

Dear Kirsty,

I have finished reading *Last Rituals*, and I must say that I have enjoyed it very much. I would have finished reading it in three days even if you had not told me of the urgency. It really is compulsive reading.

It is a whodunnit, and the plot is managed extremely well. Not until reaching the final chapters did I begin to guess who was the murderer. When all was revealed, the whole plot seemed extremely convincing and realistic. It revolves around a group of young students (but not all that young: mostly in their twenties) at the University of Iceland who have become alienated and adopted a culture of drugs, sexual perversion (but not homosexuality) and the occult. Although many of the details of the plot are very sensational and will seem shocking to many people, the book is a serious attempt to understand the nature and origin of this culture and the story is entirely realistic and convincing. The characters dabble in the occult, but there is no actual supernatural element in the story.

The two investigators of the murder, which is of a German research student in his twenties, are not professional detectives: the police have concluded their investigations and have arrested one of the victim's friends. But the victim's family back in Germany are not convinced that the right man has been charged, and employ a German friend of the family and a female Icelandic lawyer (not a specialist in crime cases) to re-examine the case. The book consists largely of an account of their investigations and their gradual realisation of what lies behind the extraordinary crime: the victim's body was after death subjected to various rituals which have their origin in medieval accounts of witchcraft.

The details of witchcraft and torture that are described are authentic and based mainly on medieval or seventeenth century books, some of them Icelandic, some from continental Europe and in Latin. I was afraid that they would turn out to be over-sensationalised fantasies only loosely based on historical reality, but they are not. They are based on actual records of witchcraft and the persecutions of supposed witches in early times, which are convincingly linked with modern psychological ideas about sexual perversion and sadomasochism and Freudian psychology. I know a bit about this, because last year I published a translation of an account of Icelandic folklore, which included a lot of information on these matters.

The characterisation of the two investigators and their developing relationship is also very well handled. The Icelandic lawyer is a single mother with two children, one of whom, the son, is going through a difficult stage at the age of sixteen. Though his problems (and those of his mother) are nowhere near as great as those of the victim of the murder, they are integrated into the story of the murder in a very interesting and effective way. This is a serious book which addresses sensitively many important questions about modern society (all over the world, not just in Iceland), and is very topical (crime linked with drugs, sex, the occult, youth culture, women's roles in society, child abuse, police incompetence – nearly the lot).

The style of the narrative is quite straightforward and rather spare, with touches of humour and irony that are very attractive. Moreover, though the language of the youth culture presented in the book, the details of seventeenth-century and earlier Icelandic history, and the Icelandic psychological terminology may well present some problems to a translator, the technical matter is handled very skilfully in the book. Since one of the

investigators is a foreigner, he has to have all the information about Icelandic culture and history (and geography) explained to him by Icelanders, and this of course serves to inform the foreign reader too. The author clearly had a foreign audience in mind when writing the book, and has taken care not to make the Icelandic background to the story a stumbling block for uninformed readers. She has managed this extremely well.

While one of the chief attractions of the story to me has been the Icelandic background – the department of the University of Iceland that is the setting for much of the action is one that I know extremely well – I do not think that the book will appeal only to those who know Iceland, though the large number of tourists who have now been to Iceland will in many cases have visited exhibitions in the institute closely involved in the plot and will find that aspect of the book a great attraction. This means that an English translation could well find an audience in Iceland. For others, it will be just a rather exotic setting for a traditional type of detective novel, rather like the Caribbean in some of Graham Greene's novels. Nor would it be right to describe it as a campus novel, though its use of the University background will undoubtedly make it appeal particularly to the audiences of David Lodge or P. D. James or A. S. Byatt. As a detective novel it is perhaps most similar to Colin Dexter. I think that the translation will, if well publicised, find a wide readership in North America and Australia, where there is a considerable market for books about Iceland. We (the Viking Society) sell a large number of our books in the US and Canada, where also the majority of the sales of Snorri Sturluson's Edda take place as well, as Frances Wollen will tell you. The psychological element and the links with the occult will also give the book a particular attraction among a general audience of intellectual readers. The historical material puts the book into a class with Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

I do not know where the English title has come from, but it is not very satisfactory. 'Last Rites' would be better, but the literal meaning of the Icelandic title is 'The Third Sign'. Both refer to the occult symbol cut on the corpse's chest which constitutes one of the most macabre features of the crime, and is also one of the indicators of the motive. Another link with Eco's semiology.

I very much hope you will get to publish a translation – the book deserves a serious publisher – and that you will not employ a hack translator who cannot do it justice. There are a lot of them around, especially in Iceland.

Regards,



Anthony Faulkes