

## An introduction to Einar Már Guðmundsson's new book 'Bankastræti Núll'

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### High Streets and Piss Pots

Before the authorities plugged them up in 2006, there used to be underground, public toilets on the corner of Bankastræti and Lækjargata. In his most recent book, Einar Már Guðmundsson recounts how the toilets were once the hub of Reykjavík's seedy area, where boozers and drug users mingled and where teenagers procured condoms. The area was commonly known as Bankastræti Núll ("Bankastræti Nil") or simply Núllið ("The Nil") as it marks the spot where Austurstræti turns into Bankastræti and a new house number count begins. 'Bankastræti Núll' is also the title author Einar Már Guðmundsson uses for his most recent book, a collection of interconnected essays, stories, poems, quotations and memoirs that attempts to piece together some of the scattered remains of reality after Iceland's bubble burst in 2008. It is written in a similar vein to his preceding book, 'Hvíta Bókin' ("The White Book," 2009), which first appeared as a series of political essays in newspaper Morgunblaðið in the wake of the collapse. Although Einar Már is better known for his prose fiction, most notably the Nordic Council Prize winning novel 'Angels of the Universe' (1993), his last two publications reflect his re-engagement in politics as an outspoken critic of the neo-liberal policies that precipitated the financial crisis.

'Bankastræti Núll' opens with the narrator's lament: the current political situation has stifled his

ability to write poems to his lover. Although he foresees a future where “reality wakes up” and poets can once again sing the praises of love and nature, the resounding sound of social injustice presently overwhelms him and beckons him to first engage in the struggle against the free reign of the stock exchange, privatisation and greed.

Just as natural resources have been privatised, so the arts have been appropriated by big business and made to serve its interests. The comedian John Cleese became the main commercial spokesperson for Kaupthingbank, and hundreds of Icelandic artists came together to act in a Landsbanki advertisement under the direction and patronage of Björgólfur Guðmundsson, former billionaire and banking mogul. Einar Már further interprets one of Kaupthing's mottos, “kaupthinking,” as cleverly constructed doublethink, ‘to think so as to buy’ or ‘to buy so as to think,’ which could have been sent to the Venice Biennale had it been labelled art.

Einar Már is no less critical of certain forms of popular contemporary literature, most notably crime fiction. He shows how crime novels have come to reinforce neo-liberal values by emphasising the singularity of criminal actions, evildoers, and lone detectives while avoiding systemic analysis. It becomes apparent that the poet cannot write poetry and the novelist cannot write novels, not because they must leave their armchairs and desktops to join the revolution but because the forms have been corrupted. Reality has been turned on its head and churns out its own fictions: “In fact, it is no longer necessary to write novels in Iceland these days, because they happen in real life. Iceland is like a reality show, with live broadcasts of erupting volcanoes and a financial crisis that transforms bank directors into wanted men.” Thus Einar Már leaves off the traditional novel in search of new literary forms, which he hopes will more thoroughly encompass and make sense of a fragmented social reality rife with contradictions. He questions how his own generation, which welcomed the student revolution of 1968, the Beatles and radical left politics could later endorse Iceland's transition toward reckless capitalism. He delves into the past and weaves together fragments of various, mostly non-fictional, accounts of seemingly random events in his life which nonetheless coalesce into a narrative about the elliptic yet steady rise of neo-liberal ideology in Iceland. Although digressive and playful, ‘Bankastræti Núll’ remains an earnest effort to retrieve lost connections between past and present, politics and poetry, prosperity and poverty. Iceland's economic collapse was not an isolated event but part of a global system that now binds Iceland and Haiti closer together as captives of the IMF. Moreover, the persistent division between the sciences and the arts and an ever-increasing specialisation of labour only heightens our sense of fragmentation and alienation.

Einar Már's medium reflects his message: just as a more integrated and long-term approach is needed in politics so ‘Bankastræti Núll’ combines various literary genres to create a multifaceted narrative. It does not read simply as a political manifesto but as an experiment in narrative building that strings together various stories, legends, ideas, personal memoirs, poems and quotations. It is a convergence of form that finds its social counterpart at the intersection of Lækjargata and Bankastræti, where the Prime Minister's office still stands next to the remains of the old public toilets and across from where Útvegsbankinn (“The Fisheries Bank”) once stood before its scandalous collapse in 1985, reminding us of the fine line between the most respectable and least respectable members of society.

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Photo: Alisa Kalyanova

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