



The Perfect Landscape

Ragna Sigurðardóttir , Sarah Bowen (Translator)

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Hanna tekur við sýningarsal í listasafni borgarinnar. Það er góðæri og auðmenn njóta þess að gefa safninu dýrar gjafir. Ein slík er landslagsmálverk eftir þekktu listakonu frá öldinni sem leið. En hvað nú ef málverkið reynist falsað? Sagan opnar glugga að lifandi listheimi þar sem átök stjórnast af metnaði, græðgi, afbrýðisemi og ástríðu fyrir listinni.

The Perfect Landscape Details

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From Reader Review The Perfect Landscape for online ebook

Alisha says

This was interesting and fairly quickly read. It is written in present tense, which was a little distracting at first but ultimately fit the story well.

Tom says

Almost just a sketch rather than a novel, but a pretty good read. A list or diagram of players might have been helpful, and some important details were only coyly revealed.

(Found this filed under Ragna and right next to Ragnar Jonasson in the fiction shelves of my local library, as I continue my journey backwards through the alphabet from Updike.)

Phil says

Hanna has returned to Reykjavik to take on a new job in as director of a section of an art museum. On the first day, the gallery receives an exquisite gift of a painting from a friend of one of her new work colleagues by a renowned icelandic painter that cost the friend €15 million but it is Hanna and the galleries conservator's job to authenticate the painting as being as described on the tin before they can show the painting in public. There is also vandalism ongoing of public art statues and sculptures and Hanna goes with the conservator to examine what to be done.

It is an interesting read though the narrative at times came across as stunted (maybe a problem with the translator?)

Larissa says

A lot of the office politics within the gallery setting were enjoyable, as were the passages where characters outline the ways in which they have determined that a work of art might be a forgery (my favorite fun fact: no birch trees with straight trunks existed in Iceland in the middle of the last century). But while there is a lot that actually happens in this novel, it never really felt like it got off the ground. There is a lot of back story, and either it or any one of the many sub-plots, character relationships, etc. could really have used some more development.

It is definitely a novel in which the setting comes through, however. I very much enjoyed reading the descriptions of Reykjavík and the surrounding areas, and getting even a cursory feel for the art scene here.

Jaylia3 says

There isn't a lot of dramatic action in this Nordic mystery; its pleasures are more subtle and character driven.

The book opens in Iceland, where Hanna, an art theorist, is beginning a new job at a small but prestigious art museum and hoping for a fresh start in her home country. She's currently separated from her daughter and somewhat estranged from her Italian husband of 20 years, so Hanna looks forward to throwing herself into what she believes will be a cushy and interesting job. Once she arrives however, she realizes that the job isn't what she thought and its internal politics are tricky enough that she has to be on guard much of the time. A lot of the book's activity takes place inside Hanna's head, where she uses her knowledge of fencing strategies and stances to prepare herself to parley effectively with the people around her.

Since Hanna's area of expertise is landscape paintings, she's thrilled that the museum has acquired a beautiful landscape by a much beloved early twentieth century Icelandic artist, but when she and a male colleague she has complicated feelings for begin to suspect it's a forgery they launch a covert investigation that involves collectors, dealers and artists from across northern Europe. Though not gripping in an edge-of-the-seat kind of way, *The Perfect Landscape* is quietly compelling and I kept coming back to it for the joy of making discoveries along with Hanna.

Phil says

Not just a routine murder - in fact there is no murder. But there still is a mystery. Good book. Delves into the world of fine art and forgeries. I found it very well written and interesting.

Bev says

It's always difficult to rate books that I'm reading in translation--particularly when they don't strike me as particularly awesome. I never know if it's really the story and the way it was originally written or if something funky has happened in translation. *The Perfect Landscape* by Ragna Sigurdardottir (translated by Sarah Bowen) provides such a dilemma. My first-ever mystery set in Iceland--I'm afraid I'm very underwhelmed. It moves very slowly. The mystery plot just really doesn't flow. Others on Goodreads have said that the book is more character-driven, but I can't say that the characters particularly grabbed me either. The story has a very choppy feel to it--again, I don't know if something was lost in the translation. Then there's Hanna's running theme of fencing--which just, quite honestly serves no purpose. Perhaps if the author had worked in some scenes of her fencing, had shown how much she loved the sport and why the metaphors were so valid for her (instead of telling us--repeatedly), then maybe it would have made sense to tell us that Hanna was mentally en garde or raising or sheathing an imaginary foil. Without the groundwork being laid, the imagery just falls flat. And, finally, I just don't really get into present tense tales and the present tense in this particular story just adds to the already odd feel of the book.

The best part of the story is Hanna's interactions with Stein. Their friendship builds through looks and unspoken agreements. It is the most believable interaction in the novel--the quick recognition of two kindred souls who share the same passion for art and justice. I would have really enjoyed more focus on the two of them. Keeping them as friends would have been fine--no need to add to the attempt at romantic tension. Two stars--almost entirely for Hanna and Stein.

This was first posted on my blog *My Reader's Block*. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks!

Jane Mulkewich says

A book set in Iceland and the world of art and art forgery, I read it to steep myself in Icelandic culture and it did not disappoint. It is more character-driven than plot-driven, and I was drawn in by the characters and the office politics of an art gallery in Reykjavik, with sub-plots about families and relationships.

Virginia says

This was the best-looking of a bunch of duds available to me for \$1 on a LivingSocial coupon. I only picked it because it was written by an Icelander.

What a nice surprise. Sarah Bowen's translation is full of plain, straightforward sentences that give the story a sense of trustworthiness. This text isn't poetry, but it's clear and comforting.

There's an art mystery (solved only for the reader) told mostly through the voice of Hanna, a gallery manager who has essentially exiled herself to her homeland.

A wintry book, satisfying. Recommended for hot summers, turbulent minds.

Cheryl says

This is from an Iceland writer and it delves into a lot of Icelandic painters and the evidently widespread world of art forgery.

The heroine, formerly from Iceland, is hired to come back as the director of an art gallery. They've just received the gift of a painting by a famous Icelandic artist. Our heroine, whose hobby is fencing, has to be en garde all the time for backstabbing employees while slowly realizing the latest gift painting is actually a forgery.

Nice read.

Adara says

This book is more character driven than plot driven. A quick read, the author explores every thought and emotion in a character's mind before moving the plot along. It is amazing how much can be said between characters with only a glance! I enjoyed this exploration into the world of art and art forgery, something I am not familiar with. I did feel that some of the plot lines were very tangent and were not as well connected to the main story or developed as they could have been. One subplot in particular, I felt was almost unnecessary.

I enjoyed this book, but wouldn't necessarily recommend it. There are so many other great books about art and art forgery, it is possible to find a more developed and engaging story.

Lora says

The author's background in art is a strength, but her novel was a little unfocused - you might say a bit like daily life, where there are things going on that don't always serve the main "plot." The forgery plotline was genuinely interesting and contributed to the book's strong ending. The street waif and marital discord plotlines were a bit unengaging and incomplete.

Another weakness was that the author used fencing metaphors too often. I found it annoying and distracting after awhile, and I preferred the chapters that didn't have these metaphors. However, it did seem that the author made a conscious choice to use or avoid these metaphors based on how comfortable the main character felt in varying social situations. If she could just be herself, she didn't need to think defense or consider strategies.

There was quite a bit of namedropping of Icelandic artists, which doesn't work well for those of us who have never heard of them - and don't even know if they are invented or not. It turns out that all the artists who were mentioned are real, except the two whose paintings were forged.

Finally, the time setting was unclear. Some chapters were marked with a year (2004 and 2005), but others were marked "current day" - which means we have no way of knowing how much time has passed between various events. The publication date was 2009, so that can function as "current day."

Kimberly says

I love Iceland and really enjoy reading books set in Iceland. I also really like mysteries, so this art gallery mystery set in Reykjavik seemed like the perfect read for me.

Hanna is new to a job at an art gallery in Reykjavik, and is quickly caught up in uncovering whether a donation of a work by an Icelandic painter is in fact a forgery. The story wasn't terribly cohesive for me, and I found myself not being able to relate to how characters were feeling or able to understand some of their actions. I'm not sure, though, if this was because this is the English translation from Icelandic, or because the book itself is missing some of that character development and plotline cohesion. All in all, though, "The Perfect Landscape" is a really pleasant read, with a compelling look into the art world and an interesting mystery, all set in the most amazing place I know.

Val says

The art gallery in Reykjavík is given an attractive landscape painted by an Icelandic artist. The curator, Steinn, fears it may be a forgery and raises his concerns with the new director of the contemporary arts annex, Hanna. Together they try to find out the paintings provenance. The investigation raises doubts about another painting, an abstract work donated the year before. This is a mystery set in the world of art and art forgery.

At the same time as the investigation of the painting, Steinn is worried about his eyesight, Hanna is worried about her marriage, Kristen, the director, is worried about the gallery's reputation, Agusta, a young assistant, is trying to balance her family and career, some teenagers are vandalising public art works and Ebba makes lots of coffee. The gallery is also staging a national and international exhibition of landscapes and Hanna wants to get involved in community projects with the teenagers.

The story is mostly told from Hanna's viewpoint. She is not an engaging protagonist and sees each social encounter as a ritualised dual, as shown by a recurrent and overworked fencing metaphor.

It is not a bad story and the insights into the art world are interesting. Unfortunately the writing, in translation, is more akin to trudging through deep snow in heavy boots than the rapier swiftness and precision of the piste, so I can't recommend it or give it more than three stars.

Pamela Barrett says

At her new job as the art director of the Annexe Gallery in Reykjavik, Iceland, Hanna is surprised when asked to look into one of the galleries newest paintings. It is a landscape by one Iceland's premier artists, and one whom Hanna has studied and wrote about—the problem is that she and the conservator don't believe it's authentic. Concerned that it is not part of her job expertise, Hanna is stuck trying to find out if the painting is a forgery, and if the gallery will accept what she and Stein, the conservator, discover.

I loved the idea of this story, the mystery; the insiders look behind the scenes of the art world which the author, an artist, knows well. The problem for me is that I never connected emotionally with Hanna. I never understood, or even cared about most of the characters. Every time Ragna dipped below the surface—like in the scenes with Stein and Kari (a young troubled graffiti artist)—it was fleeting and left unresolved. Even the ending left me with questions, and a little depressed. This may be what the author intended, but as a reader I needed something to grasp onto. I'm giving this book a 3 star rating.
