapters 3–4, seems to me actually to have been some way ahead of mainstream academic medieval studies. The novels’ engagement not only with the European Middle Ages but with the relationship between the European Middle Ages and Orientalism parallels scholars’ nascent rethinking of the Eurocentrism of post-war medieval studies. Whether the novels do this well or badly, they show that medieval historians, often still busy Europeanizing a field criss-crossed by the anachronistic borders of nineteenth-century nationalism, need to pick up their pace: other intellectuals are already reworlding the Middle Ages from outside the profession, and it would be helpful if they had more research to draw on as they do so.

But the richness of the explorations of identity in Crash novels brings into relief the thinness of their explorations of finance, perhaps echoing the way in which identity politics has shifted from being a critical, left-wing project to being the basis for contestation across the political spectrum, while simultaneously overshadowing critiques of capitalism. Here at the conclusion of this study, it is possible to look across the Crash-corpus that I have surveyed above and identify an inchoate writing of finance capital through the illegal drug trade — a method of charting capitalism which has served writers well, from India to America. The idea that credit during the boom was an addiction pervades Icelandic Crash-writing, within the literary corpus and far beyond. Einar Már Guðmundsson’s essay collection Bankastræti núll (“zero Bank Street”) takes its name from the colloquial sobriquet of the public toilets at the top of Bankastræti, once noted as a haunt of junkies. Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson’s autobiog-

4 E.g., Amitav Ghosh’s Ibis trilogy, the first novel of which is Sea of Poppies (London: Murray, 2008), and Simon et al., dir., The Wire: The Complete Series, Warner, 2009.
raphy opens with the words “My name is Bjorgolfur Thor Bjorgolfsson and I’m a deal junkie.” In its 2010 election campaign, the Best Party “promised to break all of its promises, make corruption more visible, and advocate for ‘sustainable transparency’ in addition to calling for a drug-free Parliament by 2020.”

Thus it is clearly possible that Icelandic writing could have developed this reference point to explore the nuances of finance.

Often Icelandic writing simply uses the passing association between financiers and hard drugs to wag the finger, co-opting the conservative attitude that taking drugs is immoral, and writing financiers as drug-takers as a convenient mode of defamation. Thus the bombastic opening poem of Bjarni Karlsson’s 2013 poetry collection Árleysi alda wryly integrates drug abuse into its representation of the útrásarvíkingar’s hyperbolic, nationalistic medievalism and post-colonial hubris as it describes the peak of Iceland’s banking boom in stanza 10:

Íslandi gagnar þá auðsælir bragnar til útlanda spana,
ákefð þeim magnar arfur fornsagnar og efni í rana.
Baunverjinn þagnar er bruna fram vagnar um borgarhlíð Dana.
Ákaft því fagnar Ólafur Ragnar með orðum úr krana.

It serves Iceland when wealth-blessed heroes rush to foreign lands;
the heritage of ancient tales increases their eagerness (as does the powder in their snouts).
The Dane falls silent when chariots charge at his city gate.
Ólafur Ragnar eagerly welcomes it with words from the tap.

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But the powerful potential for drugs as a vehicle for writing neoliberalism is hinted at in Steinar Bragi’s *Hálendið*, where the entrepreneur Hrafn “með bakgrunn sinn í kókinu skildi [...] betur en flestir grunnþætti hinnar nýju markaðshugsunar” (“with his background in coke understood [...] the essentials of the new market-ideology better than most”). The comment builds on previous examples of Hrafn’s questionable self-control; indeed, in revealing at the end that most of the events of the novel cannot actually have taken place, the novel raises the possibility that most of its content is the product of the drug-addled brains of its protagonists. But the quotation also indicates how organized crime, and pre-eminently the international drugs trade, has a central place in deregulated, neo-liberal economies: prohibition has effectively put drugs entirely outside state regulation, and the trade has thrived on globalization, with deregulated finance making it easy to launder and move illegal funds. It is therefore in some ways the global industry that is least affected by government regulation, standing as a metaphor for the extremes of neoliberal ideology; yet in other ways, it is the industry which, through state repression, is the most constrained by state intervention, paradoxically standing at the same time as a metaphor for how many of the “free markets” beloved of neoliberalism only exist because they are constituted by states. The refusal of socially conservative yet economically neoliberal political elites to legalize the drugs trade thus stands as a marker of their hypocrisy; and the suspicion persists that this refusal arises because, directly or indirectly, they benefit from it, which in turn stands and as a marker of their corruption.

Correspondingly, the addictive yet lethal fungus that allegorizes capital in Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s *Paradísarborgin* builds firmly on discourses about illegal drugs. Böðvar Guðmundsson’s *Töfrahöllin* attempts to concretize and defame finance capital by narrating it through parallel stories of drug trafficking. The murdered banker Daníel Marteinsson at the center of Ævar Órn

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Jósepsson’s *Land tækifæranna* is noted for his alcoholic excesses. Meanwhile, the sequel *Önnur lif* sketches the possibility — implicitly to be explored in a further sequel — that the murderer, rapist, and conservative politician Ingólfur Halldórsson is also implicated in the drugs trade, and has used his influence to corrupt the police and to shield Iceland’s pre-eminent drug-baron Lalli feiti from investigation. As I have explored in Chapter 4, the drugs trade provides particularly important opportunities to write Iceland’s participation in international finance to Bjarni Harðarson’s *Sigurðar saga fóts*. Through it, Bjarni explores the gang-like, masculine hierarchies at the heart of the boom-time finance sector, and puts the illicit (and therefore invisible) cash-flows of the drugs trade into counterpoint with the financialized (and therefore invisible) credit-flows of finance. He even manages to use Sigurður’s involvement in the drugs trade implicitly to contemplate the neoliberal “shock therapy” that was visited on post-Communist states in the early 1990s (a process in which Björgólfur Thor was a protagonist), its association with neo-colonialism and the “war on terror,” and its unnerving resonances with Iceland’s own post-Crash experiences.

And yet, despite these promising feints, little Crash-writing gets beyond hinting at the lurking sense that the drugs industry is somehow an analogue to or metaphor for high finance. By shying away from investigating the moral complexities and economic realities of the drugs industry, and therefore the complexities and hypocrisies of politicians’ stances on it, the Crash-corpus veers characteristically away from mapping finance.

Rather, novels written in the years following the Crash are dominated not by investigation of neoliberal economies, but by a sense of confusion, as writers try to get a grip on the abstractions of finance capital but find themselves confined by genres and modes of writing which are attuned to writing individualism rather than to charting the systemic social forces which produced the Crash. In Chapter 2, I discussed at length how post-Crash writers across the genres of murder fiction, children’s novels, and literary fiction struggle to stand outside capitalist realism sufficiently to describe rather than inhabit it.
Like other commentators examining both the Crash and the planet’s unfolding environmental catastrophe, I find currently popular modes of literary realism one of the key limiting factors here. Even Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar by Þórarinn Leifsson, which deploys science fiction heroically to literalize the abstractions of finance capital for a child audience, and is literally able to contemplate the end of the world, nonetheless struggles to sketch anything resembling the end of capitalism. Concerned to represent the world as it is rather than as it might be, novelists tend to find themselves able to represent the world only as neoliberalism would like us to believe it is. No novel in my corpus deals with finance with the acuity of Halldór Laxness’s short, surrealist Atómstöðin of 1948 — and few deal as incisively with the complex structures of power that underpin Icelandic politics either.

As so-called “post-truth politics” has come to prominence in the West, it is increasingly tempting to imagine that hegemony is no longer important as a tool of elite dominance: exposing the truth can feel irrelevant in a world where political elites can so openly show disdain for facts. But this study has shown how, in post-Crash Iceland at least, novellists were acutely aware of their failures to expose hegemony during the boom, and were rapidly coming to terms with the fact that hegemony was alive and kicking in Icelandic political life. Many of these novellists — particularly people who came of age during the neoliberal ascendancy of the 1980s and 1990s — focus on their powerlessness in the face of capitalist realism, Steinar Bragi and Óttar M. Norðfjörð being among the most eloquent of these voices. In §2.3.1 I viewed with scepticism the claim that crime fiction might be the most appropriate genre to writing the financial crisis. One might rather wonder whether satire might be emerging as the pre-eminent critical medium for the post-Crash period: although at times reality palpably outpaces satire, as with Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurðar saga fót, satire has notched up some considerable achievements in post-Crash Iceland. Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s rewriting of Voltaire’s Candide, Örvitinn, is magnificent; Auður Jónsdóttir’s Vetrarsól is a gentle but insistent take-down of murder-fiction,
patriarchy, and the racism of much Icelandic feminism; and of course the would-be comic mayoral campaign of Jón Gnarr led to electoral triumph in 2010. But this is not to say that realism is in itself the biggest problem with Crash-fiction’s struggles to tackle finance (as Jón Gnarr’s enthusiasm for the realist TV drama *The Wire* emphasizes). Rather, my reading of the Crash-novel corpus has exposed how one key way in which Icelandic elites have managed to avoid incisive scrutiny in post-Crash writing has been novelists’ fairly consistent choice to focus their psychologically driven, individualistic tales on financiers rather than on government. The main exceptions to this are Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s surreal *Gæska* and Arndís Þórarinsdóttir’s realist *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds*, both of which succeed in showing how writing about political possibilities might indeed help to map paths out of what feels like a political impasse.

A different limitation in Crash-writing that has haunted this book, and may also have implications for the capacity of Crash-fiction to critique the ideologies of the banking boom, is the dearth of female voices in the corpus. As I discussed in the introduction, the lack of women writers in this study is probably partly because I chose to analyse texts that explicitly discussed the Crash; this was no doubt (unwittingly) a gendered choice on my part, and women writers may justifiably have felt that they had more pressing issues to write about than explicitly addressing a masculinist blip in Iceland’s *histoire événementielle*, its short-term “history of events.” A useful future study might explore what women writers were writing about in the wake of the Crash, and what their implicit politics were. That said, I have found that some important women writers on the Crash, such as Sigrún Davíðsdóttir and Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir, write as firmly from within capitalist realism as their male counterparts. Meanwhile, the men who dominate the Icelandic publishing scene often give feminist thought a central place in their fiction. Although the existence of a well established and indeed mainstream feminist discourse in Iceland did not serve to prevent a crash brought about by male, and ostentatiously masculine, politicians and financiers, this discourse did pro-
vide a ready resource for people of any gender to start dissecting Iceland’s boom culture when the Crash came. Yet Icelandic feminism as expressed in Crash-novels tends to lapse into essentialism, whereby people assume that prudence and virtue are inherent in women rather than culturally inculcated in them. Mainstream Icelandic feminism is also liable to participate in, and certainly to be co-opted by, xenophobic and racist discourses that oppress both men and women from the Global South by demonizing them for their supposedly patriarchal ways. For all these reasons, the ways in which Crash-literature handles gender is often profoundly constrained as a tool for imagining better futures, hinting at how the patriarchal structures in Icelandic society that were crucial to the Crash are powerful far beyond high finance. Even so, one can reasonably doubt whether, faced in 2008 with a crisis of the same magnitude, popular discourse in the UK or the USA would have articulated feminist responses with such alacrity. And, more encouragingly, at its best, feminist thinking in Iceland’s Crash-literature does suggest that if society can cultivate financial prudence and moral kindness in women, it can cultivate these qualities in men too.

Within these ideological limitations on Icelandic Crash-writing, though, there are some trenchant critiques of the boom and bust. It is abundantly clear which of the many major players in Iceland’s financial expansion have won writers’ attention: Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, followed by Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson and Björgólfur Guðmundsson. These so-called útrásarvíkingar (“raiding vikings”) not only cultivated celebrity, putting themselves firmly in the public eye (whatever their protestations to the contrary), but also integrated themselves into cultural sign-systems which were easily recognisable to the public, and readily manipulated by literary writers. Through their postmodern remixing of medieval signs (as mediated through National Romanticism), the útrásarvíkingar made it possible for writers to apprehend and renarrate their public personae, bringing these personae forcibly back into contact with medieval sources and chipping away at the medievalist-nationalist narratives which legitimated those útrásarvíkingar’s activities.
Writing inspired by the útrásarvíkingar has been particularly prominent among their contemporaries, the children born in the decades from the 1930s to 1960s. Returning to hegemony, this is again surely telling. Writers who had come of age before the rise of neoliberalism seem to have found more capacity for optimism in critiquing the protagonists of the banking boom, and their feel for saga-like intergenerational histories and their forthright but critical engagement with the same nationalist medievalism as the útrásarvíkingar drew on seems to have given them purchase.

Moving outwards from this observation, one might go so far as to say that one means for Icelandic novellists to address the abstract character of financial crisis has been to engage — admittedly with varying degrees of subtley and conviction — with temporality. I have read the obsession of crime-writing with times and dates as echoing the financialized time of capitalist realism. Historicizing the boom and the Crash by testing the dominant narratives of Iceland’s modernity against other possible periodizations has been one technique. Providing a sort of multi-temporal polyphony, Crash-writing shows how medieval and folkloric literature have the potential to stand in contrast with accounts of the postmodern condition and to challenge its presuppositions: the use of folkloric or medieval forms and references can bring epistemology to the fore, pushing readers accustomed to today’s structures of thought to question where our knowledge comes from, and how it is constituted. Admittedly, the medievalist utopianism in the ending of Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurðar saga fóts lapses into nostalgia: tampering with temporalities does not necessarily produce a path to future action. But some writers challenge the financialization of time more dramatically, with surreal rethinking of temporality, cause and effect, notably Steinar Bragi and Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl. Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s brilliant Örvitinn eða; hugsjónamaðurinn takes both approaches, by rewriting the eighteenth-century Candide for the early twenty-first century. Admittedly, the escapism at the end of Örvitinn ultimately promotes stoic unconcern at the horrors of the world. But pondering on the past, and the degree to
which Icelandic society is, despite its professions of modernity, stuck in or returning to a dystopian Middle Ages; or examining how Icelandic society seeks to define itself as both modern and Western through the abjection of an Orientalized Middle Ages; or even exploring the utopian possibilities indicated by pre-industrial life have all proven to be ways in which writers can challenge the assumptions imposed on them by capitalist realism.

Reimaginings of time in the Crash-corpus intersect with critiques of architecture, urbanism, and the construction of space more generally. Critiques of architecture tacitly intersect with and deepen urgent critiques of Iceland’s house-price boom and a dramatic shift of post-Crash housing tenancy from owner-occupation to renting. But they also recognize that the way a society shelters its inhabitants defines a large proportion of their social and aesthetic existence too. These critiques are often patriarchal, and can be merely nostalgic, casting about (albeit somewhat in vain) for pastoral idylls whose path to a happier future, if they offer one, seems also to suggest the re-domestication of women and a parochial turning inwards. For a barren volcanic island which is probably unavoidably dependent on international trade to sustain its current population, this would of course be contrary even to a narrow self-interest, while for Iceland to close its eyes to the violence in which it is complicit abroad would represent a lamentable aversion to fulfilling its potential to advance the global public good. Yet there is also a real power to much post-Crash criticism of how Icelandic society has urbanized, and particularly criticism of boom-time Icelandic architecture. Accounts of how finance penetrates a countryside that is supposed, in the national imaginary, to be the repository of Icelandic values reflect widespread anxiety at how Iceland has essentially become a city-state whose very large hinterland is mostly productive only through its commodification as a tourist destination and as an industrialized source of energy. And the most committedly utopian novel of the Crash, Gaeska, the idiosyncratic masterpiece on which I focused in Chapter 5, capitalizes on its surreal form to seize these ideas and gallop ahead with them to create a vision of a feminist, cosmo-
politically Icelandic future which puts a human politics of kindness at its center.

In reality, utopian thought and action in Iceland immediately after the Crash was buoyant, involved some extreme experiments in participatory democracy, and floated innovative ideas about harnessing technology to improve governance and the media. Indeed, even the entirely accidental collapse of Iceland’s banks in a way represented the allowing of the unthinkable, as everyone else in Europe rushed, following the fall of Lehman Brothers, to prop up the financial system with public money. Moreover, this uninvited experiment in letting failed banks fail seems to have served Iceland well. Although it is easy to be disheartened by the limited change that innovative thinking after the Crash has so far achieved, then, that thinking may yet bear fruit, in Iceland and elsewhere. Crash-fiction has touched little on some important threads in Iceland’s utopian politics: press freedom, civic and political life, and environmentalism have often been sidelined—just as has innovative thinking about finance itself. But Crash-fiction has nonetheless helpfully emphasized other ideas that enjoyed less explicit scrutiny in public political debate, suggesting a future that benefits from combining a number of ingredients. The novels recognize the degree to which the national imaginary has, despite Icelanders’ talent for claiming an ironic distance from nationalist narratives, been in thrall to versions of history that do not represent the whole of the country’s past—and which sometimes have been altogether bogus. Nor, the novels recognise, do these nationalist narratives provide a satisfactory template for Iceland’s future: novelist have drawn on recent academic work to rehistoricize Iceland’s current status as a neoliberal country, recognizing that this is not an inevitable situation, and its obsession with its own “independence,” recognizing that this is often merely a hegemonic discourse—and that, conversely, where Iceland’s sovereignty is not illusory, it is not always exercised. Novellists have sought to reshape the frenetic, financialized time to which we are increasingly habituated, epitomized by automated, superhumanly swift trading that creates no real value, in favor of long-term and well
informed investment. They seek to recognize the tangible successes of Icelandic society in cultivating humane and prudent behavior in one half of the population, and suggest that these practices could be extended to the other half, with compound benefits for both women and men. These recalibrations of national identity, time, and gender norms can be imagined, and to some extent actually realised, through long-term rethinking of human habitation and use of space. Although they offer little by way of templates for how they would look, Crash-novels at their best reject firmly the idea of housing as a commodity and push us instead, without reimposing patriarchy, to create habitations that are tailored firmly to domesticity and the real economy.

One has to be impressed by the sheer amount of Icelandic literature explicitly addressing the Crash, and although novels often shy from exploring possible alternatives to twenty-first-century financialization, they comprise a large body of inventive, challenging writing. Naturally this reflects the enormous prominence of the Crash in Icelandic life. But despite writers’ own complaints about the state of the Icelandic literary scene and the worrying ability of Icelandic elites to control it, the scene’s ability to respond to political circumstances has been noteworthy. And although the way these novels turn their faces away from finance and direct political engagement is a limitation, in one sense it also represents an achievement: rather than thinking about the crisis narrowly in terms of the financial system itself, the novels studied here generally look at deeper or broader cultural forces which promoted Iceland’s (selective) embracing of neoliberal policy and insulated an improbable banking boom from criticism. Echoing holistic grassroots responses to the crisis like the so-called “ant-hill” that organized the 2009 National Assembly, and recalling the way in which both Sebastian Faulks and John Lanchester felt the need to write state-of-the-nation novels far wider in scope than simply an account of the financial crisis itself, Iceland’s Crash-novels collectively represent a rather fulsome exploration of key problems in Icelandic society. Moreover, while Icelandic novellists were late to grasp the perilousness of Iceland’s economic situation, the anxiety at the
globalization, migrations, and cultural changes that has exploded into the forefront of Western politics in the last few years is already apparent everywhere in their post-Crash writing. In this sense, these texts were a step ahead of electoral politics, and provide valuable insights into the emergence of right-wing populism in Europe — both in showing the pervasiveness of the cultural anxieties which this populism has harnessed, and at times in attempting productively to address them.

These successes of Icelandic writing in the wake of the Crash surely partly reflect Iceland’s unusually small market, in which the difficulty for any novel to achieve commercial viability perhaps makes publishers more agreeable (or resigned) to publishing novels that are awkward fits for the expectations of the marketplace. In turn, the fact that novels are viable at all is partly due to Icelanders’ exceptionally large (if declining) per capita appetite for reading, which might be taken as another social good that has helped the country respond to the Crash. Correspondingly, the existence of state stipends, which provide a living for well established writers, and reduces their dependence on sales income, must also be significant. The charting of the value of the króna to the Euro on each page of Hnefi eða vitsola orð sends various messages, but partly reflects Eiríkur Örn’s own dependence at the time on an income denominated in krónur while living in the Eurozone, and to this extent acknowledges the importance of state funding for writers. It is telling that Gæska has not yet been translated, unlike Eiríkur Örn’s next and more conventional novel Illska, which has at the time of writing been translated into French, German, Swedish, Danish, Croatian, Spanish, and Greek — yet Gæska still made it onto the Icelandic market.

That said, the writers whose work I have found most challenging and interesting were nurtured outside Iceland’s main publishing venues — and some significant contributions are by people who are not professional novellists, or even writers. Sigrún Davíðsdóttir’s Samhengi hlutanna was an interesting experiment in expanding beyond her main professional writing as a journalist and translator, while Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurðar
saga fóts was published by a press which is tiny even by Icelandic standards, by a man whose main recent careers have been politician and bookseller, and it is again a telling sign that the novel still commanded quite extensive media coverage. But the most prominent minor press has proved to be the short-lived avant-garde collective Nýhil. Icelandic commentators have not always been altogether impressed with the avant-garde poetry that was the backbone of the group’s publications, or convinced that the poetry really was as innovative as it sought to be; and the post-Crash novels of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl and Óttar M. Norðfjörð have mostly been published by Iceland’s mainstream commercial presses. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that without Nýhil’s nurturing of a prickly, politicized, experimental, and internationalist corner of the Icelandic literary scene, the scene’s capacity to respond to the Crash when it came would have been much shallower. Thus we owe a lot of the most interesting literary responses to the Crash to writers associated with Nýhil, and the sacrifices they made for their writing during the boom years. Patronage (and once or twice censorship) by financiers had an important role during the boom in shaping Icelandic literature and ensuring financiers’ hegemonic dominance in Icelandic society. But civil society and the Icelandic state did, between them, enable a kind of standing reserve of forms and styles which came into their own after the Crash and produced some of the most idiosyncratic and inspired literary responses to the Crash anywhere in the world.