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Booklover -- Sheep

Donna Jacobs
MUSC, jacobsdf@musc.edu

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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 smokey rind. Sprinkled along **Krakow'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 descendent. 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 Nobel-ist**, 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 tends 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's** 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 a shepherd's life, the life of his family, and the conflict between **Bjartur** and his daughter **Asta Sollilja** make for fantastic reading. The

fact that this piece of work helped secure his **Nobel Prize** may be all that one needs to say.

The Introduction to the novel is written by **Brad Leithauer**, an American poet and novelist who is currently on the faculty of **Johns Hopkins University** in The Writing Seminars. I took a minute to reread his words since it has been several years since I have cracked this spine. His passion for this novel covers the reader like a blanket buffering from a harsh wind. "There are good books and there are great books, and there may be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life. If you're quite lucky, you may chance upon a novel which inspires so close a kinship that questions of evaluation become a niggling irrelevance.....And the book of my own life? **Halldór Laxness's Independent People.**" Wow.

Leithauer has immersed himself in every nuance of the novel and entices the reader like an amuse before a feast. His passion for this story inspired him not only to spend time traveling to Iceland but also to seek out **Laxness** himself.

Laxness's story begins with an Icelandic tale of sorcery, a history of religious worship and occult lore that haunts the land known as Winterhouses. The elaborate description of every tiny detail of the land — the ruins of an old croft-house, the marshes, the river, the view of the mountain crags — sets the stage for our introduction to **Bjartur** and the beautiful yet harsh reality of independence.

Bjartur is the protagonist of this story. He has struggled for years in servitude to the Bailiff at Rauthsmyri but now has the financial resources to make a down payment on his own land and is thus able to raise his sheep as a free man. Tasting the grass as if one of his own sheep, marking his territory from the highest knoll, dispelling the relics of the mythical lore that haunts the property, **Bjartur** declares,

"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 exorcised 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, **Titla**. **Bjartur** now knows that this is not his child, but decides to raise the girl and names her **Asta Sollilja** ("beloved sun lily"). 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's** Communist views ran afoul of the **McCarthy** era — not unlike another **Nobel Literature Laureate**, **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**. Even **Leithauer** connects the two authors, likening **Laxness's 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 **Leithauer's** for **Laxness**.



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