

An interview with myself

David Gutnick

David Ingvar Gutnick has been a CBC radio reporter and host for 25 years.

He lives in Montréal. David is son of the late Þórdís (Thordís) Ásgeirsson and Nelson Gutnick of Calgary.

'Follow me along the western coast of Iceland. Do you see Reykjavík, the capital? Yes. Good. Work your way up along the countless fjords of these shorelines eaten by the sea, and stop a little before the line of 65° N. What do you see?'

'A peninsula rather like a bare bone, with an enormous kneecap at the end.'
'Not an inappropriate comparison, my dear boy. Now, do you see anything on the kneecap?'

'Yes, a mountain that looks as if it's sprouted in the middle of the sea.'

'Good. That's Snæfells.'
'Snæfells?'

'The one and only. A five-thousand-foot-high mountain, one of the most remarkable on the island – and definitely the most famous in the whole world, if its crater leads to the centre of the globe.'
'But it's quite impossible!' I said, shrugging my shoulders in protest at such a conjecture.

'Impossible?' said Professor Lidenbrock severely. 'And why should that be?'

Journey to the Center of the Earth,
Jules Verne

Question: Why are you starting this interview with an excerpt from a science fiction novel published in 1864?

Because of that one word: Snæfells – the volcano Snæfellsjökull – and the surrounding region of the Snæfellsness Peninsula are a deep part of the mythological Iceland that I have been living with for as long as I can remember.

I remember a Catholic friend whose family had a drawing of a bearded God sitting in the clouds on their kitchen wall, a line-up of people standing at a golden gate as one by one the gate was opened



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and they were admitted to heaven.

We had Snæfellsjökull.

Our family has roots there we children were told, though details were scant; there were no albums of fading pictures of homesteads, no story-filled evenings where we would hear of our ancestor's heroic battles with the sea or tragic tales of poverty and hunger. Conversations on the farm were about the weather, and Tommy Douglas and the CCF, and about whose turn it was to dump the slop pail.

There were few explanations of why my mother's parents and grandparents had left paradise to homestead in North Dakota and Saskatchewan.

My handsome afi had come to Canada with his brothers, signed up to fight in the muddy French trenches – we had a sepia photo – and how he had left a Guðmundur dead in Vimy. We knew that for the rest of his life he carried a dark sense of guilt and shame.

My little amma, a Guðmundson, was born in the states and with her parents eventually settled near Elfros.

My sisters and I heard Icelandic but never figured out what the adults were saying. I knew the precious books near my afi and amma's sagging bed contained poems and sagas, myths and stories. But since I could not read them I had the impression that the Iceland was therefore inaccessible....

So instead I invented a country of my own.

Iceland had been home to Ásgeirssons and Guðmundsons in a foggy past,

a dream filled with geysers and sheep and ice and lava that was as close to perfect as perfect could be.

Mother-earth Iceland was white and pure, the *Alþingi* was the real birthplace of democracy, a no nonsense place where poetry spilled from the lips of farmers and fishers.

Beer was illegal.

Icelanders ate *vínarterta* and *rúllupylsa* and *pönnukökur*, the foods my amma and mom and two aunts cooked up at Christmas. Men tucked rock-hard lumps of sugar under their lower lips and slurped their boiling strong coffee off saucers.

No one winced.

When men drove tractors and combines they took pinches of Copenhagen snuff and spit when they thought you were not looking.

Women and children weeded the gardens and strung rusty honey pails around their necks when they picked raspberries and then boiled them into jam on the wood stove. I was born in raspberry season.

And then there was my father's Jewish culture – the other grandfather was zeida – which we absorbed in different ways.

Question: David why are you going on and on about all of this?

Sorry, I do not mean to be boring. But I am trying to set the stage on which I will be comfortable enough to be able to explain how I became a CBC radio reporter and talk about what that means.

So just get to it.

Always, always from the days on the farm through elementary school in the Northwest Territories and Fort Qu'appelle, Saskatchewan to high school in a Calgary to university years in Halifax and Québec City, I watched people and made-up stories about what I had seen.

1985.

I had a job working with Inuit teenagers in Québec City. They were flown down from the north and billeted with families so that they could learn French. I was their big brother, their guardian; I distributed their bus passes and made sure they showed up to class and dental

appointments. I rented a house where they would come on weekends to hang out together and eat the caribou and seal meat that their parents sent down.

One Friday evening Talasia Tulugak was kneeling over a seal carcass, slicing off chunks of blubber and meat and handing it to the hungry students who crowded around her. Talasia handed a piece to Tommy Putugu who stuck it in his mouth, along with an Oreo cookie. And I had an epiphany: Some of these teenagers had been born in igloos, now here they were in the south, spending their weekends watching rock videos on television and stuffing themselves with junk and the country food that they so loved. The entire history of Inuit culture was in Tommy's mouth, a chewed up bloody chocolate mess that he found entirely delicious.

I went to the CBC and told them that this was worth a story. Someone gave me a tape recorder and I did it.

Summer came and the students went home. They are now leaders in the fourteen villages of Nunavik, the Inuit territory in Northern Québec.

I have been reporter for CBC radio for twenty-five years.

Question: But I rarely hear you on the news. Are you lazy?

I am not really a news reporter. I do go and cover news events occasionally, but I am not good at being tight and focused and smart in a minute ten seconds. Many of my colleagues are extremely good at simplifying very complex stories and working under deadlines. Not me.

I have been lucky to have had bosses who have allowed me to find ways of telling stories that take more time and need to be more nuanced.

Question: So are you finally going to tell me about some of those stories?

Well how about one of the recent ones. It will serve as an example of how I have worked for years.

I spent three weeks in Haiti after the quake. My job was to try and tell stories about the people I met so that listeners would have a better idea of what the daily lives of Haitians were like in Port-au-Prince.

I took a palm-sized recorder and microphone with me wherever I went.

Other reporters were filling television and internet screens with pictures of tent villages, talking about the million people who were now living like this.



David in Haiti

I did not want to talk about a terrible situation where people remained anonymous.

I wanted to put names and faces to these people because they deserve to be known.

Before January 12th the eleven members of the Merisier family had been living in a house in a neighbourhood called Delma 56. Now they live in a tent made from sheets in a vacant lot. I asked if I could stay with them for a couple of days because I wanted Canadians to hear what it is like for a family to live with almost no food, little clean water, no toilets and no electricity. I wanted them to hear the anguish in the father's voice and the sadness in the voice of the teenagers who no longer had a school to go to and who were not allowed to go out in the evenings because their father – Madsen, and their mother Nadine were too afraid they would be raped or get lost.

I did lots of other stories as well; I spoke to a Voodoo priestess – a mambo – who was helping to organize food into her community, I asked a factory owner if he was running sweatshops or paying decent wages for work well done. I asked an economist how the tug of war between Haiti's rich and poor could change now that so many people were out of work and desperate.

I continually try to make pictures that are so clear that they remain in listener's heads. What happens after that is out of my hands.

Question: So that was Haiti. Are you going to just go on and on and on about all your other stories?

I could go on and on about Fifi and her gang of courageous women in Mali who are fighting genital mutilation one small village at a time, or the underground church preacher in Beijing who leads prayer sessions in secret, or the piano teacher in Montréal who left his bust of Beethoven to an immigrant girl who was his most prized student.

As a reporter I have the privilege of listening to passionate people talk about their lives. If I can get their stories to you so that they are clear and make you think and feel then I have done my job.

Back in 1979 I moved to Québec City because it seemed so exotic, I had this deep need to try and become part of the other, to live and dream in a language that was not my own. Perhaps I was trying to relive the immigrant experience that my afi and amma and zeida had lived a couple of generations earlier, betting that a better life could be built on new soil.

Sunday morning. I am sitting at my kitchen table in Montréal looking east. The spring sun has turned snow into slush. Dogs sniff around the alley, a kid on a bicycle rides through a puddle. A group of teenagers heads up to the treed paths on Mont Royal, a quick way of getting away from the hustle bustle and drone of constant traffic. This evening I will be having supper with my teenage daughter. She thinks of herself as a Québécoise, more Francophone than Anglophone. Her middle name is Sóley – buttercup. She will be spending the summer in Iceland and likely stay on a farm in Snæfellsness.

There must be a story there somewhere.