



Weird Visitations

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Weird Visitations: Attendant Spirits & Ghosts

- Adaptation theory: Stories survive by appropriation and adaptation.
- Background: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland* (1940); revised by Einar G. Pétursson, translated by Benedikt Benedikz (2003).
- Sveinsson argues that folkstory motifs migrate more easily than the stories and that the stories are invariably adapted to their new environment; stories based on the same motif will be quite different stories.
- Confirmed by my study of the legacy of Icelandic folkstories in Icelandic Canadian literature.





The Gift of Second Sight: Ófreski - Skyggni

- Sveinsson notes that ideas about second sight were largely unchanged from ancient times:
 - the tone is partly, of course, set by the spirit of the age. But all the basic elements of belief in dreams appear to be constant, and stories about dreams, based on true experiences, run completely parallel in ancient and more recent times. Thus there appear in them people with symbolic names, people who utter verses, prophecies, second sight and so on.... People with prophetic powers get their knowledge from ... a presentiment, sometimes from dreams, sometimes from some kind of vision... understanding the language of birds. (188-89)



Attendant Spirit: Fylgja

- **Guardian spirits** go back to ancient times: “did no harm, unless their ‘owner’ was an evil person or in an evil mood, and then only to other people” (Sveinsson 188). Variants on the ancient fylgja in all Nordic countries: body in trance but “external soul” travels (Sveinsson 190).
- **Evil attendant spirits** did not appear widely until late 17th or even the 18th century, and never as attached to families until late 18th century.
- These "attendant spirits" had one thing in common: they went in front of the person to whom they were attached.



Hálf dán Sigmundsson's Deliverance

- The Mail-Delivery Saga of Hálf dán Sigmundsson (1849-1935) in Þorleifur (Jóakimsson) Jackson's settlement history of New Iceland, 1919.
 - Hired as postman in Oct. 1882, delivering mail from Icelandic River to Clandeboye, two trips a month
 - Each trip took 3-4 days across Lake Winnipeg when roads were impassable.
- Four places, rest & meals:
 - Drunken Point: Stefan Sigurdsson
 - Arnes: brothers Johannes & Gudlaugur Magnusson
 - Gimli: Petur Paulsson
 - Kjalvik: Benedikt Arason



Hálfván Sigmundsson's Deliverance

- Leaves Drunken Point for Gimli in extreme frost, darkness, high winds & heavy snowstorm, against Sigurdson's warning.
- Hálfván says: The Lord will provide him with the stamina to survive; the trip will be no harder for him than for his wife to do the chores and mind the family.
- Collapses from exhaustion, unable to rise, recites a prayer, falls asleep.
- Awakened by a voice calling: "See the light!" Resumes walk, refreshed. Glimpses land and finally a lantern light straight ahead, leads him to Petur Paulsson's house, continues trip next day.





Hálf dán Sigmundsson's Deliverance

Concludes that he will remember for all time his joy at seeing the light from the lake but his wife's welcome was even more precious. "Her love-light has illuminated my soul during our life together, as it will until the end of my days" (43).



Kristjana Gunnars: “Guest” in *The Axe’s Edge* (1984)

- Creative reworking of Hálfván’s story through translation, adaptation, fiction.
 - Weaves together his narrative; additional local information, including means to survive on and near the lake in inclement winter conditions; the traditional lore, knowledge and manners that the Icelandic immigrants brought with them from Iceland (the main source for the last is “Gestur” in Jónas Jónasson’s *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir* (1961)).
 - Places Hálfván’s story within a broader context by having the story told by Anna, his daughter, who fills in the gaps of his own original account and explains the historical baggage that might be awkward and cumbersome to convey to English readers who know nothing about the Icelandic background or New Iceland.



Kristjana Gunnars: “Guest” in *The Axe’s Edge* (1984)

- No longer a story only about Hálf dán but about the mindset of Icelandic settlers in New Iceland, Keewatin, who are sustained by three strains of religion that co-exist: Heathen, Catholic and Lutheran.
 - Anna says: “You’d think Hálf dán had the sense of an Eskimo dog and could smell a snow squall a day away. But that’s not him. Father is just full of belief, that’s all” (42).
 - Anna cites her mother on the “walking spirit” (Gunnars’ trans. of *fylgja*, attendant spirit), which makes itself known in advance of a guest’s arrival by a host of different means. (Heathen ideas surviving beyond yr. 1000).
 - Hálf dán’s prayers solicit St. Benedict’s protection of his head (evidence of Catholicism surviving after the Reformation in 1000-1550).
 - Anna points out: Luther’s Table prayers would be recited before a meal.



Original log home and newer frame house of Halfdan Sigmundsson, Riverton, circa 1903.

<http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/timelines/imageref/ref1201.shtml>



[Archives of Manitoba](#), Still Images Section.
New Iceland Collection. Item Number 511. Negative 15489.



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
DEILD ERLENDRA TUNGUMÁLA,
BÓKMENNTA OG MÁLVÍSINDA

W. D. Valgardson: “The Divorced Kids Club” in *The Divorced Kids Club and Other Stories* (1999)

- Draws upon the motif of the attendant spirit as a guiding light for a teenager who decides to fight the disorder in her life.
- The informal support club that Kathleen runs at school at the outset of the story, with other kids of divorced or separated parents who need ways to cope, is indicative of her enterprising and solution-oriented drive.
- Her wish to see her parents reunite seems beyond hope as she joins her mother’s new sweetheart, her own gym teacher, and his two sons for a spur-of the moment weekend in the family cabin.
- Cabin weekends with her parents were quiet but creative and pleasant, but the three new males are irritatingly loud and restless, and Kathleen foresees the end of life-as-she-likes-it.



Kathleen's Guiding Light

- Kathleen's father had been the meticulous planner who would make her mother's impetuous and far-flung adventures work out safely.
 - Without him there's no wood to burn at the cabin
 - The jock-sweetheart barely escapes death when he chops down the biggest tree on the property, without know-how or forethought, so it falls on him.
 - Careful rescue work, led by the mother, gets him from underneath it alive, but with one leg broken with open fracture.
 - They have no mobile phone and heavy snowfall blocks the road so Kathleen overrides her mother's objections and goes skating across the icy lake to get help.



Kathleen's Guiding Light

- From her years of skating on the lake, she knows the ice and its hazards but as she skates past empty cabins and snow-ridges that drive her away from land, as the wind rises, snow starts swirling, and darkness falls, she realizes that prior planning would have put her at less risk.
- In desperation she calls for help and whistles, a dog barks but she cannot find her bearings in the dark until a light appears and she reaches the shore guided by the light, until it disappears.
- Her whistling and the dog yapping guides her the last stretch to safety with an older couple.



Kathleen's Guiding Light

- Larry tends to Kathleen's feet to minimize frostbite, and goes to get medical help and wood to the cabin.
- Maud gives hot drinks, cookies and advice on how relationships will last: the trick, as in cooking, is to match opposites, sweet with sour.
- Kathleen shares this advice with her mom, who is shaken by the consequences of her own and the jock-sweetheart's irresponsibility.
- Kathleen's mom and dad get back together.
- During her rescue trip, Kathleen realizes the importance of tempering spontaneity with caution; we observe her discovering for herself the truth that Maud imparts to her in the sweet-sour nutshell.



Kathleen's Guiding Light

- There was no light – not even moonlight – at Maud & Larry's but only Kathleen's guiding light.
- Valgardson allows for three interpretations of Kathleen's guiding light: her guardian spirit, her own heightened sense of vision, her own soul transcending her body.
- All three stories on the guiding light use the same motif, but *they are very different stories*.



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Ghosts

- No difference between heathen Icelandic & Norwegian ghosts:
 - “the body lived on, after a fashion, especially while it had not begun to decay, and if anyone came back from the grave, it was in bodily form. It might also be that spirits of dead men were around, since souls of living people could get about outside the body” (Sveinsson 184).
- Christianity was no hindrance to belief in ghosts:
 - “people continued to lead a sort of bodily life in the graves. Their feet got cold if someone dug a hole into their grave and forgot to fill it in. Revenants (zombies) were mostly in bodily form, and they had to stop playing their tricks if their bodies were burned or their heads were placed by their buttocks and so on” (Sveinsson 184).



Ghosts and Cultural Difference

- Heathen hoard dwellers are evil and hostile and turn into dragons to guard their hoard or throw themselves and their gold into waterfalls or the sea.
- Christian misers become ghosts who guard their treasures jealously.
- Difference in numbers:
 - Catholicism offered numerous measures to deal with ghosts.
 - After Reformation an explosion in number of ghost stories, from 1600 onwards.
 - Sendings created by sorcerors were added after the Witch Burnings in 17th century – Þorgeir's Bull.
 - Vengeful attendant spirits as of late 18th century – Skotta, Móri.



Gunnars, Ghosts and Indians

- Kristjana Gunnars suggests in “Mice,” in *The Axe’s Edge*, that ghosts served the same function in Iceland as the Native Peoples in Canada, as the outcast Other.
 - Fridrik Sveinsson discovers that the Ramsey Salteaux family does not have to be oppressed and cast out; they can co-exist and share the goods of the land with him and his foster father.
- Anne Brydon published an article in 2001 revealing that the happy co-habitation of the Ramsays and Ólafur Ólafsson at Ós, north of Icelandic River, was a myth, which she thought created by the bad conscience of the New Icelanders.
- Brydon’s findings attest to the accuracy of Gunnars’ equation between ghosts and Indians in the story.
- Also manifests a basic change in attitude: appropriation of land no longer acceptable.

Valgardson's New Ghostland

- Throughout the short story collection *What the Bear Said*, W. D. Valgardson's ghosts are well provided in their New Iceland environment, free from oppression, ostracism, hunger, jealousy, threat and injustice, and signifying Icelandic Canadian knowledge and acceptance of a dark and painful past.
 - In “The New World,” the ghosts have a place to stay with their family, and ample resources to feed, if so inclined, and turn into sentimental dreamers who may indulge in occasional weeping by the Lake Winnipeg shore for their long-lost graves and grievances.
 - In New Iceland, Loftur's ghost finds a new “life” of acceptance, care and respect with the family he was conjured to haunt and harm in Iceland.
 - Runa is finally allowed dignity, love and care when her son Sigurður brings her outcast remains to be buried in hallowed ground in the Gimli cemetery, in “Sidewalk of Gold.”



From Myrká to Lake Winnipeg

- Valgardson's "Cabin Fever" in *The Divorced Kids Club and Other stories* is different from his ghost stories in *What the Bear Said*.
- A creative adaptation of the story of the Deacon at Myrká.
 - Works as a paranormal story, where the past feeds into the present and the other world reaches into the reality of the living world.
 - Also works as an imaginative rendering of a teenager's final encounter with her own nervous breakdown – depression – fully overcoming her suicidal desire.





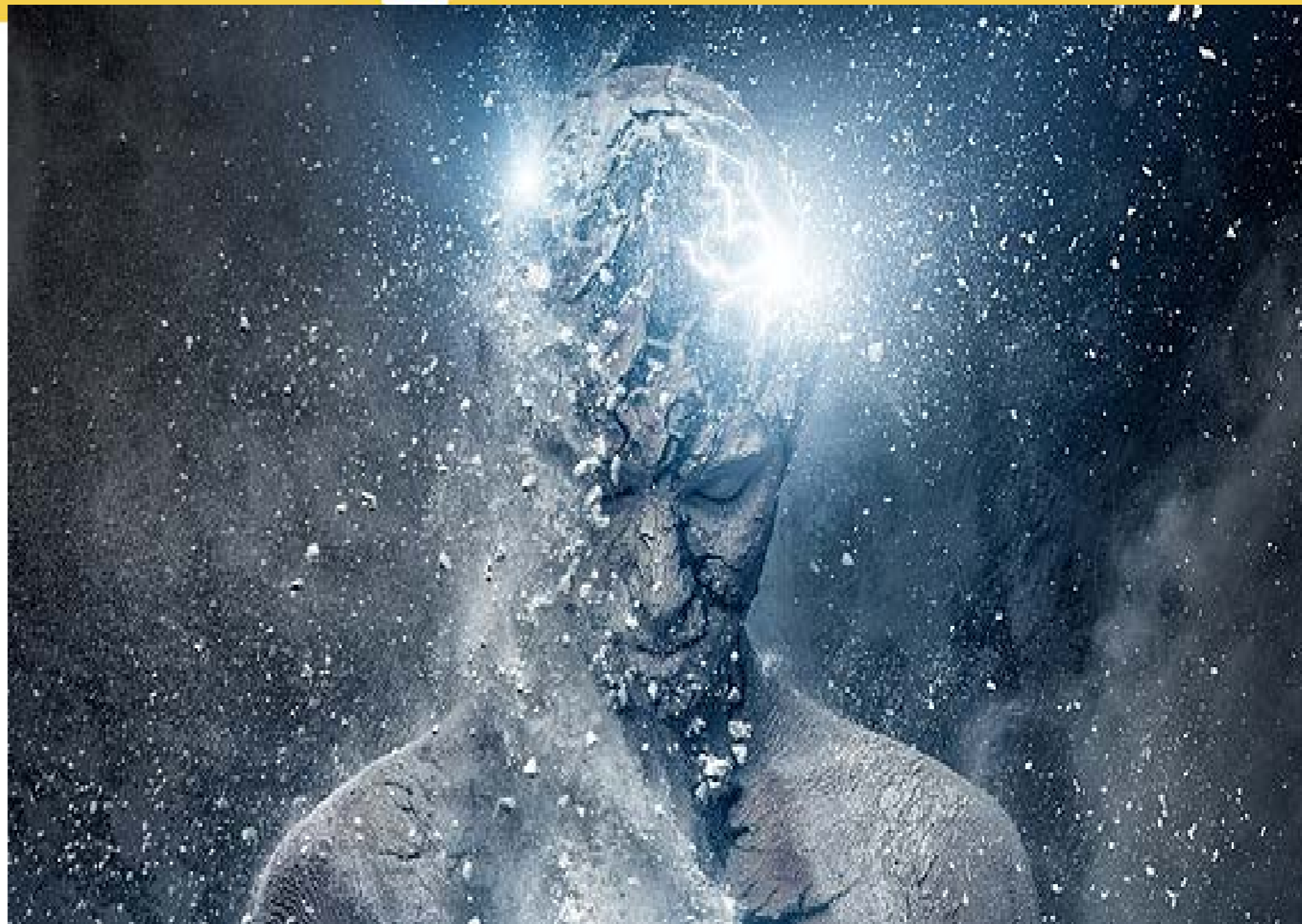
Spirit Guardians and Ghosts Revived

- It is interesting to see how ancient story motifs gain renewed creative vigour in Icelandic Canadian fiction, reflecting new realities.
- The motifs of the guardian spirit and the ghost serve to capture psychological realities, each story providing new angles.
- The motif of the ghost also serves to embrace and lay to rest the painful and harrowing aspects of the past, allowing the guardian spirit to point to the future.



**Thank
you!**

Takk!





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“The Deacon of Myrká” in Iceland, samples:

- [“Djákninn á Myrká,”](#) art and artifacts.
- [*The Deacon of Myrka*](#), animated film with Icelandic introduction. Film starts at 4:10
- Icelandic band Mannakorn plays [“Garún.”](#)
- [*Djákninn*](#) (The Deacon), TV film from 1988.

