

# Iceland

Kristof Magnusson interviewed **Vigdís Finnbogadóttir**.

Interview date: April 2019

**Magnusson:** Vigdís, thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me. It's such a pleasure to meet you.

**Finnbogadóttir:** It's a pleasure to meet you, too.

**Magnusson:** First, I'd like to ask about your background. You were born in 1930, in Reykjavik. Could you perhaps describe what kind of a world it was that you were born into – Iceland of the 1930s?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes. I was born to parents who were somewhat further along in years; I was a long-awaited child. They had both been studying abroad. My father was an engineer – he studied engineering in Copenhagen and later became the first professor of engineering at the University of Iceland – and my mother studied nursing. She was a nurse and a very prominent woman, as she was Chair of the Icelandic Nurses Association for countless years. She often travelled abroad as the representative for Icelandic nursing, and, for a while, as Chair of the Northern Nurses Federation. This meant that I grew up in a fairly cosmopolitan milieu. There was lots of talk about what was happening abroad. My mother went to Germany, to Berlin, and to Vienna for graduate school, and Europe – as events were unfolding at the time with Nazism and everything else – was much discussed in my childhood... Because of this, I have made a point of keeping abreast of what is happening in Europe all my life. Later, I went to France to study, and was very glad that I did, as it gave me the chance to follow what was happening in Romance-language culture.

**Magnusson:** Yes, that was in 1949, wasn't it?

**Finnbogadóttir:** That was 1949. I was in Grenoble and Paris, and it benefitted me immensely. When I came home, I was very involved in teaching French and literature at the university, and in theatre literature. I'm still very French-oriented.

**Magnusson:** I am too, actually; I began learning French several years ago.

**Finnbogadóttir:** One of the loveliest things that ever happened to me was receiving an honorary doctorate from the Sorbonne. I was extremely pleased about that.

**Magnusson:** Now when did that happen?

**Finnbogadóttir:** That was just two years ago.

**Magnusson:** Well then. Congratulations! That's not in your biography, since that was published in 2009. Fantastic. I knew you had several other honorary doctorates but –

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, but this was the main highlight among all of them.

**Magnusson:** Certainly, the icing on the cake, or the ‘raisin at the end of the sausage’, as Icelanders say. I’d like to ask you a bit more about when you were growing up in Iceland. Did you feel, at the time, that you were also, in some sense, growing up in Europe, or did you feel that Iceland was outside of Europe?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, I did not feel that Iceland was outside; I felt that Iceland was the centre of gravity. I was raised with a very strong sense of the language, especially, for which I cannot be thankful enough. I was raised in a very rich Icelandic, a wealth of language. My grandfather was a priest at Sauðlauksdalur; he was a teacher of Icelandic and was constantly forcing books and reading material upon me; he could tell I was interested. Yet I was equally interested in what lay beyond Iceland, because I was planning to be the captain of a ship.

**Magnusson:** A captain?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I was determined to be a captain, to sail abroad and see what Europe was like. What the world was like.

**Magnusson:** And this is when you were how old?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I was around ten. And they patted me on the head and said, ‘No, you can’t do that, dear, because you are a girl.’

**Magnusson:** They said that?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, that’s what people said then. ‘You can’t do that because you’re a girl.’ That’s why now, when I fly, and a woman’s voice comes on the microphone and says, ‘Hello, this is Captain Sigríður Sigurðardóttir’, I just sit and laugh, because it’s so neat to have a woman pilot. Because I was told that I wasn’t able, because I was a girl. But yes, people were always talking about world affairs at my house, and during the war, for example, when I was ten or nine when it broke out – there was always a map on the wall of my father’s office. This is where we kept track of the war and its battle lines as they shifted. There was lots of discussion in my younger years about Europe and world culture in general.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Was that something that worried you, that the war would someday reach Iceland and there would be battles? I know of course that Iceland was occupied, but was this something that people feared?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I remember very clearly when the British army arrived in May 1940, yes. And I remember vividly when the war broke out, and the talk beforehand of war coming. Here at home, in Iceland, in 1939, there was a big Northern Nurses convention and naturally my mother was in charge. And we went north, along with my father, to see off the women who attended, as they boarded the ships that would carry them home. There were speeches and singing and so forth – but people were so downcast and sorrowful. I tugged at

my father's sleeve and asked, 'Why are people misting up as they say goodbye, here in Akureyri, in Iceland?' And then Daddy said that strange sentence that I'll never forget, 'Because we all think a war is coming.'

**Magnusson:** So people didn't know if they'd ever see each other again; they weren't sure they'd be able to travel anymore.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, they recognized that they wouldn't be seeing each other.

**Magnusson:** And, I'm sorry, this was when?

**Finnbogadóttir:** This was the summer of 1939.

**Magnusson:** Right, just before ... wow.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, that's why I have such a vivid memory of this older man, who lived on our street and had two sons, walking down the street on 2 September, 1939, shouting into the yards – there was such good weather in the summer of '39 – he was shouting into the yards where people sat outside – 'War has begun! War has begun!'

**Magnusson:** Do you remember what you thought at the time?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes. I was nine years old and I thought, 'Now it's happening, what Daddy said up north.' And it affected me deeply. I thought to myself, 'Now I won't be able to see the things I wanted to see in Europe.' That's selfishness – to think only of one's self.

**Magnusson:** As children often do. Is it true, what I read once – that you started collecting postcards of European artworks because you were afraid that they'd be destroyed? One reads so many things on the Internet without knowing whether they're accurate.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well, I collected pictures from art books and hung them on my wall.

**Magnusson:** So that's what it was.

**Finnbogadóttir:** On my wall I had Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin. My girlfriends had pin-up pictures; I had this.

**Magnusson:** Do you still have them?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, I don't think so. But I remember I once wrote a paper about Van Gogh and that was the one paper I got a genuinely good grade on.

**Magnusson:** Really? Better than your grade on Romanticism in Dickens?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Ha ha. They were similar.

**Magnusson:** After the War, however, Iceland had become an independent country. And you could finally go to France, in 1949.

**Finnbogadóttir:** I finished secondary school in 1949 and at that point wanted to go to France more than anything else, as I wanted to see this cradle of modernist culture that was in France. I wanted to find out about how

Impressionism had originated there. Admittedly, Dadaism began in Switzerland, but Paris and France were in a way the cradle of European culture, or so I thought at the time.

**Magnusson:** And it's quite true, too.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, probably quite true. That's why I chose to go to France. I began – on the advice of the French ambassador – by going to Grenoble, because foreign students could have an easier time there. It was very demanding, then, to study in France. You had to take entrance exams for the universities then, and many people spent a year or two, at least, on passing the entrance exam. I spent two years in Grenoble and then went to Paris, where I continued my studies, in the meanwhile immersing myself in theatre-going. By then, theatre had become my main interest. Avant-garde theatre, in particular, I knew cold, completely off-book. When I came home to Iceland, I had a hand in founding the first avant-garde theatre and translated the French avant-garde playwrights.

**Magnusson:** Can you recall a particular play that especially influenced you?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, but I greatly enjoyed Genet and Arrabal, and was an admirer of Jean-Paul Sartre.

**Magnusson:** Did you translate – I know it was performed here – did you translate *The Maids*?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I translated *Les Bonnes* by Jean Genet. And I translated Sartre's *No Exit*. And later I translated various things – Arrabal, for example. And I translated – was asked to translate – Georges Feydeau. That was great fun. Utterly miserable to translate, but so delightful on the stage.

**Magnusson:** Did you feel a lack of international, cutting-edge works in Iceland back then?

**Finnbogadóttir:** It was just getting started. We brought it home with us, we who came back from studying abroad in those years. We had found out 'what was happening' in Europe.

**Magnusson:** So you had changed a lot, during your student years in France?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, I took it all in. I don't know whether I myself changed, but I absorbed everything French. I was very culturally-oriented.

**Magnusson:** But did you even know that Sartre, Genet and the rest existed, before you went to France?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I knew.

**Magnusson:** You did. So they had been in the newspapers here.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes – no, you see I was so lucky as to belong to a kind of culture club. I was the only girl in the boys' club, for which I can never thank them enough. It was a classmate of mine who said, 'You're coming with us now,

and joining our discussion' – one result of which was that I went to France. I wanted to know everything about it. It was very rare for girls to study abroad and I'm very grateful to have been allowed to; my parents were not overly fond of my plan to go to France.

**Magnusson:** Why not?

**Finnbogadóttir:** It was just unfamiliar territory. It wasn't like going to the Nordic countries, which they had both done.

**Magnusson:** But at least no one patted your back and told you, 'Girls can't do that,' as when you wanted to be captain of a ship?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, no. It was acknowledged that I was capable of studying abroad and standing on my own two feet.

**Magnusson:** Was that hard, though, sometimes? I read in your biography that life in France was not always easy for you.

**Finnbogadóttir:** No. No, it was often very hard.

**Magnusson:** What was the hardest part for you? Was it lonely?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes. Homesickness. I was homesick.

**Magnusson:** What did you miss most?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I missed the Icelandic environment, obviously. The family, of course. And my brother who died soon afterwards, whom we missed terribly when he was gone. There was a great bond of love between us. And I had a boyfriend, too, at home.

**Magnusson:** Ah, so you had to leave him behind. He didn't come visit?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, not then. But that was actually just fine.

**Magnusson:** Those were obviously exciting years for culture. Besides being the cradle of Impressionism and the fine arts of the past, France was basically where everything was happening during those years.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, the so-called avant-garde. That was all going on.

**Magnusson:** Was that what you followed most closely? Or did students, or you personally, follow politics?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Not as much. I was mostly thinking about what was happening in culture. Politics was sort of more distant. But it was a sheer delight to be in Paris in those years; there was so much happening there. Especially in theatre and literature, and in the women's movement – Simone de Beauvoir was on everyone's lips, of course. And Sartre. And the modernist authors. And my contemporaries were there, painters who later became nationally-acclaimed artists.

**Magnusson:** Icelandic artists?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, Nína Tryggvadóttir was there, and her husband.

**Magnusson:** Oh yes, of course.

**Finnbogadóttir:** And Þorvaldur Skúlason was there, and Valtýr Pétursson. They all became famous painters, renowned painters. And then there were the poets, like Sigfús Daðason, he was there.

**Magnusson:** So he was there too. And Thor Vilhjálmsson?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, Thor was there.

**Magnusson:** That's right, he spoke French, if I remember correctly.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Oh yes, all these people were beautifully fluent in French. And they brought new movements home, brought home modern art theory. And it has been great fun to watch the influence of French culture, how strongly it has come across, here at home.

**Magnusson:** I find this very interesting to hear. I'd been thinking about the post-war years mainly as fateful years for political development, 1949-1954, for example, when the first steps were taken toward the European Union, with the European Coal and Steel Community. Did that have any significance for you students, or was it mainly Sartre and de Beauvoir?

**Finnbogadóttir:** The political happenings were more on the sidelines. We were mainly there for the culture, to absorb the dominant currents in France during the post-war years.

**Magnusson:** But the social changes that occurred in Iceland between 1950 and 1960, were they somehow connected to the arts people were bringing in?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Were they ever! All these people brought back their ideas, their learning, and their experience. It was very important. Iceland was not really isolated, there were so many people who went abroad to gauge what was happening elsewhere. European culture had a special importance in light of the American culture that had arrived here and was very dominant. Movies, for example, all came from America, all of them English-language films. I once asked a cinema manager, 'Why don't you show more films from countries other than America?' And he replied, 'Well, we show very few foreign films.' I thought that was rich. It was completely acceptable for the cinemas to show American films, but you rarely saw anything else – despite all the delightful films that were being made elsewhere, for example, in Italy and France!

**Magnusson:** It's remarkable to think how strong American culture had become in Icelandic life.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, it had become very strong here.

**Magnusson:** How about imports in other branches of the arts? Was it important for Iceland to maintain some kind of balance as the midpoint between the United States and Europe?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, many artists also went to study in the United States and came home cosmopolitans, both in visual art and music. It was wonderful to get them back – bringing a broader perspective than our own.

**Magnusson:** I find it very exciting that cultural matters carry so much weight, no less than political affairs.

**Finnbogadóttir:** It's important to remember, too, that we're an island; we live on an island. So our border is the ocean. Back then, needless to say, there was no internet and such, so it was very important for us to cross the ocean and see what went on the other side. It was even more important, I think, than for people on the mainland.

**Magnusson:** Yes, on the mainland there's more interaction, more back-and-forth in daily life. To go back to your stay in France for a moment: How did you see the future back then? Were you optimistic? Pessimistic?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I think it is very common, when one is young, not to think too far ahead. One thinks rather short-term. I never contemplated becoming the director of a theatre or a teacher or whatever I might be. I took in everything I could learn or hear of in those regions, and of course that shaped my opinions and resulted in my being fairly cosmopolitan in terms of culture.

**Magnusson:** And so you began to translate.

**Finnbogadóttir:** That was actually not until later. But I see now that I was quite the cosmopolitan when I came home to Iceland –seasoned abroad, in a sense. I've been told by those whom I then began to teach that I taught completely differently.

**Magnusson:** What did you do differently than other teachers?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I don't know, but I've heard many students say that I taught in a different way, that I taught more from within the culture itself – I was teaching French, obviously – than from within Icelandic.

**Magnusson:** It must be really beneficial to offer that kind of insight, given that language-teaching concerns not only grammar and vocabulary but also the cultural world attached to the language.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes indeed. I made it a habit to relay a lot of what was happening in France. And, if the readings included literature, I had them read the good French authors – Voltaire and those fellows.

**Magnusson:** Really, you read Voltaire with secondary students? And did they manage to claw their way through him?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, it was quite – easy, really. Voltaire is awfully good, *Candide*, for example. Naturally I assigned *Candide*.

**Magnusson:** Why not start at the top?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, it's right there, easy to manage.

**Magnusson:** I find this really interesting. I know that in Germany, for example, many people – perhaps because of the War – idealized Europe as a kind of saviour, a force that could change the world. And that was bound to politics for many people.

**Finnbogadóttir:** For us Icelanders, it was bound more to culture. But we have never, ever seen ourselves as anything other than Europeans. Our foundation, or the root of Icelandic history, lies in Europe. I remember that once, when I was at a meeting in Britain, a map of Europe was projected and Iceland was missing. I walked up to some very important Briton and pointed it out to him, 'Have you noticed, Sir, that Iceland is missing from this map?' He answered, "Yes, now that you mention it, I see that. I shall write to the *Times!*" This was very strange; Iceland is always on the map of Europe.

**Magnusson:** That happened in Germany, too, in the 1970s. Iceland was missing from a map on a set for the television evening news. Many people complained, so they changed it. It was best to keep Iceland in the picture!

**Finnbogadóttir:** We certainly are on the margin; you need a big map to include us.

**Magnusson:** Or maybe shrink the other countries, a little. Well, you've obviously done so many kinds of work, we can't discuss them all, perhaps, but when you think of your years in the presidency, both as you began and as it ended, did you find that any of your previous jobs were particularly helpful to you in office?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, above all to have worked in the theatre. For the presidency hinges on understanding people. And when you've been in theatre, amid all these characters and discussions of human nature, it's very helpful. To understand people is vital in an office like the Icelandic presidency, which is not a political one. The Icelandic presidency is about people, about having the people's trust. To appear, and to be, the people's symbol of union. That's why I'm so glad that I realized early on that I needed to get the children involved, the youth. In those years Iceland was very dry, with a great deal of soil erosion; we used to say, ourselves, that our country was outright blowing away. And it occurred to me to enlist the children in binding the soil, planting trees. That was one of my most fortuitous ideas, because it was so delightful. I planted everywhere I went. People gave me sweaters, knitted for me, gave me lovely keepsakes whenever I visited people in the country. And I always went to the children, and always planted three trees. One for the boys, one for the girls, and one for the unborn children.

**Magnusson:** How lovely!

**Finnbogadóttir:** And the boys planted for the girls, the girls for the boys, and the third tree, for the unborn children, the boys and girls planted together.

**Magnusson:** So you let the children plant the trees; you didn't do it yourself?



**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I watched them, helped them dig the hole, helped them tamp down the soil, and so on. And it was very well received. At first, actually, people laughed at it; journalists laughed, ha ha, wouldn't you know, a woman, planting trees.

**Magnusson:** Seriously?

**Finnbogadóttir:** It hurt me, but within several months, or a year, people started calling from rural areas and asking, 'Do we provide the trees or does she bring them?' And I always brought the trees myself.

**Magnusson:** Were these official presidential trees, or –?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes. And they're all over the country, I did so much planting. And the nice thing is – though I had no notion of it at the time – trees bind carbon. Vegetation binds all that. I was mainly thinking of binding the soil. Now there are many woodlands in Iceland, from that time, that are flourishing and expanding.

**Magnusson:** Yes, one sees them. I remember when we drove around when I was a kid, in 1984 or '85, there were far fewer trees here. At that point the trees and I were the same size, but now, as you drive around, it's beautiful to see all these woods.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, there are verdant places all over now.

**Magnusson:** What kind of trees were they, that you planted?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Always Icelandic trees, always the Icelandic birch.

**Magnusson:** You said that journalists made fun of this at first, with sarcastic comments.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, they were on the lookout, because I was the first woman doing this; they were on the lookout for a soft spot – but it died down quickly.

**Magnusson:** Did that often happen, that people sought to criticize you for something you were doing, and chalked it up to the fact that you're a woman?

**Finnbogadóttir:** At first, of course, many people were opposed. No woman was ever supposed to take this job. You were never supposed to elect a woman. It was a narrow margin, and the man who came in second, behind me, was a very fine person. I won by a very small margin. I sincerely wanted, sincerely felt he should win; he'd been Rector of the University and was an exceptionally kind, solid person. And here I won by this slender margin. I've always been so glad that the margin was that slender.

**Magnusson:** Why?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Because I had such esteem for this good man, who had been my companion throughout the campaign. It was seemlier. Women should always win by a slender margin. To remind them that they weren't allowed up on deck, couldn't be captains.

**Magnusson:** Did you have that statement in mind, when you won?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No.

**Magnusson:** This is just what I was wondering. As you ran, did you believe, then, that you could win? Or did you rather feel that you were doing something symbolic?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I was roped into this, you know. There had to be a woman. After the Women's Strike of 1975, many said you couldn't hold presidential elections without a woman candidate. So I was roped into it. I flatly refused, at first, to launch that kind of candidacy, but little by little – and when the fishermen sent me that lovely telegram – then there was no turning back. This was a trawler crew out at sea who sent me a telegram so big, it was like an accordion. They had all signed – how many people are on a trawler crew? Quite a number – and I always remember how big that telegram was,; it took me a long time to open it.

**Magnusson:** So this was an actual paper telegram?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, it was handed to me on my front steps, this telegram from the fishermen.

**Magnusson:** And is it in the National Museum now?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well, it's tucked away safely somewhere. And it really was what tipped the scales. I've sometimes said that Icelandic seamen, and seamen everywhere, appreciate women keenly because women see to everything while they're gone. Women run the household, obviously; they are the minister of finance, the minister of culture, the architect –seamen know that they can fully trust a woman. So it was seamen – and I thank them every chance I get – who caused my life to take this turn.

**Magnusson:** So fishing is in the national interest, and also affects domestic affairs.

**Finnbogadóttir:** As a class, fishermen are extremely trustworthy, as all of us who have fishermen in our backgrounds know. I'm a great admirer of fishermen; to me they're larger-than-life characters.

**Magnusson:** So you see that as the point when everything changed.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well maybe it wasn't that, but it was a very strong summons, saying that this was possible. When a sector like fishermen think it's possible – but it took effort. I had to travel around the whole country and speak ... and I wasn't married. That was one thing that was very hard for the nation.

**Magnusson:** You were a single mother.

**Finnbogadóttir:** I was single, and I was a single mother.

**Magnusson:** That was one thing I was wondering about. Modernity was in full swing, of course, but still ... how big a 'problem' was it then, to be divorced, and a single mother?

**Finnbogadóttir:** It was a problem to the extent that people were used to having a married couple at Bessastaðir, the presidential mansion. Sometimes there was a lot of discussion on candidate debate nights, 'What are you going to do, without a man?'

**Magnusson:** What did you say to that?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I quickly turned it around, of course. One time a sweet old man stood up and said, 'I'm so glad you don't have a man in tow, because if you were married, everyone would say, 'Her old man told her to say that!' Things have changed greatly and, to my mind, really, my one accomplishment in life was to give young girls and women confidence in themselves: 'If she can do it, so can I.' And that's enough for me to have done in this life, to have given women confidence.

**Magnusson:** I remember it well; I was four years-old when you were elected. I was in Germany obviously, but even there, many women definitely took notice. This had an impact not just in Iceland but also abroad, mainly because a woman had won the highest national office, but also because it was something that taught people about Iceland, that put Iceland on the map.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, it did. I received a clipping from China, in Chinese characters, with a front-page picture of me. It was world news. Which is remarkable, given that it was as late as 1980.

**Magnusson:** We were talking about France, where 1968 is obviously a very important year. In Germany, too, 1968 is a year that everyone knows the significance of. How about in Iceland? When someone says 1968, what comes to mind?

**Finnbogadóttir:** People naturally think of France and Berlin and [Daniel] Cohn-Bendit and this dawning of awareness among students – that there were some things they weren't going to take.

**Magnusson:** Did anything happen in Iceland; were there any protests here?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, there weren't the same problems. The problem in France was housing, obviously; that was what caused the students to rise up. When I was at the Sorbonne in Paris, we sat on windowsills and stairs; there was no room during the lectures.

**Magnusson:** Yes. And in Germany the problem that set the whole thing off was the old Nazis, obviously, who were all over the place. But do you think there's some date in Iceland that's emblematic of the social changes of the time?

**Finnbogadóttir:** In those particular years, around 1970, then I'd have to say – well, I can't point to anything. In Iceland it came about slowly and steadily rather than by leaps and bounds.

**Magnusson:** So there isn't a watershed year.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well, obviously 1980 was a watershed, when Icelanders elected a woman.

**Magnusson:** Yes, of course 1980 was a watershed! And then there was a major event during your presidency, in 1986, the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit in Reykjavik. How did you personally experience those days?

**Finnbogadóttir:** My experience was certainly very intense, as both men visited me at Bessastaðir, the presidential residence, and we sat and talked. And I became cordial friends with them. I met Gorbachev again later in Germany, where he was so popular, as people credited him with the fall of the Wall.

**Magnusson:** Yes, he's still very popular there.

**Finnbogadóttir:** We were both speaking at some conference there, after I left office. And I also met Reagan again. It all led to a cordial friendship between these parties. But yes, I remember that as the Summit ended, we Icelanders so wanted there to be an agreement like the Helsinki Accords – that an agreement be signed here, reuniting Europe and all the rest. But what we came to recognize – I remember us talking about it during government meetings – was that the door had been opened, even though no accord could be reached... Not three years later the Wall fell.

**Magnusson:** Yes, truly incredible.

**Finnbogadóttir:** That summit was a watershed, and we may be eternally grateful that it took place in Iceland. It was so symbolic, too, for it to happen in Iceland, midway between East and West, between the two great rival states of the time. And of now.

**Magnusson:** It occurs to me – a spontaneous notion, here – to compare it to the Fischer-Spassky chess match in Reykjavik, which symbolized the Cold War at its peak. So the Summit was a comparable symbol of the Cold War beginning to thaw, right?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes. It was really quite extraordinary that Iceland should be chosen as a meeting place. We can thank the American ambassador here, Nicholas Ruwe, for that.

**Magnusson:** Was it his doing?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Indeed. He was a friend of the White House, of Reagan, and Reagan's family, and this was his suggestion. And we ourselves thought it was brilliant: It's midway between the nations, it's an island, it's ideal. And this is where – I don't think people remember this enough anymore – where those locked 'exits,' in Jean-Paul Sartre's terms from *No Exit* – opened a crack.

**Magnusson:** Yes, *Geschlossene Gesellschaft*, in German. I'm not sure of the French – *Huis Clos*?

**Finnbogadóttir:** *Huis Clos*.

**Magnusson:** And a faint light crept through the crack.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, you could see a gleam. And then it opened all the way when the Wall fell, not three years later.

**Magnusson:** Just incredible.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, incredible. I don't think it gets talked about enough in Icelandic society. People forget how important it was. Our country was impartial, it was completely neutral as this happened. And still is, of course.

**Magnusson:** And did you see it as an advantage, at that time, to be a small nation?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Undoubtedly it was. It was highly unusual. We have no army and therefore had no way to protect ourselves militarily; obviously you had to ensure that nothing happened. And so the rescue scouts and squads came and formed a big circle around Höfði, where the meeting took place. It's on the shore, and out in the harbour were the naval vessels that were bringing Gorbachev, and no doubt also American naval vessels, and here are these Scouts and rescue squads in their uniforms – no police, no military. It was quite a picture.

**Magnusson:** Fantastic. Very visual, very symbolic. Were they red – these uniforms?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, they wore special uniforms, not rescue scout uniforms, but red uniforms. Rescue squads always wear bright colours, to be visible both from air and sea.

**Magnusson:** I'm still thinking about small nations. It was a great advantage then, and now many people give this as a reason why Iceland should not enter the European Union. I've often heard the opinion that the EU is just for large nations like Germany that can impose their viewpoints on others. Do you find, in general, that small nations have cause to enter a union like the EU?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I do, and I felt back then that Iceland did have cause. Because that way Europe would stay open to Icelanders. I signed this back then actually, attaching a comment, because I wanted Europe – the universities – to remain open to young people. If we had rejected this agreement back then, we would have gradually drifted, slowly and steadily, towards American universities. I was determined that Icelanders get Erasmus grants and the like to attend Europe's universities, to maintain these European ties. We are Europeans with a cordial friendship with the United States. But I didn't want to make us dependent on the United States, or for Europe to be closed to us. That was my thinking then and now.

**Magnusson:** When was this? I'm not sure I understood, was this some particular cooperation agreement that –

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, this was EFTA, the European Free Trade Association. We belong to EFTA but not the EU.

**Magnusson:** Exactly, yes. And you felt that to enter the European Free Trade Association was the way –

**Finnbogadóttir:** – to maintain our open relations with Europe. Especially with European culture, though this is an economic agreement.

**Magnusson:** And was it controversial, too?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes, it was highly controversial.

**Magnusson:** Do you have any explanations for why it was sensitive for so many people?

**Finnbogadóttir:** People found it so restrictive. Yet nonetheless, it saved us from drifting even closer to the United States than we are now.

**Magnusson:** And do you think that it's a good thing, today, that Iceland isn't in the European Union, or do you want to say anything on that?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, I have nothing to say on that. I have no particular opinions on it. But I think this arrangement is the best one for us. Norway and Lichtenstein have the same arrangement and I think we're well-placed there, with them.

**Magnusson:** Yes, you have access to everything.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, yes.

**Magnusson:** We've been talking about politics. I'd like to return to culture. There are basically two things I want to talk about before we conclude the interview: on the one hand, culture today, and on the other, Europe's future. Let's maybe begin with contemporary culture. You've told me about many things that strongly influenced you as a student and so on, but what excites you in today's culture – in books, music, and visual art.

**Finnbogadóttir:** I feel we today are in a strong position culturally, we Icelanders. We run a society here that has, where culture is concerned, just about everything that exists abroad, except certain specialties; with so few of us, we can't cultivate certain specialties. Yet we can run a national theatre here, a municipal theatre, and other smaller theatres – in Akureyri, for example. We have a symphony orchestra that is brilliant by international standards and travels on invitation to many countries and states. And we have various cultural centres here that stand on an equal footing with cultural centres abroad. And all this sustains Icelandic culture. One fear, perhaps, is that we urgently need to digitalize our language. We have begun to do that. We need to preserve this old tongue, this old language, and that's a defensive game because so much cultural material in English is being imported.

The cultural world is changing so greatly; it can all be found in computers, and naturally, young people want it that way. I think we're in a fairly good position with regard to that, but we're in a defensive position as a culture with a small population. This culture that we have here in Iceland includes such invaluable memories – Invaluable medieval memories, for example. I sometimes say in jest, 'We don't have castles, but we do have medieval sagas.' Our medieval sagas are our castles. This is the great legacy of the Icelandic tongue. All over the world people pore over these sagas. They are considered so extraordinary –these stories written in the Middle Ages.

**Magnusson:** Yes, you find that in Germany, for example, if you stage an event about the sagas. I translated *Grettla* [*Grettir's Saga*] and –

**Finnbogadóttir:** Did you really – *Grettla*?

**Magnusson:** – and at festivals where well-known actors read the medieval sagas aloud, 600 people would show up at the hall and pay 25 euros to get in. It's possible to do so many things with these old texts. Each generation can translate them anew and find new angles, so I completely agree with you that this is a treasure.

**Finnbogadóttir:** When I was summoned to Paris, to the cultural branch of the United Nations, UNESCO, and was made a Goodwill Ambassador for languages, I of course asked, 'Why are you asking me to do this? Why was I chosen?' The president at the time, whom I had often met, replied, 'Because you've never made a speech that you didn't to some degree base on national heritage.' That's what he said – and I hereby bequeath to you, to all of you, that if you need material for a speech, you will find a goldmine in Snorri Sturluson. You should go to the *Edda*, or the *Sybil's Prophecy*, or some piece of old Icelandic literature; there's always material there to build on. A string of speeches can be monumentally boring, and if they are dinner speeches people are apt to fall asleep in their soup. However, if you start telling stories, everyone wakes up. They all start listening. Dead silence ensues when a story finds its way into the speech.

**Magnusson:** Maybe to get across abstract ideas –

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well, for example, to just tell the story of Iceland's guardian spirits. Utterly delightful. What is it that protects Iceland in the medieval sagas? Four guardian spirits.

**Magnusson:** A cow and [...]

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, it's a bull. And there's a giant, a dragon, and there's – oh, what's the fourth one, again?

**Magnusson:** Some bird?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, an eagle – a falcon.

**Magnusson:** I really don't know the story very well. I only know –

**Finnbogadóttir:** It's delightful. King Olaf of Norway planned to conquer the country and sent a man out here. He was going to land in the south, but a great giant came out and blocked his way. Then he went east, no west, actually, and a bull came out. Then he went north and it was a falcon. And then in the east, the dragon.

**Magnusson:** What did he do then?

**Finnbogadóttir:** He couldn't come ashore; he couldn't occupy the land. These were guardian spirits. Had this been female, they would have been guardian goddesses, but these were guardian giants of the land.

**Magnusson:** He just turned back?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, he was routed.

**Magnusson:** Have you ever told this story in Norway?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Oh yes, they know it.

**Magnusson:** There's always something so intense about stories, I find.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Snorri Sturluson is such a master of narrative, too, and left us so much from the Middle Ages.

**Magnusson:** I translated Einar Kárason's books about the Sturlunga clan, and they indeed give you a sense of what kind of man [Snorri] was. And Sturla too. But I'm also interested in the idea you mentioned just now about the medieval sagas helping the Icelandic language survive the current digital revolution. So you're not overly worried, as some people are, that Icelandic will disappear?

**Finnbogadóttir:** We always need to keep watch, to stay defensive about a language spoken by such a small population. And we know – I know it, naturally, as a Goodwill Ambassador for languages – that you're on the defensive when languages are disappearing. But we're lucky in Iceland. Languages that disappear, they often disappear because there's another language that is stronger. In South America, for example, where you have Spanish and Portuguese, invaluable languages disappear up in the mountains and in the rainforest because the teaching materials are all in the official languages. Kids go to school and learn in the official languages and forget to preserve the old language that they spoke to grandma and grandpa. In Iceland we're very fortunate to have so much written material in Icelandic. There's so much creativity and so much that's been achieved in Icelandic that it helps us preserve the language. All our authors still write in this language. Of course, the language is transformed, new words and influences appear – and in that very way, Icelandic is unusual: When something new comes along in science or technology, a search promptly begins for an Icelandic word for it.

**Magnusson:** Yes, isn't it wonderful?



**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, it's quite amazing. Quite amazing. Like 'radio' and 'barometer' – there are Icelandic words for all those things. And that is thanks to our good artist-poet Jónas Hallgrímsson. He composed words, he translated words, made up Icelandic words. and what distinguishes the Icelandic tongue is its transparency. You see through the words like a clear pool; you see to the bottom of what the word means. It's a characteristic of the Icelandic tongue.

**Magnusson:** Which is very useful. Sometimes when I don't quite know what a word means in the classical languages – I know very well how you're supposed to use the word but not precisely what it means – then I consider the Icelandic version, and then it's completely clear. Sometimes clearer than one might wish, as in, for example 'urine-conduit-cutting-doctor'; maybe you don't want to know.

**Finnbogadóttir:** You picked a very good example, *skurðlæknir* or 'cutting doctor,' for surgeon or *chirurg*.

**Magnusson:** And it works for modern words, too, such as *hlaðvarp* for podcast – 'load-cast'.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Or, for example, the word *þyrlla*, 'whirler', which to me is a wonderful word; no one in Iceland would dream of saying 'helicopter'. We say, *þyrlla*, 'whirler'.

**Magnusson:** Yes, amazing. Now, naturally you're very active in the Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding. They've built a spectacular building that opened two years ago and, to me, it is exceptionally felicitous and well-designed.

**Finnbogadóttir:** It's so lovely, too, that the building's name is World.

**Magnusson:** Quite right, World – the Vigdís building.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Well, now, I prefer the name World. And it's so lovely that it's the 'west wall' of the University of Iceland. It belongs to the University. This west wall begins with the Centre for Technical Innovation, where all the technology is located. Then comes the Museum of Telecommunications, and you can't have telecommunication without technical and construction skills. And you can't broadcast overseas – next comes World – unless you have foreign languages. And northernmost is the Icelandic Studies building. That's a magnificent west wall.

**Magnusson:** A very symbolic sequence. Then comes the law building, Lögberg, right?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, next comes the National Library. And across from that, the National Museum.

**Magnusson:** Right.

**Finnbogadóttir:** It's simply a magnificent west wall.

**Magnusson:** I've never thought of it that way.

**Finnbogadóttir:** That's to be expected. I made it up!

**Magnusson:** But how does it feel to enter the building today? There are all these gifted people, visitors and students from all points of the compass. Do you still think, 'Wow, this building bears my name', or can you get used to that?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, I don't want it to be known by my name; I want it to be called World. It shouldn't be attributed to me, though I had a hand in getting it up and running. I wasn't the only one. There were others. The University, too. It was very canny of [former Rector] Páll Skúlason to call me up and ask whether he could associate my name with an institution concerned with foreign languages in Iceland. I was very grateful to him.

**Magnusson:** An honour, of course.

**Finnbogadóttir:** He did it because I was the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for languages. And it's my work to try to draw attention to instances of endangered languages. And many are endangered.

**Magnusson:** Do you mean because of English, or globalization?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Chiefly because education is conducted in the national language.

**Magnusson:** Yes, in South America, as you mentioned before.

**Finnbogadóttir:** And Africa too. In these places, large languages – no, I don't want to say 'large and small' languages. There's no such thing; a language is always large. But wherever many people speak an official language, the danger is great. It's not always English. In South America it's Portuguese and Spanish.

**Magnusson:** That's right, yes. But what do you think; in conclusion, shall we talk a bit about the future? I asked before, whether you were optimistic or pessimistic in your student years, and you replied that you had not thought much about the future then. But what about today – are you optimistic, pessimistic, or is it still the case that you live mostly in the here and now?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, you could never say that I only live in the here and now. I think a lot about the future and the past and try to join the two together. One can control this a little bit one's self. Pessimism saps people's courage, but optimism – optimism increases people's courage; optimism empowers. That's why I feel that as many people as possible, as far and wide as possible, need to set their minds on optimism. And try to minimize pessimism. It's very hard to say this – people are sick, people live in war-torn districts – but nonetheless: Believe in what is brighter than today. Believe in it, because it empowers. Believe that the war will end. Believe that the children will grow up. Believe that we can do something. We know that faith moves mountains – *trúin flytur fjöll* – and it's no accident that we say that – don't you say that in German, too?

**Magnusson:** It doesn't alliterate as nicely as in Icelandic but it is *Der Glaube versetzt Berge*.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, that's 'faith moves mountains'. And the moment you believe in something, you start working towards it. If you believe in a brighter future, you will work toward making the future brighter, or at least no darker than now.

**Magnusson:** Is this, in some part, religious for you, or ...?

**Finnbogadóttir:** No, no. It's an outlook on life.

**Magnusson:** An outlook on life, yes. Or is it perhaps a bit of Icelandic optimism? Is there such a thing? Or is this just you?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Hm, Icelandic optimism. That can sometimes be ... not realistic. This is just philosophical optimism. To know that it's not necessarily blue skies ahead, but to work ceaselessly to make it possible so that it might be so, so that it doesn't have to be totally pitch-dark. If you see what I mean.

**Magnusson:** Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely.

**Finnbogadóttir:** 'No, we're not going to try that.' That's pessimism. 'No, it's not worth it. No, no one wants to hear that.' But we do want to hear about something brighter, about a belief that something will go well.

**Magnusson:** How do you feel about the school kids who are protesting [adult inaction on climate change] now, every Friday?

**Finnbogadóttir:** I feel it's just fine. This, exactly, is faith in the future.

**Magnusson:** Have you seen them downtown?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, I have. That's optimism. Faith that one can do something through protest. That is definitely not pessimism.

**Magnusson:** It's really a lot of kids.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes, they're starting to grasp this. There's more conversation about it.

**Magnusson:** Well, I have maybe two more questions. Then of course you can add something, if you like.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Haven't I told you everything I know?

**Magnusson:** You've told me many delightful things! But what do you think is the greatest threat facing Europe now? All optimism notwithstanding, is there anything that worries you?

**Finnbogadóttir:** Obviously the fact that not everyone is equally well-off in our societies. And I am very disturbed by anti-immigrant sentiment. I find it horrible. We have to realize that we are all people. We all have our hearts in the same place and our heads in the same place, and there is no such thing as looking down on other people. I find it very hard to fathom. We were so harmed by this, after the War – I don't have to call it by name – harmed by looking down on people, regarding someone as lower than one's self. There's a lot of that going around, such as, for example, in *Alternative für Deutschland* and so on. It's in

all countries, all nations, now. It's because humankind has so much mobility now. But let's not forget the fifth century migrations, either; those were all our ancestors, moving north from southern countries.

**Magnusson:** Back then, Germanic peoples were immigrants in many areas of Germany, or what is now Germany.

**Finnbogadóttir:** There were, for example, waves of migration that introduced many Germanic words into French. But in any case, disdain for people is one thing I cannot accept, because I think we are all of equal value. So maybe there are some people who have more sway or whatever, and some have less, but then we just have to speak up for those who lack sway. To say precisely this, that we are all human, with our hearts in the same place and our heads in the same place. This so often gets forgotten. We're all cut from the same cloth, just not equally lucky in being born in a place more favoured than the next.

**Magnusson:** Yes. Is there anything you would like to add? Actually, I think it would be very lovely to end on that note.

**Finnbogadóttir:** Yes. Let's stop here, then.