

a fine MYSTERY

Writer's family
history inspires
new novel

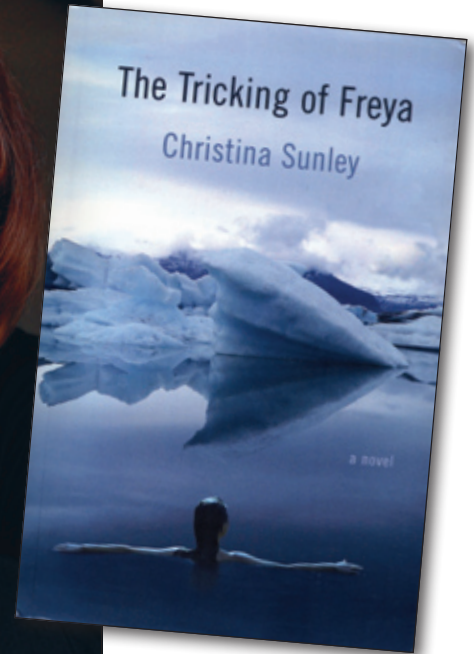
California-based author Christina Sunley has recently released her first novel, *The Tricking of Freya*, which is set largely in Gimli and explores many of the issues associated with Icelandic heritage. She took time out from her busy book tour to speak with L-H.

Tell me a little about your Icelandic heritage, how you experienced it growing up and how it has affected you through your adulthood. Has it contributed to being a literary person?

My grandfather, Ólafur Björnsson, emigrated from the east of Iceland with his family when he was six years old, after the volcano Askja erupted. They came in 1876 and settled in New Iceland. My grandmother's parents emigrated a few decades later from the west of Iceland and settled in North Dakota. My mother grew up in the West End of Winnipeg during the 1920s and '30s.

Sadly, my mother's parents died while she was still young, and she was adopted by an Icelandic relative in the United States. From my mother's point of view, she not only lost her parents, but also her beloved Icelandic community, and I don't think she ever really got over either of those losses. One way she dealt with it later in life was by telling my sister and me stories about her childhood in the West End, and about her long-dead but still beloved parents, "O.B." and Sigga. So mainly I experienced my Icelandic heritage through my mother's stories, which were very vivid and tinged with longing and grief. She told a lot of these stories, and told them over and over, although it all seemed very remote to a kid coming of age on Long Island in the 1970s.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-30s, though, that I really became interested in my Icelandic heritage. One day my mother sent me a copy of my grandfather's brief memoir about his emigration to



Canada. And it just completely enchanted me. Shortly after, she sent me *Icelandic River Saga* by Nelson Gerrard, which is a marvelously detailed and documented account — over 800 hundred pages — about the settlement of New Iceland. Nelson's book really changed my life. Suddenly, it wasn't just my mother's stories anymore. There was a whole fascinating history, a people and a land that I was somehow connected to.

I would say that my Icelandic heritage has had a profound affect on me as a literary person — though I wasn't conscious of it until I was older. I think the biggest impact is feeling connected to a people who have traditionally revered writing and the literary arts. My mother liked to say that writing is in my blood.

How did your career as a writer begin?

Well, I've always loved writing. All through childhood and adolescence I wrote stories and poems and plays. I published probably a dozen short stories in

literary journals before I decided to attempt a novel.

What brought you to the subject matter of *The Tricking of Freya*? What was the process of working out the story and writing the book?

I started researching my novel long before I knew that's what I was doing, before I had the idea for the book. After I read my grandfather's memoir and *Icelandic River Saga*, I immersed myself for a number of years in what I call "Icelandica." I read *Egil's Saga* and *Njal's Saga* and *Laxdaela Saga*. *Independent People* and *Iceland's Bell*. *The Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. I read books on the history of Iceland and about the history of the Icelandic immigrants in Canada and the United States. And I came across wonderful books by writers of Icelandic descent, like *The New Icelanders*, by David Arnason and Vincent Arnason, and Bill Holm's *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*. Most of these books came to me via my mother, who was thrilled to be

feeding my newfound passion. She must have sent me her entire library. And I also read all of our family papers, the letters and diaries and memoirs.

Out of all of this, the idea for a novel began to percolate, about a young woman of Icelandic descent who becomes obsessed with unravelling a family secret that takes her back to Gimli and then to Iceland itself.

In addition to all the reading I did, my research involved a combination of trips to Iceland and Manitoba, and many conversations, interviews really, with my mother about her memories of Icelandic-Canadian life. It took me about eight years to finish the book — I was working full-time most of that time, so it wasn't always easy to carve out time to write. But I stuck with it.

Have you found, in talking about your book, that Gimli is regarded as a mythical place which may well exist only in your imagination? Guy Maddin, director of *Tales From the Gimli Hospital*, found this to be the case when asked about that project.

That's a very interesting question. The Gimli in my novel is definitely a Gimli of my imagination. It's hard for Gimli not to seem, in some ways, like a mythical place. Its name comes, after all, from Norse mythology, and refers to a kind of mythological paradise after the great destruction of Ragnarök. And it's the name the Icelandic settlers chose for the capital of "New Iceland." In my novel, Gimli is a place of childhood memories for my main character, Freya, so even to her, it's not exactly real. It's a place of summer vacations with her relatives — she doesn't know anything about the reality of living in Gimli through a long, hard winter, or of trying to make a living in a place like Gimli.

Your book is a little irreverent — in a lighthearted and refreshing way — about such Icelandic icons as the *fjallkona*, or Maid of the Mountain. Do you anticipate any negative feedback from the Icelandic community over this or any other aspect of your book, and are you concerned about it?

Me, irreverent about the *fjallkona* tradition? I think you're confusing me with the character Birdie in my book!

Birdie is outraged when her sister's



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Christina Sunley speaks at Seattle's Nordic Heritage Museum.

best friend Vera is chosen to be *fjallkona*; she feels that Vera has not done nearly as much to keep the Icelandic culture alive as she herself has. But Birdie is a black sheep, someone who is too difficult and unpredictable to be chosen as a representative of the community. So she tries to justify her own lack of social standing by insinuating that the only reason Vera was chosen is because she's a prominent member of the community whose husband is the manager of Eaton's. The truth is that Birdie loves the traditions of Íslendingadagurinn and the *fjallkona* — but she is also critical of them for no longer being "Icelandic" enough.

Personally, I think it's wonderful to see older women being honoured by their community, instead of just youth and glamour, the way it is here in America. My grandmother was the *fjallkona* in 1931, and I have her radiant *fjallkona* portrait hanging above my desk.

As for feedback from the Icelandic community... It's been very positive so far, but I'm sure I'll receive some criticism as well. Honestly, I'm just thrilled that people are finally going to be reading my book, and I hope it engenders some lively discussion.

What do you think is responsible for the fascination many people seem to have for Iceland?

I don't think there's one thing — there are so many ways to be fascinated by Iceland! First of all, it's an odd, obscure place, and there are people, like myself, who are fascinated by odd, obscure places and prefer them to more famous places. Some people find their way into Iceland



through its traditional culture, like the medieval sagas, or even farther back to Norse mythology; others have become enchanted by the music of contemporary Icelanders like Björk and Sigur Rós. People who are drawn to extreme landscapes and otherworldly beauty find themselves in awe of Iceland. I could write an entire book about why Iceland is so fascinating... or maybe I already have.

*Christina Sunley will be reading from *The Tricking of Freya* at the Aspire Theatre in Gimli, MB on April 30 at 7 p.m., and at the Polo Park branch of McNally Robinson Booksellers in Winnipeg on May 4 at 7 p.m.*

