

The Sealwoman's Gift by Sally Magnusson

This book was chosen as it appeared to encompass many of the things that I love and /or believe in: history; stories; sagas; myths; Christianity; relationships and so on. Based in time in the 17th Century when pirates from North Africa (Barbary pirates) raided islands of Iceland, killing some and carrying off others to Algiers. This story was written by the priest Olafur Egilsson, the priest of the islands as he could return, after capture to seek ransom monies from the King of Denmark (ruler of Iceland at that time) to release these slaves.

It is interesting that just a few centuries before Christians, Jews, Muslims lived side by side in Southern Spain, North Africa and shared rich cultural developments that are still found in places like Seville and Cordoba in Spain, The irony that it was Christians from the north who stopped this. Slavery became rife.

To develop the story, the author did other research and used her imagination, her storytelling skills to build up the story and draw out what became of the slaves, especially from the women's point of view, and importantly, Asta, Olafur's wife. The contrast in culture, religion, the loss of children to an alien way of life and how slavery affected the Icelanders is written with an interspersing of history, imagination, and such a lot more. How Olafur struggled for years to raise money for the ransom, for as the Sealwoman prophesied, the King said 'NO' to a ransom. How by the time a boat came for the Icelandic slaves, some had died, or adapted to their new life or had been sold on to other unhumanitarian places, including three of Asta and Olafur's children.

The telling of stories/sagas, prevalent in the dark nights of Icelandic seasons were to be a lifesaver for Asta, as well as listening to Arabic ones and drawing up positive stories in her mind about what had become of her own children. The atrocities that befell some of her compatriots, the lure of a luxurious life and compelling relationship with the Muslim owner Ali Pitterling Cilleby challenge Asta's relationship with her husband, her faith and way of life.

As Asta, reluctantly returns to Iceland and is repulsed by her elderly husband and the cold, bare , way of life, it is the Sealwoman's gift that restores or redeems herself. The Sealwoman's gift helped Asta 'see' that her true relationship was with Oafur and not the magnetic Cilleby. As p 332 says, 'Do not treat worst the one you love best'. A parallel of the Icelandic Laxdaela saga and what Oddrun the Sealwoman said before she returned to the sea. " To die known, to die beloved to die certain, no man can ask for more" (p339)