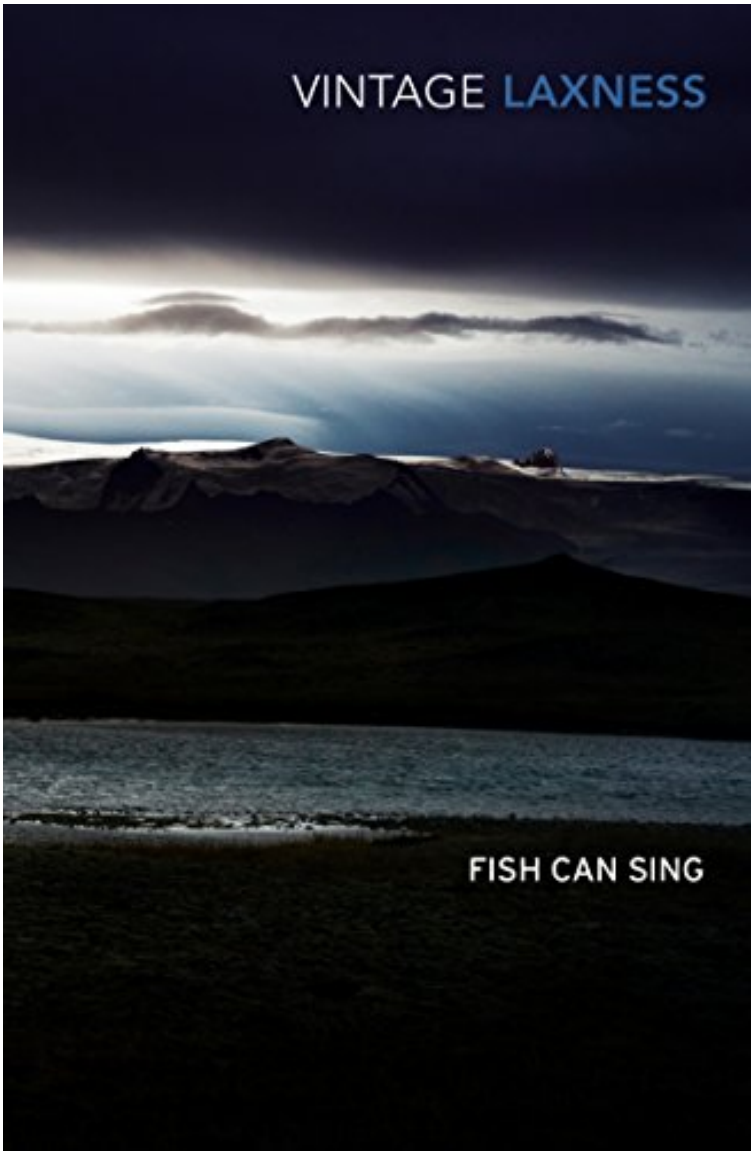
Fish Can Sing



Par Halldor Laxness
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Par Halldor Laxness : Fish Can Sing before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fish Can Sing:

Description : Description du produitAlfgrim was an abandoned child whose mother gave birth to him in the turf cottage of Bjorn of Brekkukot, the fisherman, on the outskirts of Reykjavk. This is the tale of Alfgrim's boyhood and youth in the home of his grandparents in the early years of the twentieth century. It is a hospitable place, where dignified understatement is the norm and everything from a lumpfish to a Bible has a fixed price that never changes. When Alfgrim goes to school and begins to learn Latin and music, he comes into contact with new attitudes toward the currencies of gold and language. The reigning spirit in this new world is the singer Gardar Holm, whose fantastic successes throughout the world have become a source of pride to his countrymen. Alfgrim's encounters with the singer only serve to make Gardar and his fame more mysterious and ambiguous. A beautifully crafted tale by Iceland's finest writer.

Prsentation de l'diteurAbandoned as a baby, Alfgrimur is content to spend his days as a fisherman living in the turf cottage outside Reykjavik with the elderly couple he calls grandmother and grandfather. There he shares the mid-loft with a motley bunch of eccentrics and philosophers who find refuge in the simple respect for their fellow men that is the ethos at the Brekkukot. But the narrow horizons of Alfgrimur's idyllic childhood are challenged when he starts school and meets Iceland's most famous singer, the mysterious Garoar Holm. Garoar encourages him to aim for the 'one true note', but how can he attain it without leaving behind the world that he loves?Extrait1STRANGE CREATUREA wise man once said that next to losing its mother, there is nothing more healthy for a child than to lose its father. And though I would never subscribe to such a statement wholeheartedly, I would be the last person to reject it out of hand. For my own part, I would express such a doctrine without any suggestion of bitterness against the world, or rather without the hurt which the mere sound of the words implies.But whatever one might think of the merits of this observation, it so happened in my own case that I had to make do without any parents at all. I will not say that it was actually my good fortune - that would be putting it too strongly; but I certainly cannot call it a misfortune, at least not so far as I myself was concerned, and that was because I acquired a grandfather and a grandmother instead. It might be closer to the truth to say that the misfortune was all my father's and my mother's: not because I would have been a model son to them, far from it, but because parents have even more need of children than children have of parents. But that is another matter.Anyway, to cut a long story short, I must tell you that to the south of the churchyard in our future capital city of Reykjavik, just where the slope begins to level out at the southern end of the Lake, on the exact spot where Gudmundur Gudmunsen (the son of old Jon Gudmundsson, the owner of Gudmunsen's Store) eventually built himself a fine mansion-house - on this patch of ground there once stood a little turf-and-stone cottage with two wooden gables facing east towards the Lake; and this little place was called Brekkukot.This was where my grandfather lived, the late Bjorn of Brekkukot who sometimes went fishing for lumpfish in spring-time; and with him lived the woman who has been closer to me than most other women, even though I knew nothing about her: my grandmother. This little turf cottage was a free and ever-open guest-house for anyone and everyone who had need of shelter. At the time when I was coming into this world, the cottage was crowded with people who would nowadays be called refugees - people who flee their country, people who abandon their native homes and hearths in tears because conditions at home are so desperate that their children cannot survive infancy.Then one day, so I have been told, it happened that a young woman arrived at the place from somewhere in the west; or north; or perhaps even east. This woman was on her way to America, abandoned and destitute, fleeing from those who ruled over Iceland. I have heard that her passage had been paid for by the Mormons, and indeed I know for a fact that among them are to be found some of the finest people in America. But anyway, without further ado, this woman I mentioned gave birth to a baby while she was staying at Brekkukot waiting for her ship. And when she had been delivered of the child she looked at her newborn son and said, "This boy is to be called Alfur.""I would be inclined to name him Grimur," said my grandmother."Then we shall call him Alfgrimur," said my mother.And so the only thing this woman ever gave me, apart from a body and soul, was this name: Alfgrimur. Like all fatherless children in Iceland I was called Hansson - literally, "His-son". And thereupon she left me, naked as I was and with only that curious name, in the arms of Bjorn, late fisherman of Brekkukot, and went on her way; and she is now out of this story.And I now begin this book with the old clock that used to stand in the living-room at Brekkukot, ticking away. Inside this clock there was a silver bell, whose clear pure note as it struck the hours could be heard not only all over Brekkukot but up in the churchyard as well. In the churchyard there was another bell, a copper bell, whose deep resonant tones carried all the way back into our cottage. And so, when the wind was right, you could hear two bells chiming in harmony in our little turf cottage, the one of silver and the other of copper.Our clock had a decorated face, and in the middle of the ornamentation one could read the legend that this clock had been made by Mr James Cowan of Edinburgh, 1750. It had no doubt been built to stand in some other house than Brekkukot, for its plinth had had to be removed so that it could fit under our ceiling. This clock ticked to a slow and stately measure, and I soon got the notion that no other clock was worth taking seriously. People's pocket-watches seemed to me to be dumb infants compared with this clock of ours. The seconds in other people's watches were like scurrying insects having a race, but the seconds in the timepiece at Brekkukot were like cows, and always went as slowly as it is possible to move without actually standing still.It goes without saying that if there were anything happening in the room you never heard the clock at all, no more than if it did not exist; but when all was quiet and the visitors had gone and the table had been cleared and the door shut, then it would start up again, as steady as ever; and if you

listened hard enough you could sometimes make out a singing note in its workings, or something very like an echo.How did it ever come about, I wonder, that I got the notion that in this clock there lived a strange creature, which was Eternity? Somehow it just occurred to me one day that the word it said when it ticked, a four-syllable word with the emphasis on alternate syllables, was et-ERN-it-Y, et-ERN-it-Y. Did I know the word, then?It was odd that I should discover eternity in this way, long before I knew what eternity was, and even before I had learned the proposition that all men are mortal - yes, while I was actually living in eternity myself. It was as if a fish were suddenly to discover the water it swam in. I mentioned this to my grandfather one day when we happened to be alone in the living-room."Do you understand the clock, grandfather?" I asked."Here in Brekkukot we know this clock only very slightly," he replied. "We only know that it tells the days and the hours right down to seconds. But your grandmother's great-uncle, who owned this clock for sixty-five years, told me that the previous owner had said that it once told the phases of the moon - before some watchmaker got at it. Old folk farther back in your grandmother's family used to maintain that this clock could foretell marriages and deaths; but I don't take that too seriously, my boy."Then I said, "Why does the clock always say: et-ERN-it-Y, et-ERN-it-Y, et-ERN-it-Y?""You must be hearing things, my child," said my grandfather."Is there no eternity, then?" I asked."Not otherwise than you have heard in your grandmother's prayers at night and in the Book of Sermons from me on Sundays, my boy," he replied."Grandfather," I said. "Is eternity a living creature?""Try not to talk nonsense, my boy," said grandfather."Listen, grandfather, are any clocks other than ours worth taking seriously?""No," said my grandfather. "Our clock is right. And that is because I have long since stopped letting watchmakers have a look at it. Indeed, I have never yet come across a watchmaker who understood this clock. If I cannot mend it myself, I get some handyman to look at it; I have always found handymen best."2FINE WEATHERWhen I was not in the living-room listening to the strange creature in the clock, I was often outside playing in the vegetable garden. The tufts of grass between the paving-slabs reached to my waist, but the dockens and tansies were as tall as I was, and the angelica even taller. The dandelions in this garden were bigger than anywhere else. We kept a few hens, whose eggs always tasted of fish. These hens would start their clucking when they were pecking for food around the house early in the morning; it was a comfortable sound and I never took long to fall asleep again. And sometimes, around noon, they would break into their clucking again as they strutted about in their hen-run, and once again I would fall into a doze, entranced by this brooding birdsound and the scent of the tansies. Nor must I forget to thank the bluebottle for its share in this midsummer trance; it was so blue that the sunshine made it glint green, and the joyful note of earthly life vibrated ceaselessly in its well-tuned string.But whether I was playing in the vegetable garden, or out on the paving, or down by the path, my grandfather was always somewhere at hand, silent and omniscient. There was always some door standing wide open or ajar, the door of the cottage or the fish-shed or the net-hut or the byre, and he would be inside there, pottering away. Sometimes he would be disentangling a net on the drystone dyke; or else he would just be tinkering with something. His hands were never idle, but he never seemed to be actually working. He never gave any sign of knowing that his grandchild was nearby, and I never paid much attention to him either, and yet somehow I was always involuntarily aware of him in the background. I would hear him blowing his nose with long pauses between each blow, and then taking another pinch of snuff. His constant silent presence was in every cranny and corner of Brekkukot - it was like lying snugly at anchor, one's soul could find in him whatever security it sought. To this very day I still have the feeling from time to time that a door is standing ajar somewhere to one side of or behind me, or even right in front of me, and that my grandfather is inside there, pottering away. So I think it only right, if I am to talk about my world, that I should first of all give some account of my grandfather.The late Bjorn of Brekkukot was born and bred in this part of the world; his father had been a farmer here in Brekkukot in the days when it had been a farm with its own meadows on the south side of the Lake, where, later, peat-pits were dug to supply this future capital city with fuel. In those days there were Danish governors ruling over Iceland. But by the time my story starts, an Icelandic governor had been appointed; he was called the King's Minister because he was under the thumb of the Danish king in just the same way as was the Althing we had for a so-called Parliament. When my grandfather was born there were barely two thousand people living in the capital; in my own childhood there were nearly five thousand. In grandfather's childhood the only people who counted were a few government officials (who were called variously "the gentry", or simply "the authorities"), and a few foreign merchants, mainly Jews from Schleswig and Holstein who spoke Low German and called themselves Danes; for in those days Jews were not allowed to do business in Denmark itself, only in the Danish duchies and colonies. The rest of the town's inhabitants were cottagers who went

out to the fishing and sometimes owned a small share in a cow, or had a few sheep. They had little rowing-boats, on which they could sometimes hoist a sail.In my grandfather's boyhood everyone was self-sufficient as far as fish was concerned, except for the gentry and the merchants, who lived on meat, for the most part anyway. But as the community grew and began to develop into something like a town, with some basic divisions of labour, and there began to be artisans and harbour-workers who had no opportunity of going to sea for themselves, and as a little money began to circulate, one or two people started to make a livelihood by catching fish for their neighbours' larders.One of those who made his living in this way was my grandfather. He was not a ship-owner in the sense of being in big business; nor did he own shares in a boat with others. He was never one of those who dried fish on a scale large enough to trade with merchants and accumulate gold and silver in a chest and then suddenly start buying up land or plots of ground or taking shares in a decked ship, as was then becoming the fashion. Nothing like that. When the weather was fine it was his custom to row out to sea early in the morning from the landing place at Grofin or Botin, with one or two helpers in his boat, and put his nets out somewhere just beyond the islands - or at the very most, perhaps, they might paddle the boat out as far as Svid. When he returned, grandmother and I would be waiting at the landing place with a bottle of coffee wrapped in a sock and a slice of ryebread in a red handkerchief. Then grandfather would go off with his catch in a wheelbarrow and sell it in the town for ready money, either in the street or from door to door. During the winter season, or late on in the summer, he would catch mainly cod and haddock, and sometimes also plaice and small halibut; no other fish counted. If any of the fish were not sold at once, my grandfather would clean them at home and hang them up on spars in the fish-shed; for drying into stockfish.During the last few months of winter he would stop going out to the fishing, as it was called, and turn his attention to lumpfish, which he would look for among the seaweed either in Skerjafjordur or out at Grandi. I am not sure if it is generally known that there is a distinct contrast between the male and female lumpfish; the male is one of the most beautifully coloured fish to be found, and tasty to match, but the female is less highly thought of and is usually salted down. In the south, out on the Nesses, spring is said to have arrived when the lumpfish season starts and the bark-coloured sails of the Frenchmen are glinting out in Faxafloi.Towards the end of March my grandfather would be down in the town with his wheelbarrow every morning, just as people were getting up, to sell fresh lumpfish.From Publishers WeeklyLaxness, Iceland's best-known fiction writer and winner of the 1955 Nobel Prize for literature, authored well over 60 novels and other books before his death in 1998 at the age of 90. This lyrical novel, first published in English in 1966 (nine years after its original publication in Iceland), concerns a boy named Alfgrmur Hannson of Brekkukot, the humble fishing cottage where he is raised by adoptive grandparents. The novel's plot--if so formal a term may be used to describe the tale's slow and meandering progress through Alfgrmur's uneventful youth--involves an Icelandic singing star known as Gardar Hlm. All Iceland, except for Hlm's own mother and the folks at Brekkukot, dote on Hlm because of his international reputation for performing lieder. Yet few have ever heard him sing--the beloved Hlm is growing old and he is mysteriously elusive. Young Alfgrmur may also be a gifted singer, and he tracks Hlm down assiduously. Once he finds him, however, he learns that singing is only one way of seeking "the one true note"--and he who has heard that note never sings again. Laxness portrays the backwardness of turn-of-the-century Iceland with gentle humor and irony. Tiny Iceland needs its "singing fish"--celebrities like Gardar Hlm, and perhaps Alfgrmur Hannson--but the moral of Laxness's lovely fable references a simpler sentiment: glory may just as well be sought in the humblest walks of life.