

## Book Review

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Last Rituals, Yrsa Sigurdardottir, translated by Bernard Scudder, William Morrow/Harper Collins 2007, ISBN 978-0-06-114336-6

Gail Bowen, Saskatchewan's Queen of mystery writing, says that North American readers have rediscovered mysteries because they crave stories with plot, characterization and a beginning, middle and end, and mysteries generally deliver.

Bowen would approve of Last Rituals, the first in a promised series of mystery novels featuring Icelandic attorney Thora Gudmundsdottir.

Last Rituals opens with a mutilated body. The victim is Harald Guntlieb, a German post grad student in Reykjavik whose research centres around the Icelandic witch hunts of the Dark Ages during which, unlike in Europe, men were tried. A suspect is quickly found but Harald's very wealthy family is convinced the wrong man has been arrested and hires Thora to privately investigate the murder. However, Frau Guntlieb stipulates that Thora must work in company with the Guntlieb's German employee, a former policeman whose stiff and sometimes imperious manner Thora finds intimidating. In reality, she takes the job only because she needs the money.

Together, Thora and Matthew Reich find themselves privy to an alien world of drugs, symbolism, secret societies, and strange and dangerous modern practices, all connected to violent medieval history. They encounter Harald's friends, a small, secretive group of young Icelanders who are obsessed with historical events involving torture and execution.

The theme is gruesome, but the writing is not. Yrsa Sigurdardottir does not attempt to ensnare her readers through horror scenes or through gratuitous violence masquerading as action. She depends on skilfully crafted plotting and engaging, real-life characters – even the most unsavoury suspects have a distinctly human element. She also offers objective, scholarly insights into Iceland's past, and, always, subtle injections of humour.

Last Rituals is a mystery on three levels – the murder of Harald and the mutilation of his corpse, the location of a vanished manuscript from the time of Iceland's unsavoury history of witch hunts, and the Guntlieb's own tragic family secret.

Thora, meanwhile, is a very real person living an average, modern life - a brilliant attorney in a tiny law firm dominated by the most incompetent secretary in the known universe, and a divorced mother of a young daughter and a teen-aged son, a single parent who is eternally short of the time and money her little family needs. The fourth level of Last Rituals involves Thora's own unfolding story, her challenges as a single parent and her struggles to maintain some semblance of balance between a high-pressure job and the needs of her children.

Author Yrsa Sigurardottir also lives life on as many levels. A civil engineer, married with two children, Yrsa has written five children's and pre-teen novels, two of which have won Icelandic prizes for literature. She is the technical manager of the 690 MW Kárahnjúkar project, one of the largest hydro construction projects in Europe. Her debut into crime novels has been sold in thirty-one languages. The second of the Thora series, *My Soul to Take*, is also out in foreign editions.