

V I N T A G E

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eBooks



INDEPENDENT PEOPLE

AN EPIC

**HALLDOR LAXNESS**

## Acclaim for Halldór Laxness's *Independent People*

“This beautiful and heartbreaking novel has haunted me ever since I was lent a rare copy years ago, and I am delighted that what is clearly a masterpiece by a relatively uncelebrated genius will now be available to a wide audience of book lovers. If there is any justice in the world, the name Laxness will soon become a house hold word, at least in those households where timeless works of the imagination are cherished.”

—Joel Conarroe

“Laxness has a poets imagination and a poets gift for phrase and symbol.... Bjartur is a magnificent and complex symbol of peasant independence.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A strange story, vibrant and alive.... There is a rare beauty in its telling, a beauty as surprising as the authentic strain of poetry that lies in the shoving, battering Iclander.”

—*Atlantic Monthly*

“A saga that somehow contrives to recapture the broad, clear air of older Icelandic tales.”

—*The Observer* (London)

“[Laxness] gives a large picture of life under primitive conditions, [he] writes vividly, using irony with vigorous effect; amid the brutality and squalor there are rich moments of humor and poetry.”

—*The Spectator* (London)

## **Halldór Laxness**

### ***Independent People***

Halldór Laxness was born near Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1902. His first novel was published when he was seventeen. The undisputed master of contemporary Icelandic fiction and one of the outstanding novelists of the century, he has written more than sixty books, including novels, short stories, essays, poems, plays, and memoirs. In 1955 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1998.

## **Also by Halldór Laxness**

*Paradise Reclaimed*

*World Light*

*Under the Glacier*

*Iceland's Bell*

Halldór Laxness  
*Independent People*

An Epic



TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC BY

J. A. Thompson

INTRODUCTION BY Brad Leithauser

*Vintage International*

VINTAGE BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION



There are good books and there are great books and there may be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life. If you're quite lucky, you may chance upon a novel which inspires so close a kinship that questions of evaluation (Is this book better than merely good? Is it some sort of classic?) become a niggling irrelevance. Luck has everything to do with it. Anyone who cares seriously about fiction eventually will get around to *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Madame Bovary* or *Don Quixote*, and if you're somebody whose closest literary attachment is to a book of this staple sort, you will not be graced by the particular haunted feeling of good fortune I'm talking about; you will have, instead, the assurance of knowing that your keenest literary pleasures were preordained. One looks differently on the book of genius that, even in a long bookworm's life, one might never have stumbled upon.

The feeling I'm describing may account for Henry Millers declaring that Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries* is "closer to me than any other book I have read." Or John Fowles's reverence toward Alain Fourniers *he Grand Meaulnes*: "I am, in short, a besotted fan, and still feel closer to Fournier than to any other novelist, living or dead." Or Randall Jarrell's obsession with Christina Steads *The Man Who Loved Children*. Or what Rilke felt about Jacobsen, particularly his *Niels Lyhne* ("Of all my books, I find only a few indispensable ... the Bible, and the books of the great Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen.")

No doubt Miller and Fowles and Jarrell and Rilke recognized that greater novels were to be found than the objects of their devotion. But what does greatness signify once you have met the book that was made for you? For what we are talking about is a sort of imperishable romance, in which the flaws of a book are as endearing—as treasurable—as the flaws in the face of one's sole beloved. This is the real thing: a head-over-heels incredulity that there exists in the universe so perfect an imperfection.

And the book of my own life? Halldór Laxness's *Independent People*. I remember vividly my initial encounter with it. I finished its last chapters one late afternoon in Rome, seated in an all-but-deserted café. Outside, a storm had abruptly blown in and a chill autumn rain was lashing the streets, and I read as though furtively, hunched over the pages. I did this for two reasons. The light had turned dim. And I didn't want anyone to notice I was steadily weeping.

It always strikes me as a bitter irony that, in urging the book on someone, I often must first identify its Nobel Prize-winning author. But the fact is that Laxness won the Nobel many years ago, in 1955, and that he represents the smallest country ever to produce a Laureate: Iceland, with its population of roughly a quarter of a million. Until this edition, the book had long been out of print in English.

I might never have read *Independent People* had I not, in the summer of 1984, spent two weeks hiking in Iceland. However obscure a figure Laxness may be to Americans, in his native land he is a colossus without peer or parallel, and anyone drawn to Iceland will get around to him before long. The Icelandic literary tradition is of course illustrious, but nearly all the medieval sagas and poems that are its capital glory remain anonymous. Before Laxness emerged, prodigiously and prolifically (his career began in 1920, when he published his first novel, *Child of Nature*, at the age of seventeen), Iceland had never produced a modern writer of anything like international reputation. He has been translated into more than thirty languages.

Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with which it shares family resemblances, *Independent People* in its opening pages evokes the dawn of time. García Márquez's novel commences on a blue morning when the boulders in a streambed look like dinosaur eggs. *Independent People's* first chapter summons up the days when the world was first settled, in 874 A.D.—for that is the year when the Norsemen arrived in Iceland, and one of the book's wry conceits is that no other world but Iceland exists. The tale takes place among farmers habitually so impoverished that they “died without ever having transacted a business deal involving more than a few dollars at a time.” These are men who might venture outside their valleys once or twice a year, hiking to a little fishing village to purchase a few provisions; for them, even Reykjavik is a misty dream.