

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

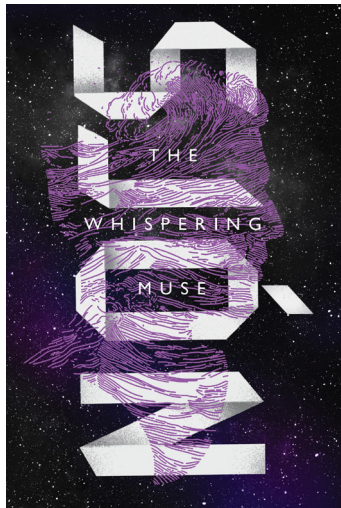
The Whispering Muse

The Blue Fox

From the Mouth of the Whale

by Sjón

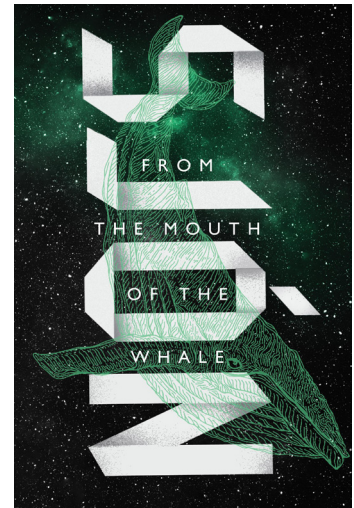
Translated from the Icelandic by Victoria Cribb



ISBN 978-0-374-28907-2 / 160 pages
hardcover



ISBN 978-0-374-11445-9 / 128 pages
paperback



ISBN 978-0-374-15903-0 / 240 pages
paperback

Already celebrated far beyond his native Iceland, the novels of Sjón arrive on waves of praise from writers, critics, and readers worldwide. Sjón has won countless international awards and earned ringing comparisons to Borges, Calvino, and Iceland's other literary superstar, the Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness. He possesses a singular literary voice that captivates through evocative images and startling turns of fate. Sjón's storytelling, which is as inventive as the sagas of his home country, takes us to mythical worlds interwoven with the history of humanity: In *The Whispering Muse*, readers board a sailing vessel in the aftermath of World War II but find themselves transported to ancient Greece. In *The Blue Fox*, a hunter's determination raises questions about his approach to life and the survival of the most vulnerable members of his community. And *From the Mouth of the Whale* takes us to seventeenth-century Iceland, where persecution and superstition obscure the truths revealed by a compassionate healer.

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The questions and topics that follow are designed to enhance your experience of these three unique novels. We hope they enrich your reading group's journeys of mystery and adventure.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

The Whispering Muse

“A quirky, melodic, ticklish, seamlessly translated, lovingly polished gem of a novel.” —David Mitchell

1. How do Valdimar Haraldsson's recollections of post–World War I Berlin compare to Caeneus's recollections of the ancient Greek island of Lemnos? What do both story lines tell us about heroism?
2. How was Haraldsson able to fill the pages of *Fisk og Kultur*, his journal devoted to “the link between fish consumption and the superiority of the Nordic race,” for more than twenty years? What aspects of his culture—culinary and otherwise—are captured in the world of seafaring?
3. As a storytelling device, does the stench of Queen Hypsipyle and the other women of Lemnos affect the male and female audience members differently?
4. Discuss the purser's sensitive lady friend. How did your opinion of her shift throughout the book? What does her history teach us about Europe's history?
5. Chapter IV frames the Nordic legend of Sigurd and Gudrun within Greek mythology. What conflicts emerge within both cultures? What does this passage say about universal experiences between lovers?
6. On page 75, in his shipboard lecture, Haraldsson proposes teaming up with Japan. To what extent does this predict the global fish trade of the twenty-first century?
7. What realities are revealed in the novel's myths? What truths survive across centuries of retelling?
8. If you were able to take a modern-day voyage with a mythical Greek hero, which one would you choose?

The Blue Fox

“When I need something epic and lyrical I call upon Sjón . . . *The Blue Fox* is a magical novel.” —Björk

1. In the novel's opening scene, as the Reverend Baldur Skuggason and the vixen interact, how do they balance the mutual danger with the fact that they find each other alluring?

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2. How was your reading affected by the alternating points of view? How does the herbalist Fridrik B. Fridjónsson's view of his community compare to what you see in the scenes of the Reverend Baldur and the vixen?
3. What does Hafdís Jónsdóttir's childhood tell us about the culture that didn't want to see her survive? What accounts for Fridrik's unusual compassion toward her—his Abba—and toward Hafdís's sweetheart, Hálfán Atlason, as well?
4. How did you interpret the conversations between the vixen and the Reverend Baldur? Reading the novel as a fable, what are its lessons?
5. How does the Reverend Baldur see his role as a religious leader? As he and the vixen debate electricity on pages 98–100, what do we discover about how their moral compasses are set? What do they believe is their source of “power”?
6. Discuss the landscape as if it were a character in the novel. In what ways is it threatening? In what ways is it enchanting?
7. In his letter in the book's closing pages, what does Fridrik reveal to us about his Abba's view of the world? Despite her dictionary, what emotions transcended language when Fridrik took her in?
8. When the Reverend Baldur meets his fate, is justice served? Is he destined to be the hunter, or the hunted?

From the Mouth of the Whale

“Hallucinatory, lyrical, by turns comic and tragic, this extraordinary novel should make Sjón an international name. His evocation of seventeenth-century Iceland through the eyes of a man born before his time has stuck in my mind like nothing else I've read in the last year.” —Hari Kunzru

1. How is Jónas Pálmason the Learned affected by the promises of Christianity and the power of the Virgin Mary?
2. What do the sandpiper and the other seabirds bring to Jónas on Gullbjörn's Island? How do they serve as more than his muses?
3. Ultimately, what made Jónas so threatening to the “serpent brothers”?
4. What is at the root of the Reverend Sigurdur Pétursson's madness? How is his community affected by his choice of fire as his favorite way to purge?
5. Is “Wizard-Láfi” Thórólfur Thórdarson effective as he wages war on ghosts?

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6. What did you discover about Icelandic history as Jónas recounted the interactions with Spanish and Basque mariners?
7. How does Jónas make peace with the death of Sigrídur “Sigga” Thórólfsdóttir and their children? Is he living in world where religion offers any solace?
8. Discuss the closing scene. How is it different from other whale tales you’ve read?

PRAISE FOR SJÓN AND HIS FICTION

“An extraordinary and original writer.” —A. S. Byatt, *The Guardian*

“Sjón is the trickster that makes the world, and he is achingly brilliant.” —Junot Díaz

“An extraordinary, powerful fable—a marvel.” —Alberto Manguel on *The Whispering Muse*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SJÓN was born in Reykjavík in 1962. He is an award-winning novelist, poet, and playwright, and his novels have been translated into twenty-five languages. Sjón is the president of the Icelandic PEN Centre and the chairman of the board of Reykjavík UNESCO City of Literature. Also a lyricist, he has written songs for Björk, including for her most recent project, *Biophilia*, and was nominated for an Oscar for the lyrics he cowrote (with Lars von Trier) for *Dancer in the Dark*. He lives in Reykjavík. Visit Sjonorama at <http://sjon.siberia.is>.

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