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The Perfect Landscape



Synopsis

When a wealthy patron donates a valuable landscape painting to Reykjavík's art museum, the staff can hardly believe its luck. It was painted by one of Iceland's most beloved artists, and the acquisition is sure to elevate the museum's already sterling reputation. For Hanna, a newly arrived art theorist, the acquisition is a chance to begin her job on a high note; after all, she's something of an expert on the artist. But when the museum's conservator suggests the painting might be a fake, Hanna realizes the museum's reputation is not the only one in danger of crumbling. And so she sets out to authenticate the painting, drawing on every ounce of skill that she possesses. What Hanna doesn't know she vows to learn, venturing deep into the shadowy world of art forgery. Only then will she be able to strip away the varnish of the past to uncover the truth. Nominated for the 2014 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

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Customer Reviews

The Perfect Landscape is a very easy and rewarding read from Icelandic author, Ragna Sigurðardóttir. It's beautifully translated by Sarah Bowen. Descriptions, of people, of Iceland, and of work in an art gallery are crisp and convey just enough detail. The characters are well-drawn and realistic, and it's easy to build empathy with the leading character, Hanna. I like the pace, unhurried yet engaging. The setting and the context for the book are unusual. This is a work of fiction centered on fine art, but it is very far removed from the world of thrillers that might involve some sort of a smash-and-grab heist. It's a book of great subtlety. The characters draw you in even though your view of them is carefully limited and constrained. The author is not hurried and yet is not

long-winded in revealing the plot. Through Hanna's eyes, we learn the techniques used to verify the authenticity of a painting. This feels very naturally done, as though the author is just layering this detail on her canvas. You'll be disappointed if you were expecting an episode in crime scene forensics. In many ways, the book resembles a beautiful oil painting. We get a glimpse of some interesting characters. The writer gives us a frame within which to view them, and we see interactions between them, but inevitably, as with any slice of life, we can't tell what happens afterwards. How does Kari's story evolve? Does Hanna see him again? What of the various relationships in the book? I think the book is so much better for not attempting to show resolution and conclude with 'happily ever after'. It gives us a frame of life and leaves us with much to think about.

This book is an overlap of two emerging genres: Icelandic mysteries and art forgery mysteries. In other art forgery mysteries I am familiar with the real artists, so I can sort out the fictional artists who are the plot. In this book, in my ignorance of Icelandic fine art, I don't know which are real and which are fictitious. You would think that it would not matter, but somehow it does. In *A Dangerous Talent* (An Alix London Mystery) I knew who Georgia O'Keefe was, and it really did help with the plot. And I want to read more Alix London mysteries. The politics of being a small country in the world of art makes a lot of the intrigue. I enjoyed those insights. However the lead character was not compelling. The story was okay. This was not my favorite Icelandic mystery. For serious reading, I suggest *The Flatey Enigma*. For an absolutely hysterical introduction to Iceland, read *The Hitman's Guide to Housecleaning*.

The setting is Reykjavik. The protagonist is Hanna, who is just starting a job in a city art gallery. She at once has the idea of putting on an exhibition of contemporary Icelandic artists inspired by landscape. The gallery already possesses a perfect landscape by a famous Icelandic artist of the last century. There are many currents running through the plot - the office politics in the gallery; Hanna's marital troubles with an unfaithful Italian husband; Hanna's attraction to Steinn, the colleague in charge of conservation; Hanna's compassion for the wild young graffitiists who are defacing the city's public art; but most of all, the threat of art forgeries, in this small gallery and in the art world at large. We get a picture of how forged paintings creep into the market. We learn something of the techniques of imparting age to a new work. In the snooty art world, Hanna doesn't quite fit in. She has too much integrity, too little guile. She practices fencing for exercise, and the vocabulary of fencing strategy is constantly in her mind as she metaphorically fences with her

snobbish boss and ambitious co-workers. This novel clearly aims to be literary rather than sensational, despite the scandalous subject of art forgery and the goings-on of unscrupulous Russians in the background. In a way the book felt more like a painting to me than a novel - all color and light, emotion and innuendo, glancing brush strokes. Some readers will like this. I read *The Perfect Landscape* with mild interest but not much excitement.

The Perfect Landscape is a great little story. Based on the synopsis, I was expecting a cerebral mystery, but that doesn't describe the book at all. *The Perfect Landscape* is part character study and part exploration of what qualifies as art and how that definition changes over time. Despite the fact that events in the book occur in several different countries, the entire tone of the novel was very insular. It almost felt more like reading a play, with the understanding that the action is all going to be contained to one small stage. This has the effect of bringing everything and everyone into heightened focus. Using this technique, the author is able to create a sense of intimacy regarding characters that surprised me, given the limited amount of information she actually provides us about them. If you're looking for a fast-paced mystery, this isn't for you. But if you would like to read a more general, but very well-crafted story, pick up *The Perfect Landscape*.

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