

Kristjana Gunnars:

"The writer is the one who voices the silence, who turns on the light in the room we are observing from the window, so we can see."

—Kristjana Gunnars, Introduction to *Unexpected Fictions: New Icelandic Canadian Writing*

Kristjana Gunnars, the new writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, can be said to have devoted her whole literary output to voicing the silence, to making heard the voices of those excluded from the discourse of mainstream Canadian culture. Through editing two anthologies, publishing two books of translation, six volumes of poetry, a collection of short stories and a novel, she has devoted her work to what Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch calls "unhiding the hidden."

Gunnars was born and raised in Reykjavik, Iceland, and she emigrated to Canada in 1969. A very prolific writer, she has published four books in the past two years: a translation of selected prose and poetry of the Icelandic-Canadian poet, Stephan Stephansson; her first novel, *The Prowler*; an anthology of short stories by Icelandic-Canadian writers, *Unexpected Fictions*; and a new book of poetry, *The Carnival of Longing*. She claims to have no special reason for being so prolific: "It's my profession. My working day consists of writing and writing-related activities."

Her activity within the Icelandic-Canadian community is a very important part of her writing. She says, "My task in life is the translation, the expansion, and the preservation of Icelandic culture, as it exists both in Iceland and in North America. It's part of my mandate for being around." Her translation of Stephansson's writings demonstrates this point clearly. Stephansson was a poet in the early part of this century, who lived and worked most of his life in Markerville, Alberta. Though considered by Icelanders to be one of their greatest national poets, his work has long been neglected by Canadian audiences.

Gunnars is especially proud of two of the pieces in the book. "I think the most valuable thing I did in that book was the translation of some of the autobiographical sketches. I also think it was worth having for the anti-war poem ('Ceasefire', Stephansson's powerful meditation on the vagaries of war, occasioned by the outbreak of World War I). I thought that those two were important historical documents, and they should be available in English. Lyric poems are more problematic to me because they're harder to translate. I just thought I'd give a small attempt at it."

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Gunnars' interest in Icelandic-Canadian culture extends to the present day, with her involvement in *Unexpected Fictions*. In her introduction to the book, she sets out a dichotomy between mainstream and ethnic writing, while pointing out that all of the stories in the book are decidedly mainstream in outlook. When asked about the tension between the mainstream and ethnic positions, Gunnars says, "I guess what I wanted to highlight is what it is to be ethnic in Canada today, and what I want to get to eventually is, let's drop this whole idea. What I want to get



to is, let's not have these divisions between mainstream and ethnic. Let's just call people writers if they are writers. And Canadian writers are in an international pot. The sooner we get a hold of something more cosmopolitan the better off we are.

"What we're doing now is, we're segregating portions of our own community so that we don't have to take part in the world community, so that only a small sector of the Canadian writing community in fact takes

existential ontology, Gunnars' novel rejects what she calls the "19th. century mannerisms" of conventional narrative. She says, "Art has to respond to the world we live in and writers, artists of all kinds, have to keep testing to see what works in the time they're living in. Also, there's the problem of the writer's voice. When you write, you have to find your personal way of telling a story, and it has to be different from everybody else's. You're always looking for the difference. The key word is the difference."

One of the results of Gunnars' excursions into metafiction is a questioning of the relation between the author and the text. Text becomes an autonomous entity for Gunnars; she writes in *The Prowler*, "the text has a desire to censor stories it does not love." For Gunnars, there is a paradox involved in trying to be as honest as possible in fiction, for by its very nature the literary text subverts honesty. "When you write, when you commit something to a permanent form, you realize that the very unchangeability of it makes it untrue. We're always in a state of flux. I think of literature as something organic, in constant change. So committing something to a form of permanence is always a problem. And now it seems the best thing you can do is attack the problem head on. There is no point in trying to avoid the problem."

part in the international scene. This doesn't make sense to me."

Her novel, *The Prowler*, is one of the most interesting Canadian novels of the past year. Rather than tell her story of a girl growing up in post-war Iceland in a conventional, linear fashion, Gunnars' narrative is fragmented and elliptical, interrupted by self-reflexive 'metafictional' passages on the process of narrative and the difficulties of writing. Like the "nouveau roman" experiments of Marguerite Duras and Milan Kundera's cerebral fusion of politics, game-playing and