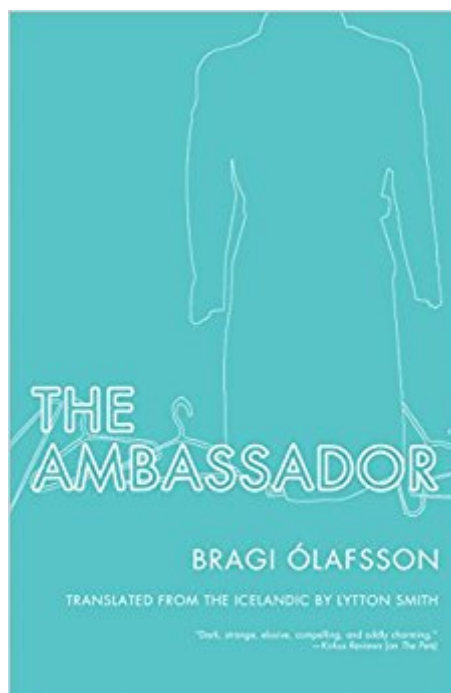


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# The Ambassador



## Synopsis

Sturla Jónsson, the fifty-something building superintendent and sometimes poet, has been invited to a poetry festival in Vilnius, Lithuania, appointed, as he sees it, as the official representative of the people of Iceland to the field of poetry. His latest poetry collection, published on the eve of his trip to Vilnius, is about to cause some controversy in his home country? Sturla is publicly accused of having stolen the poems from his long-dead cousin, Jónas. Then there's Sturla's new overcoat, the first expensive item of clothing he has ever purchased, which causes him no end of trouble. And the article he wrote for a literary journal, which points out the stupidity of literary festivals and declares the end of his career as a poet. Sturla has a lot to deal with, and that's not counting his estranged wife and their five children, nor the increasingly bizarre experiences and characters he's forced to confront at the festival in Vilnius . . .

Bragi Ólafsson's *The Ambassador* is a quirky novel that's filled with insightful and wry observations about aging, family, love, and the mysteries of the hazelnut. Bragi Ólafsson is most well known for playing in The Sugarcubes. He is the author of several books of poetry, a number of plays, and five novels. His works have been finalists for the Icelandic Literature Prize and Nordic Literature Prize, and he has received the Icelandic Bookseller's Award. Lytton Smith is a poet and translator, and a founding member of Blind Tiger Poetry. His book, *The All-Purpose Magical Tent* was published by Nightboat. His poems and reviews have appeared in such publications as *The Atlantic*, *The Believer*, and *Boston Review*.

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## Customer Reviews

Álfarsson's dark, delightful tale of an alcoholic Icelandic poet representing his country at a poetry festival in Lithuania brims with mordant commentary and beguiling narrative cul-de-sacs. The book begins with one of many nods to Gogol as Sturla Jónsson buys an expensive overcoat that he will promptly lose at the festival. Then the situation worsens: Sturla gets mixed up with a Salomėja-inspired striptease gone wrong, is accused of plagiarizing in his latest book, gets harassed by a garlic-breath prostitute, and resorts, in a moment of desperation, to thievery. Álfarsson (The Pets) skillfully fills in Sturla's dysfunctional family history while building up to the festival, then wastes no time in painting his protagonist into a corner once he gets there. The tension over how and whether Sturla will escape his comical problems is satisfying, as are Álfarsson's sly observations about literary and Icelandic culture. If the eventual resolution feels too easy, there are enough discordant notes and painfully awkward situations to add depth and angst to this look into the messy calculus of life. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

With the exception of Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, modern Icelandic literature remains as remote to most Americans as the island nation known for its banking and volcanic disasters. Smith's assured translation of *The Ambassador* brings Álfarsson's Icelandic novel into contemplative English. Although Álfarsson introduces a number of conventional plot elements—a journey, romance, and mystery—he takes his time working through each, unconcerned with resolving any of them. Nor is Álfarsson burdened by making his protagonist, Sturla Jónsson, a poet attending a literary festival in Lithuania, particularly likable, though the article he writes attacking literary festivals is very funny. Sturla mostly gets drunk, acts superior to the people around him, and frets over his expensive overcoat. Although the repetition grows tiresome, especially in the absence of any real narrative momentum, Álfarsson's prose springs to life when Sturla considers his favorite subject—his discontent—in a context larger than himself: Weren't fathers of numerous children all over the world fetching brooms from laundry rooms of apartments, only to return them to the same place later? --Kevin Clougher

Translated from the Icelandic by Lytton SmithIt's tough being a poet. First, there's the whole stereotype of the cerebral, tortured artist who offers the world little but obscure verses. Then your Dad starts doing the passive-aggressive thing and slights your work whenever he can. Your son calls your career a 'hobbyhorse'. You get no respect. This is the world for Sturla Jon, a successful

poet from Iceland. He's tough, sarcastic, and is finding it hard to even respect himself anymore. He still writes poetry, but since he's hit fifty, he wants to do something more. Novels, maybe. He's dissatisfied with most of his life, and it's starting to show: "In Sturla's opinion, there is an irony to this that results from a deception the poet himself perpetrates: when it comes down to it, his value is only ever evident from the price tag on the book..." And to make one big step away from the starving artist that he imagines typical poets to be, he goes out and buys a top-notch overcoat, high style and big money. He's old-fashioned, and decides the cell phone pocket will be perfect for his cigarettes. That one detail shows a great deal about him: he isn't fitting in with the times. "One moment Sturla feels there is depth and purpose to his writing but the next...he, the poet, starts to think that he can't see anything in the production of poetry but emptiness and the surface emotion that still lifes offer: more or less beautiful textures, at best, things better suited to being the subject of a watercolor on the wall of a room." So with this new overcoat, and an invitation to a poetry festival in Lithuania, he makes a new plan. He's going to move towards an experimental form of literature, and 'review' the events of the festival before it even happens. His cynical and disparaging review reflects all the clichés of poetry, and poetry festivals in general. Bad food, terrible lodging, and worse, pretentious poets who take themselves far too seriously than he thinks they deserve. His caustic review makes him feel fresh and innovative, and he leaves for Lithuania with low expectations. However, despite the fact he condemns the poet's lifestyle as often as possible, it's revealing that he still wants to go. Why not just skip it? This is one of the complicating facets to Sturla: he's not really sure what he wants to be, and at his age, it's hard to change. His life is full of contradictions: he wins money (that he doesn't need) at a slot machine when he's just killing time, and his aging father gets more attention from the ladies than he does. While he works part-time as a building superintendent (possibly the diametric opposite of a poet), he likes to hint to people that he's a published poet. Who is the real Sturla? Only in Lithuania does Sturla even begin to understand just how he fits in, and his exploits there are terrifying, frantic, and sometimes slapstick. He realizes that his "predicted" review is not only wrong, but almost criminally so. Lest this sound too serious, keep in mind that Sturla is possibly one of the funniest characters I've run across. He's snarky and witty, and throughout the narrative there is a remarkable amount of humor as he pokes fun at himself, his family, and most of all, the literary world. The author, Bragi Olafsson, writes Sturla as the least expected poetic figure: needy yet badass, sensitive but acerbic, and always unpredictable. The book in whole is more comedic than serious. Yet it also gives a unique glimpse into the world of literature and translation, cultural disparities, and historical influences that define a geographic location. I loved the little things that make Sturla a real person: the way he's annoyed by

his Dad's constant calls on the new cell phone he finally gets, his simple desire to just get a cup of decent coffee, and the way he mentally rehearses little remarks to himself to get them right. Additionally, Olafsson hints at the need for poetry and literature as a means of dealing with the contradictions and complexities we all face.

Sturla Jon Johansson is a fifty-one year-old building superintendent cum conflicted and (in his mind) unremarked Icelandic poet with seven books to his credit. He's also the son of estranged parents whom he regards with ironic filial piety. His mother, Fanny, is crazy, finding solace for her wandering mind in a bottle of anything alcoholic. His father, just Jon, is a belittling film maker, utterly self absorbed, who views his son as a prop to his existence. Sturla spends most of his time fantasizing about being a different kind of writer and, decides to throw over being a poet in favor of becoming an avant garde prose writer. Good luck with that. What Sturla wants is unclear, other than an expensive new overcoat, which he buys himself at the beginning of the book and fondles through the first 4 chapters, and which is later lost/stolen. But I suppose it's a woman. His chances of meeting one may be better when he travels to Lithuania to give a poetry reading. He makes the trip reluctantly and deprecatingly, filled a priori with resentment of the other poets who will be there. However, he does meet a woman. Liliya is her name; she's Belarusian, also a writer, and lives with her mother in Minsk. Even at the end of the novel, Sturla remains an ineffective fantasizer about Liliya, her mother, and an imagined visit he will make to their shared apartment in Minsk. Olafsson is good at getting nowhere fast; he annoys because he salts the inaction with references to obscure Icelandic poets, international artists, photographers, writers, and far too many street names. At least 30% of the details included in the book are unnecessary details and would be better left out. It is a novel of incident but not action. Still, Olafsson does write with a wry sardonic humor, a humor that grows as the novel goes on. Yet, the reader is left with the impression that Olafsson is sneering at his own main character; and by extension sneering at the state of poetry (and poets, except for dead ones) in Iceland -- as if it's a country unfit to produce finer literature, great writers of any kind. [Himself included?] The "ambassador" in the title may be the stuffed puffins, so nicknamed by the Westman Islanders. But it's really, Benedict, Sturla's deceased grandfather who was ambassador to Norway. Wait, no! It's really the name of the hotel where he meets Liliya. It certainly isn't Sturla who is unfit to be an envoy for any purpose to anywhere, much less on behalf of poetry to Lithuania -- even if sent by his government. And that may be Olafsson's ultimate joke.

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