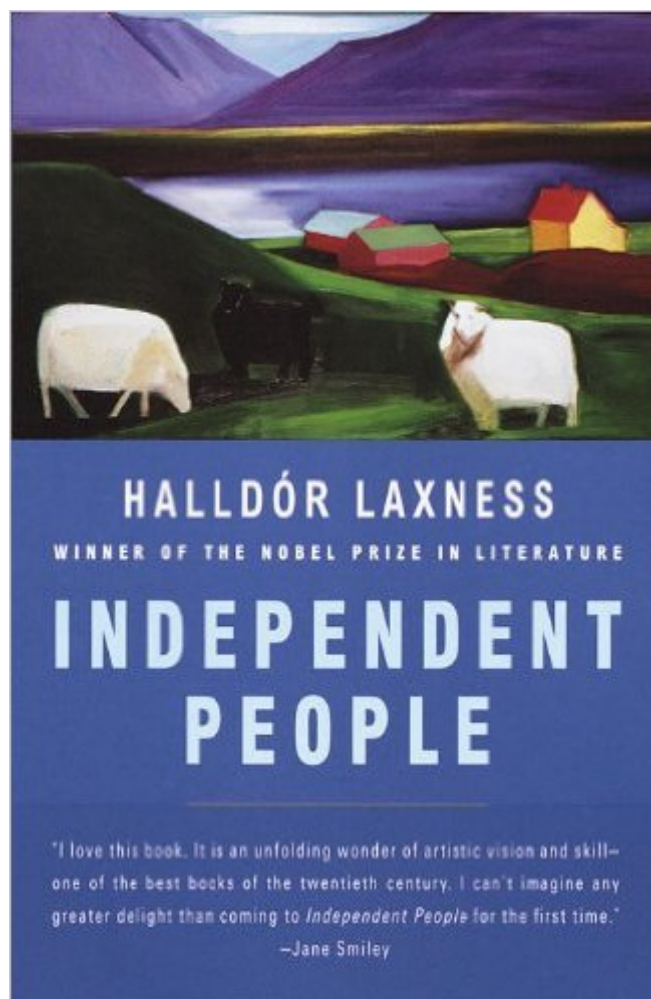


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Independent People



Synopsis

This magnificent novel "which secured for its author the 1955 Nobel Prize in Literature" is at least available to contemporary American readers. Although it is set in the early twentieth century, it recalls both Iceland's medieval epics and such classics as Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*. And if Bjartur of Summerhouses, the book's protagonist, is an ordinary sheep farmer, his flinty determination to achieve independence is genuinely heroic and, at the same time, terrifying and bleakly comic. Having spent eighteen years in humiliating servitude, Bjartur wants nothing more than to raise his flocks un beholden to any man. But Bjartur's spirited daughter wants to live un beholden to him. What ensues is a battle of wills that is by turns harsh and touching, elemental in its emotional intensity and intimate in its homely detail. Vast in scope and deeply rewarding, *Independent People* is a masterpiece.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Independent People is not a book for everyone. It is a long, slow and sometimes punishing read. Laxness paints the sheep farmer's life in bleak tones. Think of Solzhenitsyn's *Siberia* or Rolvaag's *Dakota prairie*. So dismal is the mood at times that the reader feels the imminent onset of seasonal affective disorder. But *Independent People* also contains moments of pure, distilled beauty so arresting they seem to stand out from the cold landscape like stars in the ink of darkness. Bjartur of Summerhouses is a true epic hero. As Monte Cristo is to vengeance, Bjartur is to self-determination. His emotional intransigence and the suffering he visits on all those close to him

is balanced only by the enormity and brute force of his will. Asta Sollilja, his daughter, is the only possible counterweight to his obstinacy, in both emotional and literary terms. She is strong and sensitive, beautiful and grotesque, half Bjartur, half anti-Bjartur. Her duality provides the story's central drama and the book's over-arching metaphor. Masterfully constructed of vignettes woven into small books, *Independent People* is seamless. Laxness's voice is clear and lyric, never showy. The writing is fresh and modern, yet seems to be channeled from Iceland's mythic past. This is a land populated by many dark spirits and one never feels quite free of their presence here. Certain images from *Independent People* are indelibly etched on my consciousness. A man violently and accidentally riding a reindeer. A girl longing by a window for a stranger she's met just once. A young man seduced back to the home he has left by a siren on horseback. There is something more to why I love this book. I spent a week in Iceland in July 1998, and was transfixed by its rugged, austere beauty.

I first read "*Independent People*" in 1996 after reading Brad Leithauser's essay in the "*New York Review of Books*." Leithauser's praise of the book and the author were so intriguing that I went to the library that day and found an earlier edition. I recently had the opportunity to read the book again, with Leithauser's essay serving as an introduction. A single reading cannot exhaust this outsize, obscure novel by the 1955 Nobel-prize winner from Iceland. On a simple level, "*Independent People*" deals with the lives of the poor sheep grazers in Iceland early in the 20th Century. The hero is a farmer named Bjartur of Summerhouses who, after 18 years of working for another, the baliff, earns enough money to buy his own small farm. Bjartur's goal is to be independent and self-sufficient, to take what he earns and not take or give to others. In addition to this simple economic credo for independence. Bjartur is an "independent person" emotionally in his relationships with his wives -- he is twice married in the book -- his three sons and his daughter -- actually his first wife's daughter but not Bjartur's -- whom Bjartur names Asta Sollilja the "beloved sun -lily" whom he refers to as his soul's "one flower." Much of this long, multi-faceted book involves Bjartur's relationship with Asta Sollilja -- their estrangement and ultimate reconciliation. Bjartur and Asta Sollilja and their relationship frames but hardly exhausts this book. There is a picture of Iceland -- or of modernizing society in general with its conflict between farmer and town. There are long discussions of poetry and literature, of war, of politics, and particularly of philosophy and religion, see below.

Every year, I try to read at least one classic work of fiction, whether I need to or not. So far in 1998,

my choice has been Halldor Laxness' 1946 Nobel Prize winning novel Independent People. This is a book which I had never heard of until it was re-issued in English (the original is in Icelandic) in 1997. Laxness, who subtitles his work "An Epic," tells the tale of sheep-farmer Bjartur of Summerhouses, and his life-long, monomaniacal struggle for financial independence. In the process, he loses two wives, a son leaves him, and his dearest child -- Asta Sollilja ("Beloved Sun-Lily") -- is disowned. Only by losing all of his wealth does he find what he truly values. While styled "an epic," this is also a whimsical and lyrical work. Bjatur, in addition to farming, is a bit of a poet, and the most remarkable extended scene is Bjatur's desperate struggle with bitter cold in the wilderness while trying to find a strayed sheep. In the middle of the night, to keep his senses and way, he returns to his muse: 'Seldom had he recited so much poetry in any one night; he had recited all his father's poetry, all the ballads he could remember, all his own palindromes backwards and forwards in forty-eight different ways, whole processions of dirty poems, one hymn he learned from his mother, and all the lampoons that had been known in the Fourthing from time immemorial about baliffs, merchants, and sheriffs.' Ultimately, the poetry keeps him alive as he finally crawls his way on all fours to safety. I found myself reading this book in short doses so that I could savor the language, and so it would not end too soon.

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