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# The Flames of Time Bál tímans as Object Biography Les flammes du temps Bál tímans comme biographie d'un objet

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Article abstract

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# The Flames of Time: *Bál tímans* as Object Biography<sup>1</sup>

KATELIN MARIT PARSONS

**ABSTRACT:** The manuscript as narrator in Icelandic children's novel *Bál tímans* (2022) belongs to a literary tradition of sentient object narrators who document the domestic spaces in which they circulate. *Bál tímans* shifts the reader's focus to normally invisible manuscript owners and users, including women and children, bringing attention to disparities in access created through archive-building activities. In domestic settings, *Möðruvallabók* is accessible to a broad segment of the Icelandic population through practices of social reading, women's book ownership, and home education. In the archive, human-manuscript interactions are restricted to a narrow and initially male-only elite. While tensions between preservation and access are resolved when the codex is exhibited in a museum space where it can share its stories with a wider audience, *Bál tímans* examines what can be lost by bringing cultural objects into archival spaces.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Le manuscript narrant le roman islandais pour enfants *Bál tímans* par Arndís Þórarinsdóttir appartient à une tradition littéraire où le narrateur est un objet conscient et sensible qui documente les espaces domestiques dans lesquels il circule. En tant que biographie fictive de ce codex historique, *Bál tímans* porte l'attention du lecteur sur les propriétaires et usagers du manuscript normalement invisibles, tels que les femmes et les enfants. Le roman attire notre attention sur les disparités d'accessibilité résultant de l'établissement d'archives. Avant d'être envoyé au Danemark à la fin du dix-septième siècle, *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) est accessible à une large portion d'Islandais grâce aux pratiques de lectures sociales, des femmes propriétaires de livres et de l'enseignement à domicile. Dans les archives, en revanche, ses interactions avec des humains sont réduites à une élite restreinte et, dans un premier temps, uniquement male. Même si les tensions entre préservation et accessibilité sont résolues dans le roman lorsque le codex est exposé dans un musée, où il peut à nouveau partager ses histoires avec un large public, *Bál tímans* porte un oeil critique sur ce qui peut être perdu lorsque des objets culturels sont apportés dans des archives.

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Eldur er stærsta ógnin sem steðjar að bókum. Bók sem brennur verður aldrei aftur lesin. Jafnvel þótt til séu mörg eintök af henni getur eldur grandað hverju einu og einasta. (Þórarinsdóttir 27)

[Fire is the greatest threat to books. A book that burns will never be read again. Even if there are many copies of a book, fire can destroy each and every one of them.]

**A**rndís Þórarinsdóttir's innovative children's novel *Bál tímans* [The Flames of Time] from 2021 documents the life of a single medieval Icelandic codex, today known as Möðruvallabók or AM 132 fol. and preserved in the collection of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík, Iceland. Written as a children's book introducing younger readers to the manuscript heritage of Iceland, *Bál tímans* begins in a medieval setting but quickly moves forward in time, shifting the focus from the materiality of manuscript production to its changing post-production use. The narrative spans around 700 years, from the production of the manuscript's oldest leaves in ca. 1330 to the planned opening of the institute's new research facility and exhibition space in Reykjavík in 2023. Unusually for a children's novel, the protagonist is the codex itself, which describes its life from the 14th century to the present. The manuscript recounts the events that caused it first to swell to its maximum thickness as a medieval book object and then to shrink and grow again over the centuries as leaves are lost or inserted over time.

Historical fiction set in pre-modern Iceland frequently explores public and controversial or difficult events in the island's history, including sorcery and incest trials, the massacre of shipwrecked Basque whalers, and the slave raid on Iceland by Barbary pirates and its aftermath. Given that most surviving written accounts were created by the elite men managing these events and/or documenting them for official purposes, fiction is often used to explore women's perspectives and the voices of social underdogs. For instance, the protagonist of Finnish author Tapio Koivokari's *Poltetun miehen tytär* [The Burned Man's Daughter] (2018) is Margrét Þórðardóttir, a woman tried in Iceland for witchcraft in 1662 but eventually acquitted, while Þóra Karítas Árnadóttir's *Blóðberg* [Arctic Thyme] (2020) returns to the case of Þórdís Halldórsdóttir, accused of an incestuous relationship with her brother-in-law and executed after a long legal battle.<sup>2</sup> In *Bál tímans*, however, the protagonist is a non-human storyteller whose experiences are largely confined to interior spaces. The codex takes an interest in the outside world mainly to the extent that it affects readers' interactions with books or endangers the survival of its

stories, thereby offering a new interpretation of manuscript provenance that foregrounds everyday life within the domestic sphere.

Unlike many non-human storytellers in the object narrator tradition, the protagonist of *Bál tímans* is a historical object that has been the subject of close paleographical, orthographical, and morphological study (cf. Leeuw van Weenen). The Möðruvallabók codex is better known than most of the humans with which it has interacted through the centuries. Indeed, it is one of the most important and best preserved of the medieval Icelandic saga manuscripts. Documented human-manuscript interactions between Möðruvallabók and named individuals before the twentieth century involve a very narrow segment of the population: university-educated men in Iceland and later Denmark. Little is known of its early history, however, and *Bál tímans* focuses instead on the imagined stories of those owners and users who do not write their names on Möðruvallabók's leaves. In doing so, the book explores the impact of archive-building on the communities in which the manuscripts formerly circulated and practices of social reading, women's book ownership, and home education. While archive-building has given modern scholars the opportunity to study manuscripts like Möðruvallabók, its long-term preservation in the archive resulted in loss of access to all but a handful of users.

## Object biographies and objects as narrators

Object biographies, also known as cultural biographies, are an increasingly used tool for exploring the material culture of the past. Typically focusing narrowly on a single item, object biographies treat artefacts as culturally living organisms within a much wider ecosystem or network of social and cultural connections, interactions, and responses (Kopytoff). Accumulated social entanglements within the life cycle of the object form a continuous narrative as the object moves through time and physical space. Within this life cycle, an object gains new chapters of meaning and value through its interactions with humans and non-human actors, which the object biography seeks to collect, document, and analyze (Gosden and Marshall). Just as a human biography is constructed from an individual's social relationships with others, beginning even generations before birth, an object biography is inherently relational (Joy 2009). Rather than treating objects as passive receptacles of human stories or simple props for social action, object-centred narratives position individual objects as active participants in narrative production, with independent voices of their own (Humphries and Smith).

One challenge to the biographical approach to the study of objects is that inanimate objects like manuscripts do not possess a linear life cycle of birth and death within a single social network (Moreland; Joy 2010). Objects are not a

singularity, as new objects can for instance be made from existing ones, and—as in the case of medieval codices—they can be divided, augmented, and rearranged as they pass from user to user. In fact, the objects that form the subjects of object biographies are rarely “dead”: the approach is used mainly for objects that have been either “resurrected” through excavation or separated from their original milieu of production and use and “re-birthed” into a new social context, most notably that of the western museum collection. However, object biographies can be a useful tool for the study of manuscripts and manuscript cultures, not least given that their focus on relationships and interactions is compatible with material philology and medial approaches (cf. Nichols; Rohrbach 2014; Rohrbach 2019).

The material object as narrator is not a new phenomenon. Fictional object narratives or it-narratives, in which a storytelling object such as an item of clothing or mundane household object is the central character, were popular during the second half of the eighteenth century, both in poetry and prose novels (Blackwell). Many eighteenth-century object narratives exploit the production, consumption, and circulation of garments and accessories to explore intimate, interior spaces and women’s domestic labour and promiscuity (Wigston Smith).

Writing squarely in the object narrative tradition, Icelandic poet and naturalist Eggert Ólafsson (1726–1768) composed a posthumously published poem, *Teflöskuvísur* [Verses on a Teapot], in which the speaker is a broken bottle originally used for liquor that was mended and transformed into a makeshift teapot (146–47). The poet claims in a footnote to his autograph copy in Lbs 1513 4to (60–61) that his poem was inspired by an actual home-repaired and repurposed bottle used for brewing tea. A *flaska* [flask] being a grammatically feminine noun in Icelandic, Eggert Ólafsson draws a parallel between the damaged bottle and the plight of a “damaged” woman who laments the loss of her maidenhead, telling her audience her pitiful tale as a warning. The fallen bottle lives in a wretched and reduced condition, as the mouldy imported tea with which she has been filled is ruining her health, but a piece of linen paper used to patch the crack has given this unwilling teapot a medium through which to voice her lament and her hope for the restoration of her former virtue.

Eggert Ólafsson describes *Teflöskuvísur* as *hálf-satíriskar* [half-satirical] (60). As in his better-known poem *Búnaðarbálkur*, the satire transparently seeks to enlighten the reader as to the wastefulness of tea consumption, using humour to deliver an earnest underlying message (Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson). Thus, the bottle claims that if she would be transformed yet again to hold a more economical and wholesome drink brewed from Icelandic flowers, their purity would act to restore her lost virginal state.

Although Eggert Ólafsson’s bottle/teapot appears to have gained sentience only through the production process, the object narrative can reach as far back

even as the natural resources from which the object is crafted. *En Bog Papirs Historie* [The History of a Sheet of Writing Paper] by Norwegian-Danish novelist Christen Pram (1756–1821) begins the object’s biography with a tiny flax seed in the ground in a farmer’s field and concludes with the fully formed paper resting on the author’s writing-desk (185–286). In *En Bog Papirs Historie*, the narrator is in a state of continual change throughout its life cycle, since the flax must be spun and woven into linen cloth, which then must become a worn-out rag before it can be processed into paper. Nevertheless, it retains its singular consciousness and memories, which it dictates to the human author in a conversational manner; remarks such as “Jeg holder for, at hvis du lægger denne Deel af min Ungdoms-Historie for dit Publicums Øine ...” [I think that if you present this part of the story of my youth to your public ...] (198) indicate that Pram maintains an editorial role as biographer, in close dialogue with his subject-narrator. Like many object narrators, the protagonist of *En Bog Papirs Historie* is capable of observing and understanding human interactions, and it weaves into its own tale the history of its former owners, the poor clergyman’s daughter Julie Reinbek of Westphalia and her lover Cornelis, the son of a wealthy Amsterdam merchant. The narrator in fact spends very little time in its final state as paper, but the material experience of the story is enhanced through the use of linen paper to transmit it to its future readership, which the reader can experience as being bonded to other stories of flax-turned-cloth-turned-rags (cf. Calhoun).

## Domestic histories

Unlike the narrator of *En Bog Papirs Historie*, the Möðruvallabók codex in *Bál tímans* has no memories of a past existence as a living animal. It is “born” with the pen-strokes of a scribe in the scriptorium of an unnamed monastery, who inscribes the first lines of *Njáls saga* [The Saga of Njáll] onto a fully prepared vellum leaf and thereby brings the book-object to a state of sentience. Like the year and place of production, some uncertainties in the manuscript’s history are dealt with through the narrator’s limited perspective, since it is not always fully aware of its surroundings as it comes into being, knowing only that the scriptorium is located somewhere in North Iceland. The codex is self-documenting and does not rely on human intervention to give it a voice, and it is suggested that it can interact to a degree with its favourite owners, although its increasingly damaged leaves are sometimes “misheard” by its readers.

Each chapter in the book describes a separate period in the book’s history, with long gaps of time bridged by brief narratorial comments. Reflecting what is known of the manuscript’s history, Möðruvallabók remains in the ownership of the upper classes throughout most its lifetime: first the ecclesiastical elite at

the monastery, then the secular elite at Möðruvellir and other manor farms, and finally the intellectual elite in book collections and the university library. Even in entirely fictional episodes, such as one set in the library of the University of Copenhagen, the book often finds itself in close proximity with well-known individuals from Icelandic history, including the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) and the politician and scholar Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879). While meeting a famous individual from the past is a common narrative device in historical fiction for children, for instance in time-travel narratives in which children from the present day unexpectedly run into an historical figure at a key moment, *Bál tímans* balances such episodes with encounters with persons normally invisible in a traditional manuscript description, such as Björn Björnsson (d. 1657), the disabled brother of Magnús Björnsson of Munkaþverá (1595–1662), the latter of whom became Möðruvallabók's first known owner in 1628. In *Bál tímans*, Magnús Björnsson acquires Möðruvallabók from his ageing mother, Elín, in exchange for a commitment to care for his brother, who will require assistance for his entire lifetime.

The transition from ecclesiastical to secular ownership is depicted as being delayed by the death of the manuscript's original commissioner, whose identity Möðruvallabók never learns. The manuscript's first named owner is identified as Margrét Vigfúsdóttir (c. 1406–1486). At the time she is introduced in *Bál tímans* in a chapter set in c. 1450, Margrét Vigfúsdóttir is a wealthy and powerful widow living in Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður in North Iceland with her three young daughters: Guðríður (c. 1440–c. 1495), Ingibjörg (d. 1494), and Ragnheiður (b. c. 1440). Recognizing Möðruvallabók as a neglected literary treasure, Margrét uses her social status and reputation as a generous donor to retrieve the codex from the monastic library in which it has been gathering dust. The book is used extensively for reading aloud to the household for entertainment and teaching literacy to children, and beginner readers wipe their buttery fingers on its leaves as they turn its leaves. Margrét later gifts the book to her daughter Ingibjörg.

There is historical evidence to link Margrét to not only the preservation of books and literature but also to manuscript production in her role as elite patron. Hans Jacob Orning's 2017 study of AM 343 a 4to foregrounds Margrét Vigfúsdóttir as the probable commissioner of this saga manuscript, which at 110 leaves is the thickest surviving fifteenth-century Icelandic codex. The matrilineage of the occupants of Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður in the early seventeenth century forms the tenuous historical link between Möðruvallabók and Margrét Vigfúsdóttir—tenuous, in this case, because there are two major farms named Möðruvellir in North Iceland, and it is uncertain which of the two was the keeper of the medieval codex. Were Ingibjörg to have inherited the codex, it might have passed to her husband Páll Brandsson's illegitimate son, Grímur Pálsson (d. 1525), who inherited Margrét Vigfúsdóttir's farm of

Möðruvellir after Ingibjörg, Pál, and their two sons died of plague in the epidemic that began in 1494. Grímur, in turn, was the great-great grandfather of both Elín Magnúsdóttir (1571–1637) and her husband Björn Benediktsson (1561–1617), either of whom might have owned the manuscript in the early seventeenth century (Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 134–36).

Margrét Vigfúsdóttir is an example of a woman whose role in medieval Icelandic literary culture has been largely rediscovered through recent research, rather than a figure with a highly visible and continuous presence in older literary histories of Iceland. Her husband, Þorvarður Loftsson (d. 1446), died after only ten years of marriage, and Margrét spent the four final decades of her life as a wealthy and influential widow. In *Bál tímans*, Margrét Vigfúsdóttir is depicted as using her social position to secure herself a central role in the literary milieu of fifteenth-century Iceland, and this certainly reflects the position of Margrét Vigfúsdóttir in modern manuscript scholarship: Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir calls her a “literary queen” at Möðruvellir (n.p.). The records that survive of Margrét’s use of her considerable riches support her depiction in *Bál tímans* as one of the most important cultural patrons in North Iceland in the fifteenth century, who made generous donations to churches in the Hólar diocese (Bjarnason, 98–105).

Four chapters of ten in *Bál tímans* take place in the early modern period, following Margrét Vigfúsdóttir’s death. The first is set in 1553, shortly after the execution of Bishop Jón Arason of Hólar at Skálholt in 1550, an event that marked the end of the Reformation in Iceland. The chapter describes the arrival of print technology to Iceland and the impact of the Reformation on book production and preservation in Iceland. This entirely fictional episode takes place at the Latin school at Hólar, where Möðruvallabók encounters the young pupil Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541–1627), the future bishop of Iceland, who would invest considerable resources in developing Iceland’s printing capacity. At Hólar, Möðruvallabók falls victim to a spiteful bully at the Latin school, who burns several of its leaves to anger Guðbrandur, alerting readers to the book’s vulnerability but also foreshadowing the significance of fire in Möðruvallabók’s later history. Its presence at Hólar is also an exception: a temporary loan for use as an exemplar.

The Reformation disrupted some earlier sites and practices of manuscript production, but it did not have a fundamental impact on manuscript ownership and practices of exchange, as seen in two chapters set in the seventeenth century. The first of these chapters takes place in 1628, as mentioned above, which was the year that Magnús Björnsson wrote his name in the margin of f. 18v. The statement includes not only Magnús’ name and the date but also a place, the *stóra baðstofa* [large dwelling-room] at Möðruvellir, signalling that this is a record of a transaction involving ownership. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, there are two possible manor farms named Möðruvellir



where the transaction might have taken place, but *Bál tímans* follows the interpretation that this Möðruvellir was the farm in Eyjafjörður where Magnús' mother Elín lived, and it is stated in *Bál tímans* that she had handled the book from childhood.

As described in *Bál tímans*, Magnús Björnsson was the first owner to document his ownership by writing his name in the book. The importance of the manuscript for Magnús and his immediate family can be seen in the addition of seventeenth-century leaves supplying missing text from *Njáls saga*, but its presence in a domestic rather than a scholarly setting is at the same time highlighted by the trimmed-off second column on f. 29, which seems to have been cut away or possibly neatened after damage (Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 127). As a seventeenth-century hand had already added text at the bottom of the leaf, the decision to remove the column was clearly made at a later date in the seventeenth century (before 1686); a leaf from a paper manuscript of *Njáls saga* has been added to restore the missing text. These material traces in the manuscript suggest that the keepers of Möðruvallabók during the seventeenth century valued textual completeness over the preservation of the codex in as original a state as possible. While an effort was made to maintain Möðruvallabók as an intact book object, the manuscript was not shielded from the wear and tear caused by reading and circulation within domestic settings, and *Bál tímans* reflects this more tangibly by having Björn Björnsson cut the manuscript with a knife when it is accidentally left unattended where he can access it. The damage is not maliciously inflicted and is primarily the result of its presence in the household, where it is used as an object both for reading aloud and teaching children their letters.

The next chapter opens over a half-century later, in 1682. It was during the intervening period that the first collections of Old Norse-Icelandic literary manuscripts began to be amassed for export for the purpose of scholarly study rather than sacred or secular reading, buoyed by the rise of antiquarianism in mainland Scandinavia. Prior to this, kinship ties such as the mother-daughter bond between Margrét and Ingibjörg and the mother-son bond between Elín and Magnús had been central to the circulation and transmission of manuscripts (cf. Arthur). In *Bál tímans*, Möðruvallabók has passed from Magnús to his daughter Helga (1623–1677) and from Helga to her daughter Jarþrúður Hákonardóttir (1650–1686). This is an uncertain but not impossible pathway of transmission: the historical Helga Magnúsdóttir of Bræðratunga was indeed the owner of a large library of Icelandic manuscripts, some of which came from her father; Helga is known to have given Jarþrúður the saga manuscript JS 28 fol. in 1675 thanks to an inscription in Helga's own hand on f. 3r. Jarþrúður married Magnús Sigurðsson of Bræðratunga (1651–1707), who would later become the abusive husband of Þórdís Jónsdóttir (1671–1741). Jarþrúður died in childbirth together with her child; her gravestone at Bræðratunga, which her husband had

raised after her death, states that the child was her fourth and that all had been stillborn.

Jarþrúður in *Bál tímans* is depicted as being unhappily married to a volatile husband, who unlike Jarþrúður takes little interest in her books but becomes suddenly jealous when she is visited by the Danish king's appointed royal antiquarian, Hannes Þorleifsson (d. 1682), who has been charged with collecting manuscripts as antiquities to bring to Copenhagen. Magnús tosses Hannes out of the farm in a sudden rage (likely inspired by the historical Magnús' claim that the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon had seduced his second wife, Þórdís). This saves Möðruvallabók from being lost at sea in the ocean crossing back to Copenhagen that claimed the lives of all on board, including Hannes. However, Möðruvallabók's increasing value as a medieval antiquity means that it does not remain in a domestic setting for long: in 1686, Jarþrúður is visited by her uncle, Björn Magnússon, who intimidates her into giving him Möðruvallabók so that he can send it as a bribe to the scholar Thomas Bartholin in Copenhagen.

The historical Björn may, in fact, have been Möðruvallabók's rightful owner in 1686 rather than his niece, but his decision to send it to Copenhagen to reclaim an administrative position lost through his own ineptitude suggests that he valued Möðruvallabók primarily as an object of status and power. The decentralized, non-institutional nature of manuscript ownership and circulation within Iceland presumably would have prevented individuals from fully realizing the uniqueness of a specific book object, but Möðruvallabók was clearly among the most valuable medieval manuscripts in the country in the late seventeenth century. Björn, as the keeper of the former religious house of Munkaþverá and the remnants of its library, did own and actively engage with vellum manuscripts in his everyday life. According to Árni Magnússon's notes in his catalogue of vellum manuscripts, now AM 435 a 4to (ff. 9v–10r), Björn taught his son Guðbrandur to read using a late medieval religious codex containing *Maríu saga* and other vitae, AM 232 fol., which was later misplaced and rediscovered much later still at Munkaþverá by Sveinn Torfason. In a slip of paper accompanying a thirteenth-century manuscript preserving legends of saints, AM 645 4to, Guðbrandur recognizes the volume as also having been housed at Munkaþverá in his childhood but states that only a single man in all of Eyjafjörður could read it. In both instances, Guðbrandur's memories of Munkaþverá suggest an environment conducive to domestic use and circulation of older manuscripts in the seventeenth century, including (perhaps surprisingly) religious literature on saints.

Rather than keeping Möðruvallabók at Munkaþverá, however, the fictionalized object biography in *Bál tímans* shifts the codex into a domestic setting and a new social network where it can come into contact with conflicting ideas of the manuscript's significance: Jarþrúður is the last owner to value Möðruvallabók primarily as an object for sharing stories. Antiquarianism places

greater value on the medieval manuscript as a textual authority, and as such it must inevitably be removed from the domestic spaces in which it has lived for centuries and brought to Denmark for safekeeping and use by university-educated scholars.

Although modern scholarship on Old Norse-Icelandic literature, which fundamentally relies on the collection activities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, generally does not criticize the actions of collectors, this shift inevitably came at a loss for Icelandic manuscript culture. *Bál tímans* foregrounds a disturbing aspect of late seventeenth-century manuscript culture: namely, women's gradual loss of ownership and even access to historically significant manuscripts, which gradually entered heavily male-dominated settings such as scholarly libraries. Prior to its transportation to Denmark as an antiquarian treasure in 1686, the medieval manuscript Möðruvallabók, like various other manuscripts that it encounters during its fictionalized travels in *Bál tímans*, is a living, moving object: the seed of a library rather than a fully completed book object. The manuscript undergoes changes that reflect the needs and desires of successive users and owners. Manuscript ownership provides not only good reading on long winter nights but also an active social role in manuscript culture. Before archives are built, women such as Margrét Vigfúsdóttir, Elín Pálsdóttir, and Jarþrúður Hákonardóttir take centre stage. In the period 1700–1730, however, there is a palpable drop in women's ownership of saga manuscripts (Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir 205), and this is reflected in the male-dominated episodes that follow the codex's story in *Bál tímans* from 1686 to the early twentieth century.

## From safe domestic interiors to burning archival spaces

The final chapter of *Bál tímans* set in the early modern period takes place in Copenhagen in 1721–1728 and describes the activities of Icelandic manuscript collector and professor Árni Magnússon (1663–1730): the well-documented story of how he acquired Möðruvallabók after Bartholin's death in 1691 but nearly lost it again in the Fire of Copenhagen in 1728, in which Árni Magnússon's house burned to the ground. The blaze claimed a large part of Árni Magnússon's personal papers and library; the loss of so much of Árni Magnússon's personal collection, including his research notes, and the near-loss of a good part of Iceland's surviving medieval manuscript heritage, has made this event one of the single most devastating cultural disasters in Icelandic history.

In *Bál tímans*, Möðruvallabók remarks that Árni Magnússon spends a lot of time owning Möðruvallabók and not much time actually reading it. Its use remains limited in the decades following Árni's death, and the manuscript's

relegation to the safety of a box contrasts sharply with the rich home environments in which readers and listeners interacted closely and enthusiastically with the texts. Here, *Bál tímans* echoes the sentiment of Hermann Pálsson, who observed that the traditional practice of reading aloud from manuscripts in Iceland was negatively impacted by the large-scale collection and export of Icelandic manuscripts to Scandinavia, starting in the mid-seventeenth century (17, 23–24). As Hermann Pálsson pointed out, social reading was common in pre-modern Iceland, and through these reading practices the presence of a literary manuscript in a household could provide access for the entire household, literate and illiterate alike.

Countering the accepted narrative that a manuscript is inherently safer in an institutional setting than a domestic one, the manuscript again nearly perishes by fire in 1807, when Copenhagen is bombarded by British forces in a surprise attack on the neutral country. This is the manuscript's third encounter with fire in *Bál tímans*, all of which occur in a learned environment: Hólar, Árni Magnússon's library, and the library of the University of Copenhagen. In taking the perspective of the codex, which desires above all other things to tell its stories, *Bál tímans* captures what could potentially be lost in bringing a cultural object belonging to a living tradition into an archival setting. In the words of Möðruvallabók (71):

Það er ekki slæmt að búa á safni. Ekki alsæmt. En það hefur runnið upp fyrir mér að ég verð ekki framar á heimili. Það munu ekki fleiri börn læra að lesa á síðunum mínum.

[It's not bad to live in an archive. Not all bad. But I have come to realize that I will never again be in someone's home. No more children will learn to read from my leaves.]

As *Bál tímans* memorably demonstrates, a manuscript can function as more than a simple collection of stories, and there is an ongoing tension between those who wish to use Möðruvallabók as an object of power to control or influence others and those who wish to enjoy and read its stories, whether individually or in a social reading context. In the latter category are Margrét, Elín, and Jarþrúður, all of whom are depicted as taking great pleasure in Möðruvallabók's stories. As owners of Möðruvallabók, Margrét and Elín make careful decisions about the manuscript's future that ensure its preservation for posterity. In the opposite camp are antagonists such as the imagined bully at the Latin school, who burns stories simply to hurt others, and the careless Björn Magnússon, who in *Bál tímans* manages to lose some of Möðruvallabók's leaves before presenting it to Bartholin. After its arrival in Copenhagen, Möðruvallabók is relieved to be free from Björn but nevertheless finds itself somewhat bored in an elite space

from which most social groups are excluded. Over a century passes between a brief imagined encounter between Möðruvallabók, Jón Sigurðsson and Jónas Hallgrímsson in 1845 and the penultimate chapter, which takes place in 1963–1974 as the manuscript is readied for return to Iceland.

In the book's final chapter, set in 2023, the opening of a new manuscript exhibition space in Reykjavík where Möðruvallabók is placed on public display finally provides the codex with a setting in which it can again become a storyteller and interact with children. However, like the paper in *En Bog Papirs Historie*, the stories that it transmits to the readership of *Bál tímans* are the stories of its owners and the layers of “object memory” with which it has become imbued, rather than tales of textual affinities with the archetypes of the past.

## Conclusion

The long lifespan of the vellum codex, at least in comparison to human lives, is accompanied by continual transitions between social networks and acquisition of new layers of meaning. Within an object biography, a material object can move through time and space without a single network (such as that of initial production) being strongly privileged over others. The Möðruvallabók codex, like most other medieval Icelandic manuscripts, has a largely untraceable history of object-user interaction, but the construction of its provenance in *Bál tímans* builds on relationships and relationship patterns observed in earlier scholarship. By constructing the story of Möðruvallabók as a fictionalized object biography, *Bál tímans* depicts the changing significance of the medieval manuscript from the time of commissioning to the present day, including the elusive phenomenon of generation-based manuscript transmission and the impact of manuscript collection efforts in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

While the message of *Bál tímans* may not be as plainly stated as in Eggert Ólafsson's *Teflöskuvísur*, accessibility is one of the book's most important underlying themes, with the exhibition space in its final scene depicted as achieving a balance between the needs of scholars and the inequalities of access that can arise from archive-building processes and the creation of protective spaces that intentionally or unintentionally exclude certain social groups. The accumulation of many lifetimes of history in one object also encourages the book's reader to reconsider modern conceptions of literacy, in which the written word increasingly appears in a disposable or single-view context, in contrast to the manuscript's centrality to social reading practices down the generations and the care with which the majority of its owners and users treat it. Few objects of digital manuscript culture are likely to live as long as

Möðruvallabók, but the book offers a *longue durée* perspective on the changing ways in which we consume literature into the present day.

#### NOTES

1. Thanks to Margrét Eggertsdóttir, the editor, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this chapter. This project, grant no. 218209-051, was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund.
2. Koivukari's novel was translated into Icelandic by Sigurður Karlsson as *Galdra-Manga: Dóttir þess brennda* [Maggie the Witch: The Burned Man's Daughter] (2018).

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