

A powerful story about the harsh reality of a small village in Iceland. You will meet tough women, delicate souls, thinkers and thugs, who all have their own hopes and dreams, triumphs and sorrows.

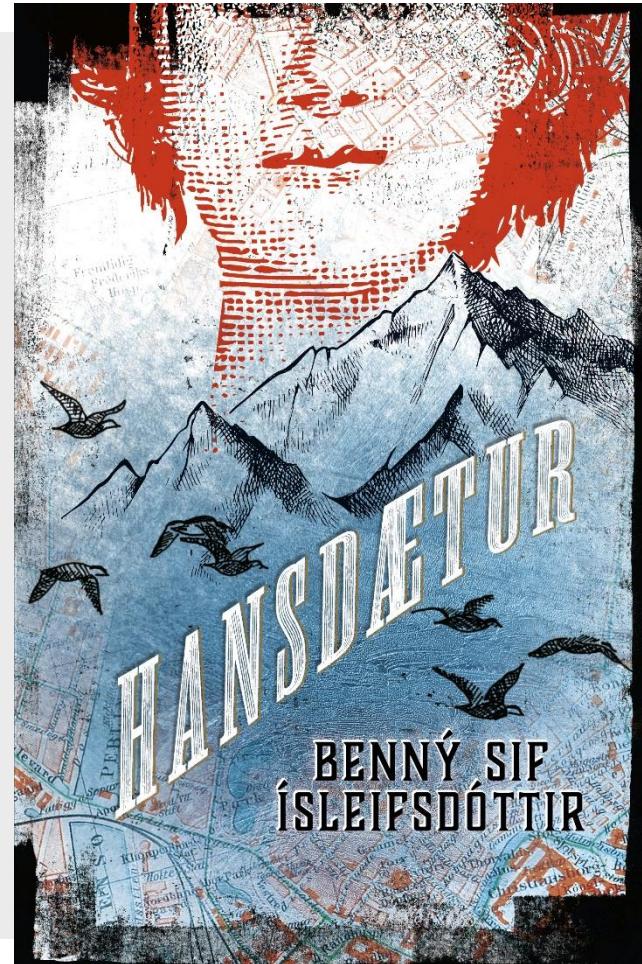
# DAUGHTERS

by Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir

In a small village in the Westfjords of Iceland at the turn of the 20th century, everyone knows their place. Nobody has ideas above their station and a single mother of three children has no chance. Her daughter, Gratiana, yearns for different times and a better life. She rejects the obligations placed on her, she wants to wear trousers, prefers wine over water, and she wants Sella to be allowed to sing and Rannveig to go to school.

- Shortlisted for the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) 2021

340 pp, 2020  
English sample translation available



MORGUNBLADID DAILY

*"Especially well written ...  
an impactful book and a fun read  
... hard to put down."*

FRETTABLAIDID DAILY

## REVIEWS



(five stars out of five possible)

"Gratiana is a marvellous character just like the people around her ... the characters are all well thought-through, both main and side characters, and bring much colour to the story. Each of them plays a vital part in the narrative and is self-consistent. Regarding the plot, the much-used phrase "I couldn't put the book down" applies here ...

It is impossible to be stingy with the stars when a book like *Daughters* comes along, I wish I could give it more than five stars."

**RAGNHILDUR ÞRASTARDÓTTIR, MORGUNBLADID DAILY**



(four stars out of five possible)

"The characterisation is excellent, side characters as well as main characters are well thought-out and make their mark on the story. It is not often that I finish a book and immediately long for a sequel, but now I beg of the author: Can we get more stories of Gratiana, please?"

**SÆUNN GÍSLADÓTTIR, LESTRARKLEFNN**

"Especially well written ... an impactful book and a fun read ... hard to put down."

**FRETTABLAID DAILY**



## BENNÝ SIF ÍSLEIFSDÓTTIR

Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir (b.1970) has written for children as well as adults, *Daughters* being her second novel. She completed a Master's degree in Folkloristics from the University of Iceland in addition to a certificate program in Youth and Community Studies from Saint Martin's College.

In 2018 she received an Emerging Writer grant from the Icelandic Literature Center for her first novel. These grants are awarded yearly to assist in publishing novels by authors just taking their first steps into the world of writing, and to encourage them to continue down this path.

# DAUGHTERS

by Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir  
translated by Philip Roughton

## Sample (pp. 5-10)

The girl is sitting on a rock toward the bottom of the shore ridge, long-shanked and short-haired, her clear eyes screwed up in her chubby face and her arms sticking much farther out from the sleeves of her dress than her legs from under its hem, slender in crumpled woolen socks and ending in oversized men's shoes that she inherited after her brother grew out of them. They are foreign, leather shoes with thick soles that Guðbjartur had bought for himself and hadn't managed to wear out. Now, they were Gratíana's new shoes, and whether she walked the shore or the road, the going was smooth underfoot. Even if she did have to drag her feet behind her.

Sitting on the rock at the shore, though, puts no strain on the soles, but Gratíana takes care to dangle her feet gently to keep the shoes from dropping off them as she watches their home's furnishings being carried to the shore. Looking toward the sun, she has a view of the boats out on the fjord and the big foreign merchant ship berthed at the new jetty for ocean-going vessels, but looking away from it, she sees the furniture forming a growing pile on the uneven shore rocks. For the most part, she does the latter, and as the sun warms the nape of her neck and her back, she watches Guðbjartur and their maternal uncle, Björn Ebeneser, help carry out the bedsteads, the dresser, and the trunk, and hears her mother calling out instructions on when to lift, turn, lower, and let go. In the meantime, Granny Mæ dallies on the shore; she wraps her apron around her hands and urges Mama to remember her knitting needles.

"I'm not leaving without my knitting needles, as Mikkalína María is my name," avows Granny Mæ, empty-handed and feeling quite uncomfortable with this enforced idleness.

"Here, Granny, I've got your knitting needles," says Sella, Gratíana's big sister, who dashes quick as a flash down to the shore before disappearing inside again; she's definitely

the best of them at packing their things: all the sundries that can be fit into the dresser and kitchen crates.

But what is so strange is that although neither Gratíana herself nor the others who lived in that basement are rich in worldly wealth, it takes such a long time to carry their belongings to the shore that by the time the work is finished, her rear end has long since grown sore from sitting there on it. Yet it doesn't cross her mind to stand up; she adjusts herself just slightly on the rock, places her shawl beneath her and goes on sitting there unmoving as the sun continues to warm her neck and back and shine on the furniture in front of this strange house that her uncle calls a "dry-house"— like one of those simple, cow-less worker's cottages — despite the chilly dampness and downright wetness that have characterized their existence there beyond all else.

In the main, Mama and Sella have had to grapple on a practical level with the sea and all that comes with it, whereas for Granny Mæ, it's on a physical and mental level. The damp settles all the way into her bones and is so much worse for her stomach, hips, and soul than the blessed cold, which, on its own, she would far prefer to endure. Although the sea is cold, of course, it is primarily just the wetness that finds its way into their basement; the basement that they're now leaving behind.

"Well, that's everything," says Sella energetically, tripping along behind Guðbjartur as he carries the final kitchen crate to the shore.

"Don't inconvenience yourself, Gratíana," scolds Mama, trailing behind them, before inviting Granny Mæ to sit down on one of the crates after managing to compress its contents enough to shut the lid.

"No, no, I'm fine hanging around here," Gratíana replies softly, drooping her head and frowning slightly.

"We had plenty of help; she just would've gotten in the way," says Björn Ebeneser, and it looks to Gratíana as if he winks at her.

"Some people are good at avoiding the grind, Björn," snorts Mama, refastening a lock of hair that had come loose. At the same time, she shuts her eyes and thereby looks at no one in particular, but Gratíana knows that her mother doesn't consider Björn Ebeneser much of a worker, and the editing of a newspaper hardly more than fiddly pottering.

"But anyway... shouldn't we take the legs off of these before we put them in the cart?" suggests Björn Ebeneser, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate his know-how—despite being good at avoiding certain tasks. He directs his words at Guðbjartur, but Mama seizes the opportunity and launches into a speech about her son's prudence and foresight,

while all eyes are directed at the tall-legged furniture standing there half-crooked and gawky, like Gísli the gravedigger after he's had a bit more to drink than is good for him.

"The boy's not completely witless," says Björn Ebeneser in response to Mama's praise, patting his nephew's shoulder and maybe even causing him to blush, despite his being so grown up.

"My Evlália can thank her lucky stars for his great resemblance to her mother's kin. It truly is a blessing from God," says Granny Mæ, in a voice that cracks, and she holds her apron up to her eyes, which never stay dry when the conversation turns to Guðbjartur's miserable paternity.

This is followed by throat clearing and an awkward silence, as usual when inappropriate topics come up, and probably because Guðbjartur is the focal point of the discussion, and an avowed thinker and craftsman, he grabs a hammer from one of the kitchen crates and starts removing the legs and frames from under the pieces of furniture that have stood in a seawater-wetted basement in recent years.

Björn Ebeneser lends a hand according to Guðbjartur's instructions, tilting the pieces of furniture right and left and laying them on their backs so that they can be dealt with most efficiently, and afterward, those present take a close look at the rot in the woodwork and estimate the damage that would have been done to such fine objects as the dresser and the trunk had not Guðbjartur thought of putting the whole lot of it on wooden frames to keep it off the floor.

The men go to fetch the cart, and in the meantime, the furniture stands idly on the shore, legless and somewhat forlorn in the warm midday sun, and Gratíana passes the time envisioning how it will fit into Björn Ebeneser and Borga's fine house. She knows that the dresser will be in the front room, beneath the stairs to the upper floor, although that might not be the best option for her mother, who is planning to sleep up under the sloping roof along with Sella, who will be sharing a bed with little Mathilde. Granny Mæ's trunk will also be in the front room, at the foot of her bed, and in the other bed, Gratíana will be sleeping with her cousin, Sonja Karen, who says that she'll be happy to be rid of Mathilde, who pees seven times a night and never without waking her big sister. In the kitchen, Guðbjartur's stately brass bed will be a true embellishment to the house and will offset the three kitchen crates, which will of course be pushed up against a wall or under a table except when they're used for seating, as they clash with the four chairs ordered from a foreign catalogue, high backed and with dark blue, plush seats.

In fact, it remains to be seen whether Guðbjartur's elegant brass bed will fit in the kitchen. If it doesn't, the kitchen crates will have to be pushed together in the evenings and

the mattress laid over them. Still, Gratíana hopes that the bed will fit, because she's had to give up her own to visitors a few times, and therefore knows how horrid it is to sleep on the kitchen crates. Granted, she hadn't had a mattress under her— only Granny Mæ's rug and her so-called duvet— but she just knows that it's an awful place to sleep. Especially for a big brother who's on the cusp of adulthood and goes to work every day, usually leaving long before Mama lights the stove in the morning and Granny Mæ grinds the coffee.

The best thing about moving to the newspaper house— apart from being able to smell the printer's ink and see the letters and pictures printed on paper— is of course the privy, which is many times tidier than their privy at the shore ridge and always has paper for wiping oneself. Sometimes unprinted paper, but most often unsold newspapers and previously-read ones that have been torn into smaller pieces, and when Gratíana is in the privy for a long time in daylight, she browses the scraps before selecting the news that she likes best to use for wiping. She is least inclined toward choosing scraps with pictures, but if she does, she makes sure to turn them upside down so that the men who are always and most preferably in them are looking straight down into the bucket and not at her behind.

The walls in her uncle's privy are clean; no splotches on the paneling and the pile in the bucket never spills over the rim, as sometimes happened at the shore before Mama took over emptying and cleaning it. Still, they could never get rid of the putrid smell, and the people upstairs and in the other house continued to use the privy as if it never crossed their minds to bend their knees a little or make an effort to hit their target.

Now they all got to go and live in the newspaper house, just because one child died. A boy who hadn't even reached the age of two and couldn't talk properly yet. All the same, he was beautiful, the little son of Borga and Björn Ebeneser, and he was the apple of his mother's eye. Ever since the death of little Ásgeir, she hasn't been able to eat or work, or sleep or be awake; she can barely go on living, in fact, and not at all without help, so now they were all going to move into Gratíana's uncle's fancy house. Mama and Sella were supposed to help poor Borga live, and Mathilde and Sonja Karen, too, because they were still alive and kicking even though Borga had forgotten that and had completely stopped putting bows in their braids or making them porridge. Someone also needed to look after the chickens and fetch the water and clean and cook for the editor since he couldn't do so himself, of course, being nothing but a man and knowing more about newspaper publishing than housekeeping, and practically nothing about raising children.