



Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland

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Novelist Sarah Moss had a childhood dream of moving to Iceland, sustained by a wild summer there when she was nineteen. In 2009, she saw an advertisement for a job at the University of Iceland and applied on a whim, despite having two young children and a comfortable life in an English cathedral city. The resulting adventure was shaped by Iceland's economic collapse, which halved the value of her salary, by the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull and by a collection of new friends, including a poet who saw the only bombs fall on Iceland in 1943, a woman who speaks to elves and a chef who guided Sarah's family around the intricacies of Icelandic cuisine.

Sarah was drawn to the strangeness of Icelandic landscape, and explored hillsides of boiling mud, volcanic craters and fissures, and the unsurfaced roads that link remote farms and fishing villages in the far north. She walked the coast path every night after her children were in bed, watching the northern lights and the comings and goings of migratory birds. As the weeks and months went by, the children settled in local schools and Sarah got to know her students and colleagues, she and her family learned new ways to live.

Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland Details

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From Reader Review Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland for online ebook

Joel says

I found this in the "travel" section, but it's not a typical travel narrative. In your usual travelogue, the author spends a few weeks or a couple months traveling widely through their chosen country, reporting the odd encounters they have along the way and educating the reader about the more significant aspects of the country's land, culture, and history. Sarah Moss, on the other hand, reports on a whole year she spent in Iceland with her family; and although she does make a few day trips, she doesn't actually travel around the country, spending most of her time in the Reykjavik area.

This allows her to make a concentrated effort to understand the Icelandic culture and people. She also uncovers details that would remain hidden to a casual traveler. She discovers, for instance, that Iceland has no resale market; the people don't seem to understand why anyone would want to buy objects that have already been used by others. She discovers that the lion's share of Icelandic preschool/nurseries are dominated by a rather creepy radical-feminist ideology whose goal seems to be to train boys not to be aggressive; after a couple weeks in such a nursery, she chooses to pull her young son out of it. And her determined perusal of Icelandic literature and cinema leaves her perplexed by the many narratives in which normal people, leading normal lives, suddenly kill each other for no apparent reason. She comments that she has finally encountered a genre which she doesn't understand.

Although she struggles to come up with an explanation for the oddities of the island's people, she never really comes up with anything that satisfies. That is not a criticism; in fact, it feels right. An outsider shouldn't be able to understand a country after only a year. A better criticism would be Moss's failure to interact more with the native Icelanders. Self-conscious about her shaky command of the language, she confesses that she usually chose not to talk with people she encounters; aside from her family, and a few interesting people she's given introductions to, most of the people she interacts with in the book are a handful of fellow foreigners. Icelanders may be a taciturn and standoffish lot, but even so, one imagines that overcoming her timidity would have led Moss to some stronger insights about the country.

Still, it's an interesting, informative book. If you're looking for a more conventional travelogue about Iceland, though, you'll likely be frustrated by the many sections about Moss's family and her daily routine; you'll likely find yourself skipping over some sections to get to the more interesting parts about Iceland.

Diane S ? says

Up until this book, I had only read novels, thrillers set in Iceland. Arm chair traveling is the best, especially for those who can't travel as they would like. There are many books that take the reader along on a vacation, a hike, or a canoe trip through various places, and we get a sense of the landscape, some of the residents along the way, maybe a little history, but not in any depth. To do that one has to actually live in the place, which is what was so great about this book.

After traveling through Iceland when she was nineteen, the author had always meant to come back. It takes many years, she marries has two young sons, when an opportunity to teach at the University at Iceland opens. So despite some reservations they decide to take the chance. Unfortunately, the timing is off and their residency coincides with the collapse of Iceland's economic structure, called the krepá.

So the reader gets a good look and understanding at exactly how different Iceland is, the difficulty they had adjusting. From the lava fields, to the ocean, the waves, the ice, the cold, bone numbing, but the pictures which I looked up on WIKi, look beautiful. We get to understand their mind set, what they do for fun, in their spare time, their families and how things are aquired when needed. The food, slim pickings on fruit and vegetables, though that is slowly changing, and what they eat instead.

I enjoyed this quite a bit, Moss is a good writer, she writes with clarity and relates her thoughts in a way that is easy to understand. Not simplistic, just explained well, so that the reader comes away understanding what it might be like to live, as a newcomer, in this country. Her sons, of course, adjusted a little easier than their parents, but children often do.

Helen says

Really enjoyed this and was sorry to get to the end. I am one of those people who has harboured a secret(ish) obsession with Iceland and Norway from early teens, and originally planned to do something serious about it but got led down other paths and have never actually fulfilled those dreams. I still hanker after it or something like it - nearest so far being sailing in a former trawler round the Hebrides, and listening to my grandparents' rather wistful stories about Shetland, where they spent three years when newly married. Anyway, this book tells you what it is actually like for someone from the UK to live there (albeit temporarily - the author was considering a more permanent move with her family but in the event only stayed for a year, partly due to the financial crisis). I still love the idea, even if it is now very unlikely to happen in my case, but this book is a bit of an eye-opener about aspects of Icelandic life which Britons might find difficult. Top of the list for me would be the big cars, scary driving habits (if the author is to be believed - and the statistics support her, with the road death rate per capita twice as high as that in Britain despite the small population and less crowded roads), and lack of public transport especially outside Reykjavik. (What happens if you really can't drive? Total isolation?) Other aspects which might take some getting used to would be the more expected ones (the dark nights in the winter, the weather, the lack of fruit and choice of food, the expense). It's surprising to read about the apparent lack of a secondhand market and even a sense of shame and horror at the idea of such a thing, when many people in the UK, me included, have homes full of secondhand furniture and clothes (what happens to things otherwise? Is there a really huge landfill site in Iceland?) She does not say a great deal about the language, which I imagine I would have tried to learn if it had been me (but then, how easy is that when everybody's English is always going to be better than your Icelandic could ever be?) The book is beautifully written, and despite the fact that she didn't stay in the end you can tell that she writes with a real love for the country and respect for its traditions, even if on occasion bemused. This book has also made me want to reread Auden (tingle-down-the-spine factor in the poem she quotes from "Letters from Iceland"). She seems less keen on William Morris, but I think he might bear reinvestigation - especially as he may have influenced Rudyard Kipling, whose "Puck of Pook's Hill" stories sound so like the Icelandic elves. Lots of food for thought here, and she may have helped rekindle my teenage dreams. (Oh dear! Too late!) Some pictures would have been nice.

Laura Leaney says

It's so much better to learn about a country - in this case, Iceland - from a story or a memoir rather than a guidebook.

In the book. author Sarah Moss (from Kent, England) takes a teaching position at the University of Iceland, family in tow, and records her thoughts, observations, and reactions to the country and its people in beautiful

prose. She is hyper-aware of her strangeness in this strange country and her comments reflect her awareness that she is "generalising" when she writes about the Icelanders. And what she writes about them is often times only a way to write about herself, about her interesting reactions to being a foreigner. I loved the part where she writes about how awkward it felt to say the niceties that we English speakers are so used to. She writes: "*Takk fyrir mig* means literally 'thank you for me', which is what Pétur's ten-year-old granddaughter says in English with startling grace when she has been round for tea. I, too, know these phrases but feel horribly awkward about using them. The artificiality of another culture's set phrases is painful where my own, similarly rehearsed, praise for the cook and requests to be 'excused' for reaching across the table, are entirely natural. It's just so false, says one of my students, all this thanking people and apologising all the time when there's nothing to be grateful or sorry about. It's like Americans telling you to have a nice day when they've never even met you and they really don't give a damn about your day."

The small stuff matters here, precisely because it's the nuance of manners and rituals that separates a visitor from a native. Sarah Moss reveals quite a lot about herself (she is sensitive, poetic, and sometimes oddly fearful, at least to me) as she examines Iceland from her foreigner's perspective. She's at her best in her description of the land's beauty: "We come down past the school, where there are footprints of the children who come to play on the snowy basketball pitch and frozen swings. The sea is silent. There are no birds. Most of the sun is below the lava field now, and the eastern sky is darkening. Careful across the icy playground, we come down to the shore, and there's no movement in the sky or along the beach because the sea is frozen. Instead of waves, there are grey slabs, piled up against each other like fallen gravestones, from the black rocks of the beach to the dimming horizon. I hadn't thought this would happen, hadn't understood that the movement of water and light, the rise and fall of waves, the shifts between lapping and pounding, the coming and going of the tide, could simply stop."

It was a pleasure to read Moss's book. She has precise, attuned perception to her surroundings. I'd love to visit Iceland, but I know I'd never understand the country the way the author came to understand it. My own vision of Iceland is an amalgamation of Björk, geysers, fjords, and unearthly greens. The landscape is haunting, and I would give anything to experience it firsthand.

But_i_thought_says

I've always felt lured by Iceland, so this memoir by Sarah Moss was a vicarious delight! In it, Moss details her move to Iceland with her husband and two young sons, describing various aspects of Icelandic life – the food (salted fish, potatoes, skyr, blood pudding and liver sausage), the education (with its emphasis on outdoor play and creativity), the importance of family networks ("you can't do anything here without a clan"), the idiosyncrasies of the language (there is no word for "please" in Icelandic and "thank you" is rarely used too), and the significance of the unseen world to the national psyche (when deciding where to build roads, for example, the Department of Transport consults mediums who speak to the elves and hidden people, asking for permission).

Moss does not shy away from detailing the hardships of life in Iceland too – particularly, the difficulty of integrating in a country where people do not speak to strangers, the challenges of finding fresh fruit and vegetables, and the daunting task of entertaining two small children indoors on dark winter weekends.

What makes this memoir so special is the author's highly analytical mind, her insights into cultural minutiae and her beautiful, poetic prose. Unlike many books of the travel memoir genre which tend to be light and humorous in style (e.g. the *Year of Living Danishly*, *The Geography of Bliss*) this is a memoir of a more somber persuasion, exploring chosen topics in detail, investigating both sides of a debate or issue, and sidestepping easy conclusions.

While the pace of the story was at times bogged down by the level of detail included, this was overall an absorbing and fascinating account of migration and cultural adaptation.

Mood: Thoughtful, analytical

Rating: 7/10

Also on Instagram:

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Elisabet Hafsteinsdottir says

As an Icelander, currently living in Norway, this book is both satisfying my homesickness and providing me with camaraderie as a foreigner in another land.

I must correct however, Moss' egregious mistake that there is no second-hand market in Iceland. There is indeed, it is just mostly on the internet! I have both bought and sold things like refrigerators, cars and computer equipment via that website. But there even is a charity shop that sells used furniture and items called Góði hirðirinn or the Good Sheperd, where Icelanders put their unwanted items into a special container at the garbage collection place and those things go straight to the charity shop.

Also, regarding fatal car accidents, which Moss seems to imply are more frequent in Iceland than other places, most of those happen outside of the city and are due to road conditions, although I agree with her that people drive cars that are much too big.

It does irritate me at times how afraid she seems to be of everything which makes things seem worse than they are and she played it a bit fast a loose with spelling of Icelandic names (like Hallðór Laxness (correct is Halldór Laxness)! Common, she should know how the Nobel winner's name is spelled and I can't imagine where she got that mistake from.

I otherwise enjoyed the book as it was interesting to see my country with a stranger's eyes. I would give it three and a half stars if I could, due to the above points.

Jeffrey says

This was a first for me: I started this book without even reading the back cover. I fell in love with the title/cover and didn't even bother reading the introductory pages.

So, I found myself half-way through the book when I realized that it WASN'T FICTION. The author has such a gorgeous sense of movement -- of grace and vitality in every word -- that I didn't even know that I was reading nonfiction.

"Is she gonna cheat on her husband?" "Will Tobias, her son, die tragically in a preschool accident?" I kept wondering when the meat of the story was going to happen. But I enjoyed each and every line and every single page along the way, just patiently waiting. And then I peek at the back only to discover that it's mostly a travelogue of a British professor of literature/poetry who is teaching abroad.

Excellently written and with a bit gentle, compassionate journalistic investigation about Icelandic culture,

tourism, crafting and even the economic collapse of the so-called "Viking Raider" banking industry.

I read this book as a general introduction to Iceland prior to a week-long vacation there. Highly recommended.

Katherine says

Where's the passion?! This book is beautifully written, let there be no doubt about that. It's lyrical, measured, thoughtful - but at no stage did I ever get a visceral sense of what it is to up and leave everything you know and love for life in an alien country. I can see how she tried to convey the why - the romantic memories of a teenage roadtrip, a powerful, lifelong affinity with the Nordic isles - but the how, the what and the next never quite works. It's too studied, really.

As someone who also loves Iceland, and writing, and who has dreamed themselves of giving it all up one day to move out there - I was looking forward to a heartfelt, inspiring account of life for an ex-pat in Iceland. I got a beautiful, careful, restrained travelog. She took the mantra of "show, don't tell" too far here - I was aching to understand more about the feelings behind the events, but everything was so carefully showcased - it was nothing more than a series of dipinti, of sketches.

Jacqie says

I picked this up to prep for the trip I've got to Iceland this summer. It was barely okay, unfortunately.

The author is a literature professor who receives an offer to teach English Lit for one year in a university (school?) in Reykjavik. She spends about a chapter romanticizing the Far North (Scotland, etc), but it doesn't seem that she is actually very prepared to go there.

She seems to subscribe very much to the "show don't tell" school of thought, but when you're writing a memoir, you do have to have some sort of commentary on what's happening to you- after all, your perception of what's happening is the content of the memoir. The author tells us that she has a husband and two sons, one a toddler, but I couldn't tell you anything about their personalities. She seems to want to present situations objectively but then let you in on the judgement she makes about those situations. For example, they decide to put the toddler into preschool because the husband finds that he can't work from home with a toddler there. The first school they try subscribes to a very gender-evening school of thought. They separate the sexes to keep things simple and (I think) keep the unconscious bias toward male children from seeping into child care. No toys or books because they want the children to develop imaginations. This is an intriguing idea, to say the least. Neither the author or her husband had any idea about this type of preschool, prevalent in Iceland (apparently). The author gets pretty upset about this, but after the fact, after not doing any research about child care, and after attempting to be dispassionate.

The author seems to have a decidedly mixed attitude toward Iceland. The Romantic Far North doesn't gibe with her negative treatment of what she encounters there. First, the family decides to do without a car. Coming from the Midwest, thinking about pushing a pram over a mile in the snow and wind every time you want to get groceries sounds idiotic to me. Our heroine really seems like a city girl who never considered life without a lot of public transportation. They don't figure out where walking trails are until some time after they move, so end up pushing their stroller along a major road to get anywhere.

The lack of research theme continues. They decide to take an overnight trip to a small island. They make a reservation at a hotel, but when they arrive, "no one is there", (what does that even mean?) so they end up making a stay at a hostel. Do they get their money back? Ever find out what happened? Not as far as I know. They also end up at this island's ferry terminal with no transport to the little town that is their destination, more than a mile away. Are there buses? No. Taxis? No. Even though a full ferry just landed, there is apparently no way to get to this town without a private car. This was when I began to suspect that the author was being a bit creative with her recounting.

Mostly, the author seemed gloomy and disappointed with her experience, intimidated by the new environment and ill prepared to deal with it. I can sympathize with the culture shock of being in a new country to live, but I feel like a bit of time spent with Google would have made her life a lot easier. As it was, I had a hard time with the book.

Andrea says

One of the items on my personal bucket list is to visit Iceland on a solo pilgrimage. Generally I like to travel alone: waking up at dawn hours, enjoying a quiet morning with my journal in a tiny coffee shop, spontaneously jumping aboard a bus to go to a nearby town, sketching while people watching, or reflecting on the experience in peaceful solitude. That is what I do and enjoy. Iceland appeals to me with its untamed wilderness and rugged landscape, its old time lore and a touch of magic in every day life. Visiting Iceland is like standing on the edge of the world. I like Icelandic way of life – unapologetic and sincere, – and would like to live that, even if only for a fleeting few weeks. I want to be forced to ask locals for directions when lost, talk to a grocer while figuring out what on earth *skyr* is, or striking a conversation with a stranger on the bus next to me who, just like me, crossed the ocean to see what Iceland is all about.

For these reasons I've been slowly accumulating information on travel to and within Iceland for quite some time. Sara Moss's memoir was a lucky accidental find, while browsing Youtube, which led to an impromptu visit to the library. I was hoping to get a book that transcends the boundaries of your typical guide book, or something that shares experiences, not tourist attractions. The chronicles of one woman's decision to move her family to Reykjavik for indefinite number of years and the subsequent integration into Icelandic society sounded like an obvious choice. After a lifelong fascination with the country, and a wild backpacking adventure alongside her friend at the age of nineteen, Sara applied for a teaching position at University of Iceland, packed her husband and two young kids, and set off on a journey of a lifetime.

To start things off, we must look closely at the main protagonist of this story – Iceland herself. Until the early nineties Iceland enjoyed a rather independent existence, with old traditions and conventional way of life dictating the economy. Then the country joined European Economic Area, which gave them an opportunity to globalize their financial sector among other things. With the privatization of banks soon after, finance became the fastest growing and developing sector in Iceland. Consumerism swept the public. Everyone had to have the latest gadgets and the biggest houses. Large SUVs, big screen TVs, expensive kitchen remodels – everything was disposable and often funded by large debt and refinancing. On paper statistics looked optimistic and bright, when in reality lack of regulations and increasing risk-taking promised trouble. Finally, in October 2008, when the rest of the world was shaken by the economic crisis, Icelandic banking system collapsed. The tiny nation was to take one of the hardest blows. They called it *Kreppa*.

At times I felt that I wasn't reading a travelogue at all, but rather a journalistic exploration of Iceland after the crisis. Moss herself mentioned a few times that she was looking for evidence of *Kreppa*, and often approached people with questions on economy, politics, and those dealing with staggering debt. Her biggest surprise was the seeming lack of crisis when she first arrived to the country: people still drove large, fuel-

gulping vehicles, rejected second-hand shopping, and lived in fancy apartments. It seemed that people were struggling, but were really good at hiding it. At one point, Moss and her Icelandic friend approached a lady at a thrift store, but were met with cold rebuff, simply because the woman was too embarrassed to be seen buying someone else's used stuff. English Moss could not comprehend why on earth purchasing baby clothes that are outgrown before they ever get worn out is such a bad thing. Resorting to food banks and thrift shops turns out to be the rock bottom in Icelandic culture.

Those are some proud people. What I took away from this incident and few other stories surrounding it, is that Icelanders are very proud citizens of their country. They cannot believe, and are unwilling to do so, that something might be amiss in Iceland. Their country is good – better yet, – the best in the world. There is no room for mistakes! There is an Icelandic way (great) and an outside world's way (inferior). It's a tiny nation, with tightly knit relations between its people, so maybe that's why it is so hard for a foreigner to integrate?

Perhaps I am being too harsh with Moss, but I didn't feel like she tried to integrate too much. Especially for someone who was considering to stay there forever. After a year living in Reykjavik, she could only really say a few words in Icelandic and had no confidence to initiate conversation with random people like a cashier at a store. Most of the people she surrounded herself with were either foreigners themselves, or Icelanders who had lived abroad and were well-versed in communicating with outsiders. Most of her friends she knew from the University. I did not feel an effort to jump into the deep waters. Instead, she sort of stayed in the kiddie pool with a float.

On the other hand I totally get it. Several years ago, I had to go abroad to live and work for three months. At a certain point you really start missing the things you are used to. At a certain point all you want to do is eat a burger and speak English with someone who actually knows it. Screw language practice! And who cares about cultural experience anyway?! All you want is to lock yourself in your empty apartment and watch favorite shows on your laptop. When everything is foreign and unknown, it gets exhausting working hard on simple social interactions every single moment of your existence. Integration is work.

To sum it up, I think Names for the Sea has some really good insight into Iceland. It touches on history, economy, Icelandic belief in fairies, traditional knitting, and the famous eruption of Eyjafjallajökull volcano, among other interesting topics. Moss did an excellent job trying to cover a range of subjects and get first-hand accounts of important events from actual witnesses. I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone who only has a passing interest in Iceland, or someone who is looking for good places to visit in the capital. Like I mentioned before, this is not a guide book, but a reflective travelogue and a cultural study. If you have a deep love for Nordic culture, however, I would certainly give it a chance.

Jessica says

Feel kind of let down by this one. I was really looking forward to it, but I just couldn't gel with the way it was written. I knew this was going to be a personal account of Moss' experience of Iceland through living there as a foreigner, a memoir of sorts more than straight up non-fiction, but the narrative style just didn't give me enough facts and the details about Icelandic life that I really wanted. That being said, I think I missed a lot that I may have taken in usually, as honestly, sometimes I felt this was dull and my attention drifted a bit. The second half was definitely better than the first for me. The occasional nod to feminist ideas started to trickle in, then there was a lot of talk about knitting and elves and I was back in! I'll definitely keep this on my shelves and may try to pick it up again at some point. Knowing what to expect from the style I could potentially take more from this upon a second read. But yeah - I wanted more from this!

Alice Lippart says

Liked it a lot. The writing in particular was excellent.

Jo says

I'm not sure what the experience of reading Sarah Moss's book would be for someone who has never visited Iceland; this is probably not the book to read as a typical travelogue or guide to the country but rather more of a memoir of her year abroad. I imagine though it would still be thoroughly enjoyable as the prose is so engaging and easy to read, and she is both funny and insightful about the land and the people of Iceland.

For me, however, this was an especially wonderful book as I lived in Iceland on and off for two years between 1999 and 2003. I found myself nodding along and smiling at a lot of what she wrote, particularly about the Icelandic character. The sometimes stony facade that soon disappears once you are familiar and conceals warmth and generosity, the independence and love of their country as well as their desire to travel and live abroad.

What I especially enjoyed about the book was not only what was familiar, but what had occurred since I left, in particular the 'kreppa' or collapse of the Icelandic banks, when the whole world was experiencing recession and economic hardship. I was on the other side of the planet then and never really got a good picture of what was occurring in Iceland at the time, although I do remember being proud of my friends who were taking a stand politically, showing how such change can be achieved when the majority of the country is of one opinion.

There are things that most people will already know: Iceland is expensive, it's cold but not that cold, it's volcanic –a whole chapter on Eyjafjalljokull will remind you of that, but there is much that might be less well known. Many people might not know about the spiritual side to Iceland, particular the pagan or mystical element. I don't think we needed two chapters about Icelandic beliefs in elves and other spirits, but the chapters about individuals like Vilborg show how these beliefs can coexist with a highly educated and intelligent people. Indeed Moss's quest to understand, the Icelandic character and culture, revealing aspects of herself along the way, is compelling. It is clear she loves the country itself even though it is not until the very last chapter, when she is actually holidaying in Iceland that she goes much beyond Reykjavik. Before this she still manages to write eloquently about her nightly walks on the shore, the birdlife, the almost surreal and magical quality of the Icelandic volcanic landscape.

She does make sweeping generalizations on occasion but personal opinions are part of any travelogue and this has to be taken into account in their reading. It's nice, however, to read a 'travel' book where the author is not an intrepid, confident individual. It's often amusing how unadventurous and reticent she is about driving outside of the city and meeting new people –always with that British unease about "being too much trouble" . Because of this reticence and because when you live and work in a new country, you don't always get to take advantage of much of the tourist experience, this separate trip is the only writing that shows us much of the country beyond Reykjavik. Prior to this however, you do get to see areas and go into the homes of people you would never get to meet on a two week holiday, and it is in this more personal experience of this amazing country and its people that make this book shine.

Adele says

I thought I would love this book. As someone who has always felt a pull and a romantic interest in all things Icelandic, Scandinavian and 'North', this account of an English uni lecturer seemed right up my street. However, it's a wee bit of a disappointing read.

The author is so self-absorbed; chapters upon chapters of ruminating and wondering and then comparing (in a semi judgemental way, most of the time). Nothing really seems to happen. I understand that the author moves to Iceland just after the financial collapse, and her salary is cut by a third leaving her less comfortable than usual. But that shouldn't have stopped her freezing up and feeling ashamed of her status! It seems like a complete waste of a year in one of the most interesting countries in the world - it doesn't cost a krona to have meaningful conversations and build connections.

The author is too shy to speak to locals, too embarrassed to show that she isn't a born and bred Icelander. But she seems to revel in her foreign-ness, and make no real attempt to assimilate herself in the culture or with locals, and go out and actually *do* anything! This attitude doesn't make for an entertaining read.

The account picks up nearer the end after a lot of waffly chapters in the middle. I did enjoy the chapters on the food banks, knitting and the elves.

There are some decent descriptions in the book, but I can't help but feel unsatisfied.

Belinda says

I've been a bit fascinated by Iceland, which has become more pronounced since reading *Burial Rites* nearly a year ago now. I saw this book being mentioned around the blogosphere, and grabbed it when it was on sale on Kindle. I've never moved overseas, though it looked like I would for a while, and that was daunting enough. I can't imagine doing it with kids in tow, and to such an alien landscape such as Iceland.

I understand the anxiety that Sarah felt about the move, and the new beginning, as well as the unfamiliarity of it all, and I appreciate her sharing it with us- it made me feel a bit like I was having a conversation with a friend. I too become anxious in new places.

I feel a bit like her anxiety was to the book's detriment, which is unfortunate. As a reader, and as someone who hasn't been to Northern Europe, I wanted her to tell me how the whale meat tasted (there was quite a long lead up to her trying whale meat, which fell flat at the last second) and what it's like to eat burnt sheep head. I wanted her to really describe Reykjavik's main street and talk more about the wildlife. She wasn't exactly willing to go out of her culinary comfort zone though, which really disappointed me, especially when she specifically talks about these foods.

I suppose I'll eat anything though... I've never had much time for fussy eaters!

I also felt like her anxiety about situations and meeting people, while perfectly understandable, was almost a disabling quality. We'd get a build up to her doing something new, but it wouldn't happen. She'd relate a second hand story from a friend instead of trying it herself. So much of the "action" of the story was the family going about their daily lives (as families tend to do!) but not going much further than the sea wall. By the three quarter mark, I was bored silly. Her disbelief in the fairies and elves made me feel a bit bad for the women she spoke to, as they were helping her with her book and she borderline makes fun of them (particularly the first lady). I understand the feeling of thinking someone odd, but she just seemed totally

unwilling to suspend disbelief.

However, the final quarter kind of picked up. I enjoyed the section on Icelandic knitting, and their trip around the island, but it was too little, too late to save the book. I would have liked her to try knitting in the Icelandic fashion, to see whether it is easier than British knitting or not. She kind of lined that section up and never kicked off, so to speak.

I'm going to give this a 3.5 star mark, because I did finish it, so it can't be too bad, and because Sarah is actually aware of her anxiety and her inability to relax about life. She admits it readily throughout the book, and in some ways it made her more relatable to me, but in other ways it made me feel like she was blocking my understanding of Icelandic life. I grabbed this as the first book I read after my thesis, and it did kind of help me ease into reading. I wish she'd included a reading list in the back of the book, so I could read more Icelandic literature!

I also think that Sarah Moss' living in Reykjavik for a year helped a book a lot, as it felt more settled, and not like an extended Lonely Planet introduction. For someone with perhaps more patience and understanding of being a mother than I do, and perhaps with less of a specific idea of what they want to know, this book would be perfect. It's not awful by any stretch of the imagination, and Moss has done a good job on most aspects of the book.
