Oscypek is my favorite cheese. Crafted from salted sheep’s milk by the farmers who reside in the Tatra Mountains of Poland, this cheese has been part of the region’s culture since the 15th century. The cheese is hard, cuts like a firm butter, and has an exquisite design stamped into the smoky rind. Sprinkled along Kraków’s Rynek Glowny Central Square are the vendors. Their carts are decorated with stacks of this delicious delight. When I visited Poland 18 years ago, I believe I consumed my weight in oscypek. It was difficult to pass up any cart without a purchase. When Avondale Wine and Cheese opened in the Avondale Point area of West Ashley, Charleston, SC, the owner had an oscypek-like cheese made in New Jersey by a Polish descendant. I was transported back to the summer of consumption, but not completely, for the cheese made in Poland draws its unique flavor from the use of unpasteurized milk. Not an ingredient that is recommended in modern cheese making. Although the debate is renewing among current cheese artisans.

The connection of oscypek with a Nobel Laureate in Literature might not be immediately obvious, but is not as far afield as one might think. When I began sharing my goal of reading works by each Literature Nobelist, I received a copy of Independent People as a birthday present from a dear friend. An elegantly poetic, 482-page story about sheep and the life of Bjartur of Summerhouses who tend them. Most people equate sheep with the counting process of sleep, but this rich novel about owning and tending sheep in the harsh bitter Icelandic climate kept this reader in a constant state of page-turning. No sleep while Laxness’ words envelope you in the minutia of housing sheep, tending sheep, searching for lost sheep. Till this day I find the words difficult to explain how the grit and grime of this world, as usual, is much more complex, difficult to explain how the grit and grime of this world, as usual, is much more complex, including in its definition of eBooks every module or whatever Pearson wants to call its wares. Academic publishers, out of habit, expect huge margins in an economic environment of scarcity. Read few readers, higher per-unit costs, and so forth.

The big news on the academic eBook front where the e-thing started is that ProQuest bought ebrary. Presumably, they bought it to counter EBSCO’s purchase of OCLC’s NetLibrary. A better explanation: library vendor buses come in threes — the first picks up the early adopters, the second, the rest of us, the third, to make sure no one can figure out the real price.

“Damn me if I’ll have names that are bound up with spectres of the past farm.” The name Summerhouses is born, and his future as an independent man on this small knoll begins. “‘Size isn’t everything by any means,’ he said aloud to the dog, as if suspecting her of entertaining high ideas. ‘Take my word for it, freedom is of more account than the height of a roof beam. I ought to know; mine cost me eighteen years’ slavery. The man who lives on his own land is an independent man.” But the spectres are not exercised by the renaming of the land and come to haunt every aspect of his freedom.

Although independence is an obsession with Bjartur, it is not shared by his first wife, Rosa, who was also a servant in the Bailiff’s family. Pregnant with the Bailiff’s son’s child, her parents wed her to Bjartur to hide the growing secret from both Bjartur and the community. Rosa abhors the roughness and longs for the life in the “luxury” of the Bailiff’s home that she traded for this marriage. Autumn brings the annual sheep roundup. Bjartur joins the men of the district for the ride into the mountains, leaving Rosa at Summerhouse with a gimmer, a young female sheep, as a companion. Rosa, heavy with child, hungry for meat, alone, and frightened by the elements, becomes convinced that the gimmer is possessed. Thus, she kills and eats the young sheep. Upon his return, Bjartur cannot find the sheep and is convinced that Rosa has set it free. He once again goes in search of his valued possession. Winter has now set in, and a blizzard delays his return. Rosa has gone into labor and dies in childbirth. The baby girl has clung to life warmed by the faithful dog, Tita. Bjartur now knows that this is not his child, but decides to raise the girl and name her Asta Sollija (it means “asthma”).

At an early age Asta tests Bjartur’s conviction by losing her virtue. Angry, Bjartur expels her from the home and Asta, with her own stubborn sense of independence, refuses to seek her father’s grace and compassion. This relationship provides the conflict for the novel as the tending of sheep provides the stillness. The simile of lost sheep is not lost on this reader.

I discovered while researching this book that it was a bestseller in the U.S. in 1946. And yet it was out-of-print in English for over 50 years. The speculation is that Laxness’ Communist views ran afoul of the McCarthy era — not unlike another Nobel Literature Laureate, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even Leithauser connects the two authors, likening Laxness’ Communist views run afoul of the McCarthy era — not unlike another Nobel Literature Laureate, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even Leithauser connects the two authors, likening Laxness’ Independent People to Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. I delight in this connection as Gabriel Garcia Marquez is one of the “authors of my life,” and I share a passion for his work in a way that is not too dissimilar from Leithauser’s for Laxness.