

Þórunn Jarla Valdimarsdóttir, *Skúli fógæti, faðir Reykjavíkur: Saga frá átjándu öld* [Skúli fógæti = the Crown's chief financial administrator; Reykjavík's father. A story from the eighteenth century] (Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2018). 256 pp.

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The monograph *Skúli fógæti* by the award-winning historian and writer Þórunn Jarla Valdimarsdóttir is about Skúli Magnússon, the first Icelander to hold the position of treasurer (Ice. *Landfógæti*) of Iceland during the eighteenth century. The position involved more than the handling of money for the Danish king in his realm in Iceland; it also included other duties such as collecting taxes in the county of Gullbringa, as well as serving as the chief of police in Reykjavík.

The book is divided into eight chapters, and each follows a particular part of Skúli's life, so that the reader gets to witness the unfolding of major events from the moment Skúli was born until he drew his last breath. As is the tendency with such biographical writing, Þórunn Jarla recapitulates the first two decades of Skúli's life. The more important events in his youth and formative years are highlighted, especially those that can be seen as prognostic for his becoming treasurer of Iceland later in life. The narrative of his first years in Iceland is quite fast paced, but as Skúli gets older and leaves Iceland behind to study in Copenhagen, the reader can feel how the narrative slows down and a more detailed depiction of his life emerges.

The main concern with the book is how it is presented as relating to its genre and the self-classification of the text as an academic work. *Skúli fógæti* can neither

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be classified as a work of history nor as fiction, nor can you wash these classifications from the book altogether. In the text one can find a tightrope walk between these two genres. The lack of commitment to one category gives Þórunn Jarla a certain freedom to play with genres and to try to stretch them, to transform them or even to agitate. This play on genre is most evident in the author's use of lavish adjectives when describing the narrative surroundings of Iceland, as well as when mediating the thoughts and feelings of the characters in the book.

Although not willing to commit to one genre on the monograph's dust jacket, one can find a commitment to a classification of the book as an *academic work* (Ice. *fræðileg verk*), along with a list of previous publications by Þórunn Jarla Valdímarsdóttir, all classified into one of three categories: *academic works*, *novels* and *biographies of contemporaries*. The classification of the book as an *academic work* is what is most troublesome, because it entails a certain set of rules that are not followed in the book. How Þórunn Jarla handles references and other source material regarding Skúli Magnússon is by no means in accordance with what you could call academic standards. Þórunn Jarla publishes her bibliography separately on a website, so anyone who wants to look at her sources has to look it up online. And when one goes to the reference website, one cannot find any indication of how or where Þórunn Jarla uses her sources in the text of *Skúli fögeti*. But on the other hand one knows that the material used in the book is of historical nature, and one knows she makes use of a fair number of sources in the text. What one does not know is how she uses those sources. All this, including the genre turmoil, makes for a reading that is at least an interesting one.

The monograph is filled with examples of Þórunn Jarla's excessive use of what one might call unhistorical descriptions, and you need not look further than the first page of the book to find an adequate example: «The story first makes contact in the middle of the eighteenth century, in the summer of 1761. An eagle flies over Faxaflói. And with a whirr flies across the courtyard at Leirá. A dog barks, waking up a cat on the roof opposite the church, the cat's eyes meet the gaze of the eagle» (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> Here one can clearly see the conflict between using historical and fictional methods when handling the source material. In this quotation from the monograph one can hardly decide whether to call the voice addressing the reader an author or a narrator, for that would ultimately entail a certain judgement in the book's classification into a genre. Regardless, the reader is invited to step into

<sup>1</sup> My own translation. Original text from Þórunn Jarla Valdímarsdóttir, *Skúli fögeti* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2018), p. 9 (Sagan tyllir fyrst niður tá um miðja átjándu öld, sumarið 1761. Örn flýgur yfir Faxaflóa. Fer með þyt yfir hlaðið á Leirá. Hundur geltir svo að köttur vaknar á þaki gegnt kirkjunni og mætir augum stórfygli)

the eighteenth century by a voice that is calm and confident and bears the mark of someone who is telling the truth. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the content of the quotation above is not something that can be associated with historical truth, let alone academic research.

By combining the elements of fictional and historical writing, Þórunn Jarla attempts to place the reader into historical events of the eighteenth century by using the methods of fictional writing. This attempt is partly successful – at least Þórunn manages to draw a convincing picture of what life was like in eighteenth-century Iceland, but this experiment is not without its flaws. The fictional methods that are used to enhance or exaggerate the narrative make it more alive in certain places and more interesting in others, but one thing is lost from the text by applying these methods. The reader's relationship with the narrative becomes somewhat disrupted. One knows that the majority of what is presented in the text is undeniably true, but when confronted with historical facts presented with these fictional methods over and over again, the veracity of every little thing is called into question. The rhetorical device that Þórunn Jarla uses in *Skúli fógæti* is very similar to the one she used in another eighteenth-century biography titled *Snorri á Húsafelli* (1989), which was not received particularly well at the time. The trouble is not in itself the play on genre that appears in the text, but has more to do with the classification of the book as an academic work. If, for example, the book were classified as historical fiction, the critique in this review would be quite different. For the historical fiction does not bear the same burden, regarding references, as the academic work.

All in all, the book is fairly well written, even though the language has a tendency to be cumbersome at times. Around the middle of the book, when describing some sexual misdeeds of Skúli, the narrative becomes very fluent and easy to absorb. In this chapter the reader gets to know a more human side of Skúli, which is quite refreshing, especially because the aim and the point of view of the narrative is to show how Skúli was always meant to be both the treasurer of Iceland and a leading figure in the early urbanization of Reykjavík. This point is driven home at every given chance in the narrative by handpicking events from Skúli's life and making them in some way prognostic. And finally, it is worth mentioning the final chapter for it is quite different from the rest of the book. In this chapter, the narrator steps forth and takes up a lot more space in the text. This is a dramatic shift in narrative styles and interestingly enough, takes the text more in the direction of an academic work. This change comes quite suddenly, and I would argue it does more justice to the sources Þórunn Jarla uses for *Skúli fógæti*, but unfortunately it comes too late.