Baldur’s Song
by David Arnason

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Baldur’s Song presents a saga of author David Arnason’s great-grandfather in a novel that reaches epic proportions, merging history with myth about his namesake Baldur, the Scandinavian god of death and rebirth.

The narrative begins modestly with a description of the author’s own birth in 1945, and a reflection about his “destiny” (implicitly as Baldur’s legacy and/or Baldur incarnate), then delves into the lives of his Icelandic antecedents several generations back, in whom determination and promiscuousness combined to populate the new world. After his great-great-grandmother Petrina Soffia packs up her belongings and “walks off the harbour” to sail to America, she is never seen in Iceland again, and the new legacy in New Iceland, present-day Manitoba, begins.

The long journey across the Atlantic is an ordeal, and it represents in itself a kind of death and rebirth that takes place intermittently between generations and twice in Baldur’s own life. Just as Great-grandfather Baldur whistles “Ode to Joy” to the casualties of a smallpox epidemic in New Iceland, so the writer Arnason brings to life his ancestors’ ghosts with a song of praise in the form of Baldur’s Song.

The devastating smallpox epidemic is described from Baldur’s unique perspective as a young boy, with the mythic roots of the Norse god’s song of rebirth thus given a particular historical context. As Baldur understands it, the English doctor’s job is to distinguish between the living and the dead, and to pronounce those dead who will be moved to the thatched roofs of houses to wait for spring thaw when they may be buried:

The people who had been resting on the roof were taken down and holes were dug in the earth and they were placed in the holes. For weeks I had been expecting to speak to them, but instead they were put in boxes and deposited in holes in the earth. Even my uncle was sullen and refused to speak, even though I addressed him by name. I think now that I might have offended him. (30)

The same doctor reappears later in Winnipeg: he has taken to alcohol (though he manages eventually to give it up) after his experience treating smallpox victims, and the reader is given another view of the disease’s impact on one working directly with the patients.

The young Baldur takes to whistling—a skill he learns from the English doctor—to those buried in the graveyard. During one of these visits, Baldur meets Inspector Gudmundur Palsson’s daughter, Lara, who has just lost her mother to the epidemic and who will later become “the love of his life.” Her sceptical words, “They can’t hear you, you know. They’re dead” (35) characterize her pragmatic point of view in contrast with Baldur’s as a kind of real-life hero in this romanticized and mythologized history. In case readers dismiss Baldur’s whistling to the dead as naive, Arnason throws in apparent red herrings that make us think again: he tells us that his family comes from a long line of freethinkers, and remarks with tongue in cheek that ancestor Arni Petursson did not believe in anything he had not seen with his own eyes, including the continent of America (17).
One of the most appealing qualities of the novel is its ability to bring us right inside the nitty gritty of cramped living quarters in the small thatched houses of New Iceland. The bathroom is marked only by a sheet, with a potty and slop pail for apple cores and potato peels. When the new teacher is offered accommodations in their house and the children peek under the hanging, she is upset at her lack of privacy and leaves the post. From the child’s point of view, but with adult hindsight, Baldur remarks:

And we had never thought of modesty before. It was a strange and terrifying notion. Our bodies, which had never been anything but the external manifestation of our thoughts, suddenly took on new shapes. They needed to be sheltered. They were suddenly vulnerable. They could be damaged by the eyes of the people who looked at them. And other bodies suddenly seemed exotic. Could strange and secret thoughts be revealed by seeing those bodies? (32–3)

Like his strong-hearted and promiscuous seafaring ancestors, Baldur falls in love with more than one woman, marrying the mayor’s daughter, Inga, but after her death and their children, named after Nordic gods, have grown up, he again meets up with his first love, Lara. In the last sections of the novel, we hear various versions of what happens to the couple in the end. According to Arnason’s father, his great-grandfather and Lara spent their last years in the nursing home in Gimli, but the writer prefers his own romantic version, canoeing down Lake Manitoba to Lake Playgreen:

I visualized them camping on the shore in a tent, waiting while the sun rose and set on perfect weather.

Then finally a storm arises, a wind from the northwest and blinding rain. They dress carefully, bind themselves together and get into the canoe. A couple of strokes of the paddle and they are into the heart of the storm. The canoe is steady, but it bucks and spins in the surging rapids. They kiss, and then are lost, spun out of history into myth, out of the reach of love and of smallpox, drawn through the river into a sort of rebirth I cannot imagine. (235–6)

Interpolating in his own voice more frequently in the last sections, Arnason tells us that a quadruple heart bypass has changed his world view, so that life and death appear differently and he, like Baldur and a true agnostic, would like to speak to the dead ancestors through this book.

This is a fine, well-put-together novel that combines family photographs and histories, a rich tapestry with border stitching that echoes details from ancestors’ lives and the author’s own story. My only complaint is that some of the minor characters’ stories are rather flat: Flora’s story as a prostitute brought back into society’s respectable fold is too smooth and blissfully unchallenged, and Johnny Ashdown’s success story is perhaps too shining (but then he dies early, so maybe not). The author’s wry musings bring this mythologized family history to life, first by dramatizing the kind of child’s thinking that underlies the human subconscious and mythological thought and then by opening up that kind of thinking to irony. ✗

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown Press, 2007).

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