

Bearing Dead Seals and Good Luck

Similarities Between Bears and Hidden People in Selected Icelandic Folk Legends

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Abstract

*This paper offers an analysis of the development, transmission and reception of selected Icelandic folk legends about bears which share features in common with legends of elves (Icel. *álfar*) and hidden people (Icel. *huldufólk*). We explore the ideas, attitudes and motifs underpinning representations of bears in this sub-set of legends in a historical and narrative context and offer a close analysis of six selected tales. We address how narrators develop on pre-existing narrative conventions to portray the bear in a new light and touch upon the responses that these portrayals may evoke among a domestic and international audience.*

Keywords

Folklore, Narrative, Folk belief, Animals

Introduction

The polar bear is an occasional visitor to Iceland and a constant presence in the folk narrative tradition. Recorded narratives about bears in Iceland span just short of a millennium and are subject to great variation in both form and content. The aim of this paper is to take a close look at bear legends which share common features with legends of elves (Icel. *álfar*) and hidden people (Icel. *huldufólk*), with a view to exploring the pre-existing motifs and ideas about bears that they draw upon, their own characteristics when they are recorded in the 19th century, and finally their dissemination and intended audience. We give particular consideration to the question of what these legends can possibly tell us about the boundaries drawn between the storytelling societies and this wild animal “Other”.

Scholars of nordic narrative culture have identified an inclination of narrators to draw comparisons between humans perceived as “Other” and supernatural entities throughout the ages.¹ The “Other”, as Tangherlini defines it, is constituted by all legend actants who belong to the “outside realm”. This realm is in direct opposition to the “inner realm” which is bounded by the cultural borders of the tradition group (Tangherlini 1995, 32–33). Lindow has touched upon the marginal position of animals in reference to folklore about the

¹ See e.g. Lindow 1995, 11; Mathisen 2004, 22; Arngrímur Vídalín 2020.

supernatural, but makes a clear distinction between domestic and wild animals. In Scandinavian folklore, he argues that the characteristics of domestic animals are more commonly ascribed to supernatural beings than those of wild animals. With reference to the power dynamics at play between humans and the animals they keep, he questions whether this could indicate an unconscious attempt on the part of humans to distance household animals from themselves (Lindow 1995, 23).

Legends about the (un)Icelandic polar bear provide valuable insights into how the self-image of the tradition group is expressed through narratives of wild visitors seen as posing a threat. Real life bear arrivals in Iceland are events which can spark lingering fear within communities for decades, if not centuries to come. Historically, human responses to bear arrivals have often been violent in character. In legends, however, human values are expressed and then either contrasted with or imposed on the bear. Unlike narratives which associate bears with trolls and ominous water-dwellers, bear narratives resembling legends of *álfar* and *huldufólk* most commonly emphasise affinities between human and bear. They draw on portrayals of bears as human-like, which are to be found across the narrative corpus and from medieval times to the present day and have parallels in many different cultures. By first offering an overview of the many representations of the bear in Icelandic narrative tradition, we examine certain motifs and ideas which lend themselves well to the types of tales recorded in the 19th century which we then subject to close analysis. Although the main focus is on 19th and 20th century folk legends, supporting sources range from medieval literature to interviews we took in 2020.² We consider how the narrative techniques and conventions employed by narrators and collectors of 19th century texts, as well as their intended audiences in Iceland and abroad, have the effect of placing the bear more firmly in the role of a supernatural near-human.

While this research focuses mainly on what tales about animals can tell us about human attitudes, it is worth considering that the human perspective is only one side of the kind of encounters these narratives describe. In recent decades, folklorists taking inspiration from approaches associated with posthumanism and the “animal turn” have paid greater attention to the role of animals in folklore — not only as subject matter but also as participants (Mechling 1989; Thompson 2010; 2019; Magliocco 2018). Other types of bear narratives lend themselves much better to an analysis informed by these approaches than

² Fieldwork was funded by the research project “Visitations: Polar Bears Out of Place”, sponsored by The Icelandic Centre for Research and led by drs. Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson with Kristinn Schram and Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir.

the ones studied in the present paper.³ The six legends analysed here deal with imagined polar bears, but the attitudes that are conveyed in them nonetheless impact the lived realities of real life bears arriving from Greenland in both past and present times.

The Place of Bears in Icelandic Narrative Tradition

The polar bear is not a native species to Iceland, and its visits are rare and unpredictable. Written sources document that over 500 bears have arrived in Iceland since human settlement begun (Karl Skírnisson 2009, 39). Historically they have been more common during particularly cold spells, travelling from Greenland on sea ice. Bears have also been known to swim to land in the spring and early summer months. Bear arrivals occur most in northern extremities such as Strandir, Skagi, Tjörnes, Melrakkaslétta, Langanes and the island of Grímsey, but are by no means exclusive to these areas. The anticipation of a bear's arrival can spark fear in communities which may linger for years — if not decades — after such an event has been reported. It is common that bears are killed on site if they do not flee, or indeed go unnoticed.

For the most part, the folk narrative tradition that has developed around bears reflects these conditions. Conflict and uncertainty are prominent themes and a large proportion of the legends take place in one of the aforementioned susceptible areas. In some cases, a perceived threat of bear attacks and other issues threatening human habitation in isolated areas are conflated, as legends attribute the cessation of human settlement on certain farms solely to bear attacks.⁴ Often the landscapes of bear narratives fit well with Tuan's description of landscapes of fear, as “the almost infinite manifestations of the forces for chaos, natural and human” (Tuan 2013, 6). It comes as no surprise that some of the farms that set the scene for bear attacks in legend have also been associated with other more common threats to human habitation, such as hostile environmental conditions and epidemics, in addition to supernatural phenomena.⁵

³ Many Icelandic bear narratives deal with real-life arrivals and include descriptions of bears' behaviour. The diligence of folklorists and narrators when it came to recording place names correctly has also opened up the option of walking ethnography for researchers who aim to better understand the animal perspective. This approach of supplementing a 'close reading' with a 'close walking' has been applied by Egeler to an analysis of an Icelandic legend which deals with human-animal relations in the context of animal husbandry (Egeler 2021). If we are to view the bear's story as a counter-narrative, this method can be particularly useful for exploring the alternative geographies, spaces and cognitive landscapes it references (Borland & Shuman 2020, 338).

⁴ Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 293–294; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 188–191; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, II:I, 13–19.

⁵ One legend tells of how the people of Keflavík in Látraströnd were found killed by bears by their neighbours from Látur, while another tells of how they were found dead from illness by the same neighbours, with both tragedies occurring over the winter (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 294; III, 44–46). A farm that is the site of a

Bears in Icelandic legends are portrayed as wild animals, distinct from those who live close to humans. Narrative and legal sources on bears being kept by humans have existed since the medieval era, but such relations were exceptional.⁶ In folk narrative of the 19th and 20th centuries, bears' non-domestic status among animals is pronounced in tales of bears killing and harming sheep, cattle, horses and dogs.⁷ In some legends of altercations between bears and domestic animals, the latter are employed as weapons against intruding bears by their human masters.⁸ In one tale, the bear appears to have passed on its wild nature as the horse who killed it becomes unfit for use due to its ferocity and temper (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 209–210). Bear narratives detail many violent killings of humans which are not supported by historical data.⁹ Victims are often the most vulnerable members of society – women, children and newborn babies. Many legends draw on the themes of bear attacks while men are away and the unlikely hero, often combined in the same story.¹⁰ Tales of amicable relations between humans and bears are the exception, as the prospect that one party may cause harm or death to the other underpins most bear narratives. It is likely that representations of this nature informed Hastrup's categorisation of bears, which she groups with foxes and other wild animals in her classification of Icelandic fauna during the period

bear attack in Hornstrandir, Álfsstaðir, is said in another narrative source to be no longer inhabited due to the farmers having died in bad weather on the way home from Furufjörður in the north – the same path supposedly taken by the bear in the first tale. After their deaths, the land was believed to be haunted (Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III, II, 59–62; Helgi Guðmundsson & Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason 1933–1949, II, 268–269). Meanwhile Þeistareykir and Drangar have been associated with both bear attacks and hauntings by ghosts (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 188–191; IV, 380–382; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, II:I, 13–19; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 225–226; Jón Thorarensen, 1971, II, 176–177).

⁶ Tamed bears are mentioned in the medieval sources *Vatnsdæla saga* 1939 44; *Landnámabók* 1968, 2, 219; *Króka-Refs saga* 1959, 142; *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* 1943, *Grœnlendinga þáttur* 1935, 291; *Finnboga saga ramma* 1959, 285; *Hungurvaka* 1778, 14; *Grágás* 1852, I, 156. See discussion in Bourns 2021. We express our thanks to Trausti Dagsson for bringing the later source *Vallaannáll* to our attention, which tells of two cubs who were “allowed to live” upon surfacing in Svarfaðardalur in 1701, but whether they were let free or lived in captivity is not known (*Annálar 1400–1800* 1922–1988, I, 443). More recently, a 19th century folktale makes use of the motif of the captive bear owned by a Scandinavian trader (Hannes Þorsteinsson et al. 1936, II, 173).

⁷ Oddur Björnsson 1977, 274–276; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 608; IV, 3; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III:I, 12–14; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 205–204, 207–208, 209, 211–212, 227–228; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 185–188, 192–193.

⁸ Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 192–193; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 209–210, 227–228; Sagnir úr Skaftafellssýslu 1934; Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 85–89.

⁹ Oddur Björnsson 1977, 274–276; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 291, 292, 293–294, 294–295; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 188, 188–191, 191–192; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 607–608, 608; IV, 3–4, 4, 120–121; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, II:I, 13–19; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 203–204, 207; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 369–370; Jón Espólín 1824, 50–51.

¹⁰ Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 3, 5–6, 6; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 227–228; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 292–3, 293; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 188, 189, 189–190, 190–191; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III:I, 37; Jón Oddsson 1970; Sigtryggur Þorláksson 2020; Jóhannes Sigfússon 2020.

1400–1800. She describes bears as being separate from the human world. They “affronted society, and people might kill them” (Hastrup 1990a, 254). In Hastrup's analysis, bears are designated as “metaphorical non-humans” — a concept drawn from the work of Lévi-Strauss (Hastrup 1990a, 254; Lévi-Strauss 1966, 204–208). Animals categorised as metaphorical are viewed by a human culture to resemble human society, as opposed to “metonymical” animals which are related to humans through forming a part of our technical and economic system (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 205).

Hastrup's designation of bears as metaphorical rather than metonymical is consistent with the folk narrative sources surveyed as part of this research. With a few exceptions of captive bears, they lived separately from people. Their lives and surroundings up until their first contact with humans are detached from the experiences of those who would go on to narrate encounters with them. Dirke's observation that what brought the animal to the point when it encountered the human is quite a different story, and one not known to us, rings particularly true for polar bears travelling to Iceland by sea (Dirke 2017, 164). Often their participation in manmade systems begins only as their life ends. Haraway writes that “only wild animals in the conventional Western sense, as separate as possible from subjugation to human domination, can be themselves. Only wild animals can be somebody, ends not means” (Haraway 2008, 207). In Icelandic bear narratives, we see that discussion of the bear's life before it encountered the human is limited to mere speculation. This is the case both at sea and on land. It is only when polar bears are killed or, in rare cases, captured alive, that they are used by humans to economic or practical ends, for example through consumption of meat or trade in pelts.¹¹ This distance between the lives of humans and bears can also be seen in the bear narratives which resemble legends of *álfar* and *huldufólk* examined in this paper — the two inhabit separate realms, and during interactions one assumes the role of a guest and another as a host.

Throughout the ages, representations of polar bears in Icelandic narratives have contained similar elements to those of *álfar* and *huldufólk*. Aspects of bears' representation which are noteworthy in this regard include the attribution of human-like qualities to them, the idea that transformations between humans and bears can take place and that properties can be transferred, conceptions of parallel bear societies, and the appearance of bears to represent humans in dreams and visions. These elements of bear folklore are by no means

¹¹ Bear meat was occasionally eaten by humans in the 19th century and used as animal fodder when supplies were scarce (Ármann Halldórsson 1979, 136; Guðmundur Guðmundsson 1967, 79–81; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason and Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III:I, 12–14). Polar bear pelts have been a high-value commodity since medieval times (Björn Teitsson 1975) and as recently as the 20th century, the issue of who got to keep the proceeds from the pelt of a slain bear has been a matter of contention (Baldur Óskarsson 1959; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 185–188).

specific to the Icelandic cultural context, and will be discussed further in this section. First, however, it is worth scrutinising Hastrup's designation of bears as “non-humans”, which places them in a different conceptual space to *álfar* and *huldufólk*, classified by Hastrup as “metaphorical humans” (Hastrup 1990a, 265). In Lévi-Strauss' work, the distinction between human and non-human animals is made according to whether a culture permits them to resemble men. Lévi-Strauss supports his designation of birds as metaphorical humans with an example from the Chickasaw nation, indigenous to the Southeast United States, whose lore makes a comparison between birds and a human clan (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 204, 118). *Álfar* and *huldufólk*, as Hastrup rightly observes, lived like humans in the respect that they had farms, families and tended to livestock and are humanised in descriptions of them feeding their infants milk and repaying favours (Hastrup 1990, 263, 261). This parallel nature of the society of *álfar* and *huldufólk* has been detailed by folklorists who have studied these legends more extensively. They search for help, obtain milk for their children and help during childbirth, borrow a ram for their ewes, repay favours and sometimes enter romantic or sexual relationships with humans. People hear church bells, singing and chanting from their dwellings and they're generally Christian – although often seemingly Catholic and with their own hymns (Árni Björnsson 2017, 157–158). As well as religion, they have hierarchical systems similar to those of humans (Valdimar Hafstein 2009, 89; Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 1995, 12–13). They are even said to engage in international commerce (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 17; III, 10–11). Non-human beings, meanwhile, are characterised among other things by a lack of “intrinsic sociability” (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 207). When discussing cattle as “metonymical non-humans”, Lévi-Strauss offers the collective name given to them and the lack of taboo about eating their meat as examples of their non-human status (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 205–207). The choice of species for metaphorical expression varies from one culture to another, as individual cultures will confer significance on different animal or vegetable species, minerals, celestial bodies and other natural phenomena (Lévi-Strauss 1985, 103).

Is it accurate to characterise the Icelanders as having always perceived bears as non-human in nature? The lack of intrinsic sociability identified by Lévi-Strauss as a characteristic of the metaphorical non-human racehorse can be gleaned from selected descriptions of bears (see e.g. *Hrólfs saga kraka* 1960, 56–61). Yet this is not at all the case in the many narratives of bears arriving as a group. In particular, the she-bear with two cubs is a prominent motif in Icelandic bear narratives.¹² The mother bear spotted by an early settler in *Vatnsdæla saga* has since become an emblem of the county of Húnavatnssýsla, with one interviewee in 2020

¹² *Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 42; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 291; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 206–207; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 299–300, 331; Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 85–87; *Annálar 1400–1800* 1922–1988, I, 443; IV, 38.

describing her as “the protector of the area” (Kristján Þorbjörnsson 2020). The emblematic value bestowed on this bear by later societies fits well with McCorristine's observation about 19th century polar exploration, that references to women “became crucial in how men orientated themselves in all-male environments considered desolate, dangerous and heartless” (McCorristine 2018, 176). Although the area around Húnavatn is now inhabited arable land, for the early settlers it represented new territory, far north west of their Scandinavian homelands. This imagery has appealed enough to be reproduced on various types of memorabilia from the area and, as we see in Kristján's comment, has been integrated into individuals' local identity.

It is safe to say that human ideas about gender also influence a portrayal of sociability between two bears in the tale of an arrival at Glettingsnes in 1880–1881. We are told that after Magnús Benónýsson shot a bear, another came the same day, “running off of the ice and going searching” in the area. The informants say that people believed that it was the female mate of the male bear who had been shot (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 208). Yet no mention is made of the second bear having been captured, indicating that its sex in the narrative is based on the perceived motivations behind its behaviour alone. Another example of sociability in representations of bears is to be found in descriptions of packs led by a leader. In tales of attacks by a pack of bears, they are often seen following a leader, identified as such by its size or its red cheeks.¹³ As has been identified among *álfar* and *huldufólk*, in these types of legends we see that bears are represented as adhering to hierarchies. This is clearest in tales of the polar bear king, described as being very big, red-cheeked and having a horn with a platinum gold stone in. He came to land in Grímsey and was followed by a line of bears. When he encountered a human priest he bowed and continued to lead his pack. When the bear at the end of the line killed a sheep, the polar bear king killed it in turn (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 3). In another version of the legend, it is the priest who bows for the bear king, who bows his head in return (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 205–206). The polar bear king's role in administering capital punishment, as well as the respectful exchanges it engages in with a leader of a human society, demonstrates clearly that there were some storytellers who conceived of a parallel bear society.

As the analysis of six legends later on in this article will demonstrate, the nature of bears' relationships with humans in folk legends was sometimes similar to relationships between humans and *álfar* / *huldufólk* in the respect that they can reward good deeds and punish poor treatment (Kristinn Schram & Jón Jónsson 2019, 150). In addition to the legends analysed in this paper, which mostly deal with amicable relations between human and bear,

¹³ Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 294; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, II, 288–291; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 608.

some narratives describe negative consequences incurred by mistreatment of bears. Sometimes, punishments are doled out by other bears (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 211–212; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 608–609). In other legends, however, misfortunes with no apparent cause are interpreted as a consequence of a bear killing. These are particularly concentrated around north-eastern Iceland, and fates attributed to the killing of bears include drowning (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 291; Benjamín Sigvaldason 1950, 65–70), loss of health (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 291; Hólmsteinn Helgason 1977), death and impotency of sheep (Níels Árni Lund 2016, I, 160–161), financial damage (Hólmsteinn Helgason 1977; Níels Árni Lund 2016, I, 160–161) and the loss of children (Hólmsteinn Helgason 1977). In a similar way to the legends of misfortunes incurred by the disruption of *álfar* and *huldufólk* dwellings studied by Valdimar Hafstein, these stories are — contrary to most contemporary legends — “almost always based to a greater or lesser degree on actual occurrences and the experience of real people” (Valdimar Hafstein 2009, 90).

Without a doubt, many portrayals of bears in Icelandic narratives are devoid of human-like elements. But representations of bears as savage intruders and perceptions of them as human-like are not, however, necessarily mutually exclusive within a given culture. This has been attested to in research on bear narratives in diverse cultural contexts. In the Inuit folklore and mythology studied by d'Anglure, he describes an ambiguous relationship between women and bears. Oral tradition told of violent attacks on women by hungry bears that unexpectedly appeared in camp when the men were away, or intercepted solitary and defenceless women along the paths. Meanwhile, myths existed on the theme of the bear-spouse, the bear as an adoptive child and the bear father (d'Anglure 1990, 184). A more recent report on bear folklore among the indigenous peoples of Chukotka in Russia described tales of unlikely heroes overcoming polar bears, of bears as monsters and of bears as helpers who repay favours existing alongside each other in oral tradition (Kochnev et al 2006). In a folkloric account of an old practice among the Nenets people of the Russian far north, we see fear of the bear as a predator in tandem with beliefs about its ability to relate to humans within the same source. In a bear hunt, the hunter would supposedly hide behind a pregnant woman and shoot from under her armpit, as Nenets people believed that a bear wouldn't attack a pregnant woman (Khomich 1977, 15).¹⁴ The diversity apparent among the subcategories of bear tales in these international studies, particularly the most recent collection from Chukotka, betrays interesting similarities to the narrative culture that surrounds the bear in Iceland.¹⁵

¹⁴ We would like to express our gratitude to Vitalina Ostimchuk for her help with Russian language sources, and to Craig Perham for bringing sources to our attention.

¹⁵ Some have floated the idea of a historical bear cult spanning a large area as an explanation for similarities (Hallowell 1926, 156–163; Vasiliev 1948, 78). This view is not universal, see Rydving 2010.

Within the same Icelandic narratives, bears fatally attack unarmed humans while sparing pregnant women.¹⁶ As touched upon above, bears' perceived closeness to humans has been observed in other studies across a range of cultures.¹⁷ The idea that they understand human speech is a widespread manifestation of this attitude. Wenzel describes a belief among the Canadian Inuit that the polar bear was fully as intelligent as a human being and that it understood when it was being ridiculed or belittled (Wenzel 1983, 94). In Northern Russia, speaking ill of a bear was regarded as dangerous among the Even people (Petrov 1989, 131). This view is also documented among indigenous groups in the USA. One particular Cree belief, that bears respond badly to being told that they have an ugly tail, provides a good example of how striking similarities can exist in folk belief and narrative about bears between seemingly unrelated groups, as this exact insult is reported to offend polar bears in the northern Icelandic island of Grímsey in the 19th century (Hallowell 1926, 45; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 4). Other Icelandic legends either state directly that bears can understand human speech, or interactions are described in a way that suggests this is the case as bears react to verbal provocation, insult and deterrence.¹⁸ This aspect of bears' representation in Icelandic narratives dates back to medieval times. In the sagas *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* and *Finnboga saga ramma*, descriptions of interactions between hunters and bears indicate an ability on the bear's part to understand human speech (*Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* 1959, 358; *Finnboga saga ramma* 1959, 274). The latter saga contains a description of a separate bear who is held captive. That bear not only “understood human speech” but is also presented as communicating its desires in a way that people understand. When told by its master to set out in a swimming contest, it “lay down before his feet and didn't want to go” (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* 1997, III, 239; *Finnboga saga ramma* 1959, 284–285).

Further examples of blurred boundaries between humans and bears in Icelandic 19th and 20th century narratives include the idea that bears recognise their future killer and men who bear their name, be it Björn, Bjarni or Bessi (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 205–206; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 4). In dream narratives, bears are often interpreted as an indicator of a human arrival. This can include a noble guest (Þórunn Ingvarsdóttir 1968; Kolbeinn Kristinsson 1968), a future partner (Guðjón Ingimarsson 2020), a ship of stranded foreigners (Vilhjálmur Jónsson 1968), or as an indication for the name given to an unborn child (Sigríður Kristinsdóttir 2017). This too has precedent in medieval literature. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, bears in dreams are identified as the attendant spirits

¹⁶ Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 291; Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, II:I, 13–19.

¹⁷ See e.g. Honko et al. 1993, 120–121; d'Anglure 1990; Hallowell 1926, 43–45; Petrov 1989, 131; Kochneva 2007, 13–19.

¹⁸ Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 203–204, 205–206, 209; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 4; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, III, 188–191.

(Icel. *fylgjur*) of human males (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1943, 292; *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 64–65; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* 1944, 62–63, 76–77). In *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*, a child's polar bear cub *fylgja* is seen by a waking man with second sight (*Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* 1991, 350). Interpretations of bear symbolism differ, with medieval bear *fylgjur* indicating the movement of one's enemies, but also benevolent suitors and kin (Friesen 2015, 274).

Not only has there been a continuous tradition within Icelandic narrative of bears representing humans, but transformations and the transferral of properties between humans and bears have also been important themes in bear narratives since the medieval era. In the legendary saga *Hrólfs saga kraka*, queen Hvít lays a curse on her stepson Björn, transforming him into his namesake — a bear. In his new form, Björn is hunted and his meat eaten — unwillingly — by his pregnant wife Bera. This leads her to give birth to three sons with animalistic properties. She is forewarned of these effects with the words “it will be obvious from their appearance if you have eaten any of the bear's meat” (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1960, 58; *The saga of King Hrolf Kraki* 1998, 38). Bera's first son, Elg-Fróði, has the appearance of an elk below the navel while the second, Þórir “hundsfótr” has the feet of a dog (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 1960, 61). The third boy, Böðvar Bjarki, had no obvious effects at birth. He is later associated with the bear when the reader is left to draw the conclusion that a bear on the battlefield had indeed been Böðvar Bjarki, who is sitting idle during the bear's attack and when he returns the bear is nowhere to be seen (*Hrólfs saga kraki* 1960, 116–119). Scholars of medieval literature Ellis Davidson and Tolley have both drawn attention to similarities between the tale of Böðvar Bjarki and Sámi bear myths, with Tolley identifying similarities between a transferral of a skin from father to son in a Swedish South Sámi bear poem and this metaphorical passing on of the 'skin' during this transformation (Ellis Davidson 1978, 128–129; Tolley 2007, 7–15). Writing about Böðvar Bjarki's battlefield scene in the context of the idea of the *berserkr* warrior, which appears widely in Icelandic medieval texts, Schjødt considers it obvious that bears play a prominent role in conceptions of *berserkr*. To be *berserkr*, argues Schjødt, has to do with ritual or symbolic transformation (Schjødt 2006, 888). There is by no means consensus on the issue of the possible connections between *berserkr* warriors and bears, as the role played by the latter in the etymology and conceptions of this phenomenon has been the subject of debate.¹⁹

The Icelandic book of settlement *Landnámabók* contains two accounts of transformation between human and bear, with one occurring during a fight between the neighbours Stórolfr and Dufþakr. It was witnessed by a man with second sight as being

¹⁹ Güntert 1912, 19–20; Noreen 1932; Kuhn 1949, 107; von See 1961, 132–135; Liberman 2005, 410; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2001, ccxii–ccxiii; 2007, 281.

between a bear and a bull. (*Landnámabók* 1968, 356).²⁰ The second account in *Landnámabók* tells of a man assuming a wild nature after eating the meat of the bear — in this case a polar bear that had arrived in Melrakkaslétta (*Landnámabók* 1968, 286). This is perhaps the earliest narrative of bear-human transformations which clearly reflects the circumstances of unexpected polar bear arrivals in northern Iceland. An account of transformation from bear to human is to be found in the later works of Jón *lærði* Guðmundsson (b. 1574, d. 1658). He describes how polar bears lie in hibernation, starving themselves out of their bear skin for 30 days and 30 nights. If no human is nearby to burn or dispose of the bear skin, the bear is compelled to assume his ursid form again and can become even more fierce (Jón Guðmundsson 1924, 15). The idea that bears can cast off and put on their hide is yet another example of one with parallels in a distant culture, having been documented in Russia (Kochneva 2007, 14–15). Transformation between human and bear occur in later folk narrative in Iceland, such as the wonder-tales “Bjarndrengur” and “Hvað þýðir “sár”?” (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 650–653; Björn Stefánsson 1926, 10). It is a central theme in the legend “Bear births a child”, which shall be addressed in greater detail in this paper.

Similarly, the idea that a bear's properties can be transferred through its bodily produce has continued to crop up in narratives up to the present day. In a phenomenon called *bjarnylur*, a bear's inner warmth is said to be passed on to children born on their pelts (*Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* 1943, 294; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 605, 608). One 20th century folklore collector describes a belief that the bear's strength is passed on through its milk (Jóhannes Friðlaugsson 1935, 389). In an interview taken in 2020, Stígur Stígsson from Horn in Hornstrandir (b. 1930) described an old belief that eating a bear's heart will make one fearless. This belief had been Stígur's motivation to take a bite of the heart of a bear killed in Hornvík in 1963. A seasoned abseiler, Stígur said “although I was always hanging around the cliffs, I was always a little scared of heights and then I saw a good opportunity to relieve myself of this fear by taking a bite of a bear's heart” (Stígur Stígsson 2020). This method proved ineffective, and Stígur's discussion of the events — from the encounter in Hornvík to an ill-fated attempt to sell the bear meat to locals in Ísafjörður — is coloured by a sense of humour. Although by no means a sincere expression of his own belief in this phenomenon, his narrative provides a source on a folk belief that has not been widely documented in

²⁰ Absent from this short *Landnámabók* account is the description of an idle human body while the bear is in combat as we see in the account of Böðvar Bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Tolley considers the lack of other Germanic sources containing the notion that a warrior's free soul could assume the form of a bear to suggest that the *Hrólfs saga kraka* account could have Sámi origins (Tolley 2007, 6–7). It is worth mentioning that Ellis Davidson has however indicated that this episode from *Landnámabók* could also have roots in Sámi bear lore, as Stórólfr is the son of Ketill Hæng, who came from a region where Sámi people dwelt (Ellis Davidson 1978, 131–132).

Iceland, yet has widespread international parallels (Pentikäinen 2007, 44; Kochneva 2007, 55). It is yet another example of the blurred boundaries between bear and human in Icelandic narrative culture and indicates a certain continuity from the earliest narrative sources to present-day living memory. It is worth noting that opportunities for knowledge of this belief to be passed on are now fewer than they were, as current rules require bears' bodies to be released to the authorities, prohibiting the consumption and sale of bear meat. Concerns about trichinosis, which Stígur and his companions were not familiar with until the authorities intervened in their venture, provide a further indication that this particular piece of folklore reflects conditions which are specific to a bygone era.

Stígur's recollection of this old belief leads us to another important element of bears' representation in narrative tradition which leaves a clear mark on *álfar* and *huldufólk*-like tales. That is, of the associations storytellers make between bears and marine resources. In Stígur's narrative, the consumption of the bear's heart was intended to endow him with courage to better navigate a dangerous marine landscape to acquire bird eggs to sell. This close conceptual connection between wild nature and marine resources has been identified by Hastrup, who exemplifies this observation with a tale linking a hunter's success in a bear hunt with his great skills in shark catching (Hastrup 1990a, 250–251; Jón Espólín 1824, 50–51). Connections between bear killings and other tasks related to the acquisition of provisions from the sea and beach are to be found in folktales from the 19th century, as well as later narratives of lived experiences. In a legend from the 19th century, the teenager Hallvarður Hallsson, also from Horn in Hornstrandir, kills a bear found in the fish store with a knife intended for cutting up shark (Helgi Guðmundsson and Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason 1933–1949, 98). A legend recorded in 1906 from Northern Iceland tells of Hvanndala-Árni, who ventured out onto the ice and robbed a bear of a seal it had caught (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964–1965, II, 288–291). Another legend published in an Icelandic folklore collection but identified as coming from unspecified Greenlandic sources tells of a polar bear overcoming a walrus — only for both animals to be killed by a man who would leave with a sled laden with walrus meat and the bear's pelt (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, IV, 213–215). Associations between bears and the marine world are not only to be found in the details of narratives, but also in the words narrators choose. Reimar Vilmundarson (b. 1972) described the atmosphere in the town of Bolungarvík in 1993 when a group of fishermen came to land with a bear they had killed at sea. He recalled “there was very much excitement among the locals to see it and the crew was really proud of what a fine catch (Icel. *fengur*) they had” (Reimar Vilmundarson 2020). The word *fengur* has connotations of taking, catching, finding and acquiring. As we will demonstrate in the following sections, this theme of harnessing resources will prove similarly important in narratives about amicable relations between humans and polar bears as it has in those marred by violence and conflict.

A Tale of Touch and Transformation: “Bear Births a Child”

“Bear births a child” (Icel. *björn á börn*) is a short legend published in Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*. It is included in both editions of the corpus, published 1862–1864 and 1954–1961 respectively (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606; 1862–1864, I, 608). In both editions, it appears first of all the bear legends, printed only below a brief descriptive text about the *bjarnylur* (i.e. bear's warmth) phenomenon. Set on the island of Grímsey off Iceland's north coast, it tells of how a female bear birthed a human child in a farmer's barn. The farmer took the child, a girl, and raised her for some time. The girl sought to get out to sea and when she eventually succeeded, the bear came and threw her paw over the child. With that gesture, the girl turned into a bear cub:

“Það er sagt um björninn að hann sé maður í álögum og eigi birnan börn, en þau verði að húnum ef hún nær að slá yfir þau hramminum. Frá því hefur verið sagt að í Grenivík á Grímsey hafi maður einu sinni komið út og séð birnu sem bar sig hálf-aumlega. Hann sótti henni inn kúamjólk og gaf henni. Seinna um kvöldið þegar hann fór að taka til heyið lá hún í hlöðunni og var að gjóta. Hann náði þá einum unga hennar og var það almennilegt meybarn. Fór maðurinn svo inn með barnið og ól það upp nokkra stund; óx hún og dafnaði vel, en sótti mjög út þegar hún var komin á legg og til sjávar. Loksins tókst henni að komast út á ís á víkinni; kom þá birnan að og brá yfir hana hramminum; við það brá henni svo að hún varð að bjarndýrshún.”

“It is said that the bear is a man under a spell and that female bears give birth to children, but they become cubs if she is able to throw her paw over them. It has been said that in Grenivík in Grímsey a man once went outside and saw a female bear who carried herself quite wretchedly. He fetched cow's milk and gave it to her. Later that evening when he went to collect hay she lay in a barn and was giving birth. He took one of her young and it was a fine girl child. The man brought the child inside and raised it for a while. She grew and flourished well, but as she got older she sought greatly to go out and to sea. Finally she succeeded and went out on the ice in the bay. The female bear then came towards her and covered her with her paw. With that she transformed into a bear cub.”

(Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606)

The situation with the original source, described only as Jón Norðmann's manuscript, makes it difficult to ascertain whether and to what extent the story could have been edited for publication. Jón Norðmann Jónsson (b. 1820, d. 1877) was a priest in Grímsey. During the years 1846–1849, he wrote a manuscript called *Grímseyjarlýsing* (i.e. description of Grímsey), which contains a version of this tale. That version is shorter than the legend published in Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, and lacks the detail of the farmer's gift of milk. *Grímseyjarlýsing* is still extant, and the manuscript, Lbs 124 4to, has been published in an edition by Finnur Sigmundsson (1946). Another collection of Jón Norðmann's material, *Allrahanda*, has also survived and been published, while much of his other work was destroyed in a fire in Akureyri. So while we cannot discount the possibility that another version, or versions, of “Bear births a child” had been recorded by Jón Norðmann and passed on to Jón Árnason, the *Grímseyjarlýsing* version provides an indication that the farmer's gift of milk to the bear was not necessarily always an integral part of the tale:

“Haldið var að húnamóðirin (birnan) fæddi börn, en brygði svo yfir þau hramminum og yrðu þau þá að húnum, og segir ein sagan, að í Grenivík hafi maður einu sinni hitt húnamóður í heytóftinni, fæddi hún þá meybarn, sem hann náði. Var það um hríð fóstrað upp í Grenivík og var snemma frábært og sótti jafnvel til sjávar. Loks komst stúlkan út á ísjaka, kom þar að henni húnamóðirin og brá yfir hana hramminum; varð hún þá að bjarnarhún.”

“It was thought that the mother of cubs (she-bear) gave birth to children, but covered them with her paw and they turned into cubs, and one story says that in Grenivík a man had once met a mother of cubs in a hay barn, and she then birthed a girl child, which he took. It was fostered for a while in Grenivík and quickly became unusual and sought to go out to sea.²¹ Finally the girl got out onto an iceberg, there the mother of cubs came towards her and covered her with her paw. She then became a bear cub.”

(Finnur Sigmundsson 1946, III, 53)

An interesting aspect of this version of the legend is that the female bear is referred to throughout as the mother of cubs (Icel. *húnamóðirin*). This unusual noun has a parallel in Jón lærði Guðmundsson's *Um Íslands aðskiljanlegar náttúrur*, in which the female bear is referred

²¹ The use of the adjective *frábær* to mean unusual is archaic and, indeed, unusual. In older Icelandic, *frábær* is either used to mean unusual or fine and the meaning is context-dependent (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2022). We have made the assumption that it means “unusual” in this context.

to as a cub she-bear (Icel. *húnbera*) (Jón Guðmundsson 1924, 14; Jón Guðmundsson 1590–1634, 29v). In these two sources, the language used clearly reflects the importance placed upon the bear's reproductive abilities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the maternal nature of female bears has historically been an important tenant of their representation in Icelandic narrative, and in some cases the mother bear has gained an emblematic status.

The interaction between human and bear around the time of the birth of cubs is worthy of comment if we are to consider parallels between bear legends and legends of *álfar* and *huldufólk*. There is an established legend tradition in Iceland and elsewhere in Europe in which humans act as midwives to fairies, elves and hidden people. “Midwife to the fairies” legends are a distinct tradition that has been researched and defined by many scholars (see e.g. Christiansen 1958, 91–99; Mac Cárthaigh 1991; Almqvist 2008).²² No bear legend included in this research follows the pattern of any of the Icelandic redactions described by Almqvist (2008). Nonetheless, an awareness of this tradition can provide further cultural and narrative context for legends of birthing and post-partum bears sharing spaces with human companions, raising further questions about whether bears can always be conceived as completely detached from human civilisation in narrative tradition, as Hastrup's analysis would suggest (Hastrup 1990a, 254). Icelandic “midwife to the fairies” legends deal with a human woman or man being called upon to help an *álfur* or *huldufólk* woman give birth. In the version labelled by Almqvist as the “eye ointment redaction”, the human midwife rubs an ointment intended for the baby into their own eyes, giving them the ability to see the world of the *álfar/huldufólk*, which had previously been hidden from them. When discovered, the *álfar/huldufólk* deprive them of this newfound ability. In the more common version, dubbed the “reward redaction”, the legend ends when the midwife is rewarded with a material or immaterial gift (Almqvist 2008).

A reading of “Bear births a child” can lead us to wonder whether the farmer might have been assisting the bear giving birth. The verb used in both versions as the farmer takes the child, *ná* (i.e. get, obtain, catch), could be indicative of close proximity to the bear during the birth. In the version published in *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, there is a greater stress on his assistance to her than there is in *Grímseyjarlýsing* as he provides her with milk in the run-up to the birth. In Icelandic folklore, there is a tradition of narratives about humans

²² Bo Almqvist has noted that in the Icelandic tradition, legends of this type tend to lack the negative traits that are found in the narrative traditions of other countries (such as gifts given to human midwives that could kill them), reflecting friendlier neighbourly relations between humans and fairies (Almqvist 2008, 294).

providing *álfar* and *huldufólk* with milk for their young.²³ Another detail that is only present in the *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* version, that the girl child was “fine” (Icel. *almennilegt*), is again mildly reminiscent of some “midwife to the fairies” legends. Almqvist describes that in these legends, the sex of the newborn is stated with great frequency, as is the case in both versions of “Bear births a child”, and says furthermore that the great size and beauty of the newborn babies is often commented on (Almqvist 2008, 301). This is, however, more common in later narratives included in Almqvist's study than in the earlier folklore collections of Jón Árnason and Sigfús Sigfússon.²⁴ If we are to assume that Jón Árnason was acquainted with the *Grímseyjarlýsing* version of the legend, we may ask whether the greater stylistic similarities between the version of “Bear births a child” that he publishes and tales of amicable relations between humans and *álfar* / *huldufólk* could have influenced his decision to publish the tale in the form he chose. The emphasis on reciprocal relations and the similarities between bears and humans undoubtedly fits well with the narratives the story appears in between, “Bear's warmth” and “The Grímsey islander and the bear”. The latter is explored in greater detail in the next section of this article.

The central theme of “Bear births a child” is that of transformation. The bear's paw as an agent of change features in another narrative, also recorded by Jón Norðmann in both *Grímseyjarlýsing* and *Allrahanda* and published in the 1954–1961 extended edition of Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*. The legend tells of how there was no water in Grímsey until a bear hit a stone with its paw, creating a well called Bjarnarbrunnur (i.e. Bear's well) (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 28; Finnur Sigmundsson 1946, 56, 134). According to *Grímseyjarlýsing*, some believe that Bjarnarbrunnur is the same spring that is called Brynhildur (Finnur Sigmundsson 1946, III, 55–56). In *Allrahanda*, however, this is later corrected as Jón Norðmann claims to have been told in 1862 that Bjarnarbrunnur is in fact a separate spring, Kaldibrunnur (Finnur Sigmundsson 1946, IV, 143). The connection reportedly made by some between Brynhildur and the legend of Bjarnarbrunnur betrays yet another association with childbirth, as Jón Norðmann writes in both *Grímseyjarlýsing* and *Allrahanda* that it was believed that water from Brynhildur had properties which could help women in labour (Finnur Sigmundsson 1946, III, 14; IV, 134). In this case, it would be the bear that facilitates successful childbirth among humans.

²³ See e.g. Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III:I, 54–58, 106–108; III:II, 25–27; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 10–11.

²⁴ Descriptions of *álfur* and *huldufólk* children delivered by humans include “healthy”, “beautiful”, “big and beautiful”, “large and healthy” and “big and promising” (Emilía Biering 1971; Bergsveinn Skúlason 1950, 50; Ingibjörg Lárusdóttir 1944, 85; Guðmundur Gíslason Hagalín 1952, 145; Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, I, 19).

When we are to consider the transformation of the child into a bear cub in “Bear births a child”, it could be argued that its initial likeness to a human invites comparison with *huldufólk* babies in some “midwife to the fairies” legends of the “eye ointment” type, in which the human midwife rubs an ointment or something similar intended for the baby into one of their own eyes, giving them the ability to see the hidden people (Almqvist 2008, 278). In her analysis of this element, Heijnen writes that it is “concerned with identity, the noting of similarities and differences between humans and *huldufólk*. The newborn child is just as unable to see the world of the *huldufólk* as humans are” (Heijnen 2013, 146).²⁵ The girl child in “Bear births a child”, meanwhile, appears just as human as any other child until she is touched by the bear. The description of her behaviour, however, suggests that she is non-human underneath. This fits with Lindow's observation that shape-shifters often retain some fundamental aspect of their otherness (Lindow 1995, 23). Furthermore, the encounter in “Bear births a child” is coloured by a power dynamic that is specific to human-animal relations. This dynamic, between animal and farmer, is seen in the subsequent removal of the bear's child.

Reciprocal Relations Between a Mother Bear and a Grímsey Islander on the Ice

Printed directly after “Bear births a child” in Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* is another tale of a mother bear near Grímsey. In this case, she provided warmth and her own milk to a man who found himself stranded on the ice. This story, entitled “The Grímsey islander and the bear” (Icel. *Grímseyingurinn og bjarndýrið*), is the only bear legend to be included in George Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon's 1864 English translation of selected tales from Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*. In the introduction, the editors make clear that they had a knowledge of other types of bear tales published in Jón Árnason's collection:

“Bears very often shew quite human skill, and the most wonderful good nature. (See, in the Appendix, the Story of the Grímsey Man and the Bear.) It is as well to avoid teasing or bating bears, for they are sure to take vengeance. Stories are current illustrating this fact.

²⁵ It is worth noting that in one legend, the baby is described as blind before treatment was applied (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, III, 29).

When a bear is killed, one must take good care not to behave in any way meanly towards the dying animal. When he has received his death-blow, he lies down quietly and licks his gaping wounds; and if, after this, the hunter takes the dastardly advantage of giving him a further blow, the man's life is from that moment doomed. If a bear, after receiving his death-wound, roars once or more than once, it is to call upon his relatives to take vengeance upon his slayer; and the next year there will come as many bears to the place as roars were uttered. It is an excellent thing to spread the skin of a bear under a child as it is born, for all infants received on that fur obtain thus the “bear's warmth”, or, in other words, become so warm-blooded that they never feel cold”

(Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon 1866, II, cxiii–cxiv)

Here we see a synopsis of selected bear legends published in the first edition of Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (1862–1864, I, 608–611). Most of the bear legends published on these pages place an emphasis on connections between humans and bears, either pre-existing or forged during the course of the tale, to a greater extent than those published in the later extended edition of Jón Árnason's collection (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, IV, 3–6) — or indeed other collections. Two tales printed in the first edition, of a man outwitting a bear who tried to get into a fish store and a young man killing 18 bears who had ravaged a farm, are not included in Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon's synopsis of bear legends. As has been explored in the first section of this article, legends which betray connections between human and bear — while a significant part of the corpus — are by no means the only, or even most common, representations of human-bear relations in Icelandic narrative tradition. Across 19th and 20th century folk narrative, bears are often portrayed as a threat and their killing a work of bravery without negative consequence. The tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear may have been picked for translation because it was considered representative of the legends of good-natured and human-like bears that the editors draw attention to. It has since been included in two later translations, *Icelandic Folk and Fairy Tales* and *Icelandic Folktales* (May Hallmundsson & Hallberg Hallmundsson 2009, 92–93; Boucher 2007, 256–258). On the curation of their translation, May and Hallberg Hallmundsson describe a desire to give an “insight into the life of the people during their long centuries of isolation and perseverance” (Hallmundsson & Hallmundsson 2009, 11–12). A tale of a man stranded on an ice floe off Iceland's Arctic coast fits very nicely with this emphasis.

It is noteworthy that the most widely translated bear tale is one of two narratives not attributed to a named informant, but rather drawn from a children's periodical, *Lítið*

Ungsmannsgaman (1852, 24–26). Considering the nature of the source, it is unsurprising that the style of the tale is closer to a children's work of literature than an oral narrative. This is the case in the Icelandic text, and is exacerbated in the English translation. Within the Icelandic setting, catering to a young audience could also have the effect of placing the issue of polar bear arrivals at a distance. Valk has argued that addressing old stories primarily for children is an important part of a process he identifies within folklore as fictionalisation. This shift in intended audience has the impact of placing them “far away from the world of adults, and into a different time of the childhood of humankind” (Valk 2015, 152).

The story tells of how there was once no fire in Grímsey, and a group of men were sent over the sound to collect firewood on the mainland. The sound was covered with ice, but during the trip one man became separated from the group. A storm started and the ice began to break up, leaving the man stranded on a single iceberg. Then began his encounter with the polar bear:

“In the evening, this piece of ice was drifted against a large floe, up which the man went, and walked over it until he found a she-bear, resting over her young ones. The man was as cold as he was hungry, and in agonies of fear for his life. When the she-bear saw the man, she gazed at him for some time, and then, rising from her lair, went towards and round him, making him signs to come into her lair and lie down beside her cubs. This he did with but half a mind. After this, the animal laid herself down upon him, spreading herself out over him and her young ones, covering them all as well as she could, and, by her signs, managed to make him take her teat into his mouth, and suck, together with her cubs. Thus passed this night.

The next day, the animal rose up from her lair, and gave the man signs to follow her. When they came to the ice, not far thence, the bear flung herself down, giving the man to understand that he was to mount on her back. When the man had mounted, she shook herself till he could no longer hold himself on, and tumbled off. No more attempts were made by her, this time, but the man deemed this play of hers strange enough. Now three days passed in this way; at nights the man rested in her lair and sucked her, but, every morning, she repeated the same exercise, making the man sit on her back and always shaking him off again. The fourth morning, the man could hold himself on her back, shake and twist herself as she would. This day, in the afternoon, she started from the floe, with the man on her back, and swam to the island. When they

came to shore, the man beckoned his bear-friend to follow him, and they went home, and he ordered his best cow to be milked, and gave of the teat-warm milk to the weary bear, as much as she would have. Then he went before her, to his pen, and took forth from it two of his best wethers, tied them together by their horns, and flung them across the back of the bear, who swam away again, with her charge, to her young ones, and had a godly feast of it.”

(Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon 1866, II, 658)

Although its origins can make it problematic to analyse the tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear as a folk legend, the story nonetheless builds on many well established narrative motifs seen in other bear legends. As early as the late 16th or early 17th century, we see the important role that lactation sometimes plays in characterisations of polar bears. In a description by Jón *lærði* Guðmundsson, we are told that after killing the third cub, for whom there is not space, a female polar bear will put the remaining two to her teats and they will “resemble their kind” with every drink they take of their mother's milk (Jón Guðmundsson 1924, 14; 1590–1634, 29v–30r).²⁶ In the tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear, the gift of milk comes at a time when the man is at his weakest. It is possible that the author(s) and/or narrator(s) could have been drawing upon a conception in folk narrative as bear milk as an especially good remedy for weakness or fatigue. Describing a phenomenon in old legends named *bjarnarafl* (i.e. bear's strength), Jóhannes Friðlaugsson writes that children who were given bear's milk to drink “would never be lacking in strength” (Jóhannes Friðlaugsson 1935, 389).

As is the case in the tale “Bear births a child”, in the tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear we see a farmer gift cow's milk to a mother bear. As mentioned previously, gifts of milk from humans to mothers of another kind feature in some *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends. Likewise, *álfar* and *huldufólk* have also been known to gift milk, cream and buttermilk to humans in need.²⁷ In “The Grímsey islander and the bear”, the milk is part of a reciprocal relationship after the farmer has already enjoyed the benefit of the bear's shelter and own milk. As will be demonstrated in the following section, reciprocal exchanges between humans and bears often present in a way that is not dissimilar to representations of relationships between humans and *álfar* or *huldufólk*. Central to the gift-giving relationships detailed between humans and bears in these types of tales are food offerings, which also play a role in

²⁶ Icel. taka þeir mikil og skíót umskipti við móðurmiólkina með hvorium dryck at líkjast síjnu kyne.

²⁷ See e.g. Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 11; III, 37, 41, 41–42, 42, 42–43, 46–47, 49–50; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III, 34–35 and Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 26–27.

narratives about relationships forged between *álfar* (i.e. elves) or *huldufólk* and humans from medieval sources up until the 20th century.²⁸

Reciprocal Relations Between Humans and She-Bears in 19th and 20th Century Folk Narrative

This final section deals with four legends collected during the 19th and 20th centuries which tell of amicable relations between men and bears and include an exchange of gifts or favours. The interactions are almost exclusively with female bears identified as mothers, although the sex of the human engaged in the relationship varies. The legends are found in three collections, Jón Þorkelsson's *Þjóðsögur og munnmæli* (1899, 342–343, 378; 1956, 299–300, 331), Guðmundur Jónsson's *Skafffellskar þjóðsögur og sagnir* (1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92) and Ingólfur Jónsson's *Þjóðlegar sagnir og ævintýri* (1974–1975, II, 85–87). In *Þjóðsögur og munnmæli*, information is not given about the informants of the two legends (“Of a bear and a farmer” and “Of a bear”) beyond the name of the priest who recorded the tales, Friðrik Eggerz (b. 1802, d. 1894) and the year they were recorded, 1852. For the tales in the latter two collections, “She-bear repays a favour” and “The bear at Sævarhólar”, no information at all is given.

Legends of reciprocal interactions between humans and mother bears may not have been as widely documented before the 19th century, but that is not to say that they were completely without precedent. Firstly, they develop upon already established ideas of bears as being human-like, which as we see in older sources are heavily influenced by attitudes towards sex, gender and motherhood. Moreover, the chronicle *Setbergsannáll* by Gísli Þorkelsson (b. c. 1676, d. 1725) includes a short folktale of this sort. It tells of how a she-bear stayed with a widow and her many children, birthing cubs under a bed at the home. The widow prohibited her children from disturbing the cubs and the bear caught provisions from the sea in return (*Annálar 1400–1800* 1922–1988, IV, 38).²⁹ This indicates that by the time the four legends studied in this section were recorded, narratives of reciprocal relations between mother bears and humans had been in circulation for some time. Whether narrators had likewise begun to make use of motifs common in *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends in earlier times

²⁸ *Kormáks saga* 1939, 288; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 152; Gísli Konráðsson 1979–1980, I, 137; Jónas Jónasson 1961, 211; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 27–28; Jóhannes Örn Jónsson 1956, 204–205. See also sources listed in appendix.

²⁹ *Setbergsannáll* exists in nearly its entirety in Gísli Þorkelsson's own handwriting (Jón Jóhannesson 1940, 1–3). This makes it easy to date the source during his lifetime.

is up for speculation. Gísli Þorkelsson's detail that children were prohibited from disturbing the cubs suggests that this may be the case, as prohibitions on child's play are an important feature of many *huldufólk* and *álfar* legends and beliefs (Bjarni Harðarson 2001, 18).

The four legends all start with an initial encounter, followed shortly by an act of kindness on the part of the human. The circumstances of the meeting vary. In “Of a bear and a farmer” (Icel. *Frá bjarndýri og bónda*), a man encounters two bear cubs when stranded on the ice. His initial kindness to the cubs is demonstrated in a description of him “scratching them and petting, and they lick him in return” (Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 300). This good will, expressed through physical touch, is the catalyst for the five weeks of reciprocal gift giving that ensued. Underpinning this description, we can identify a similar conception of the role played by touch to that described by Haraway, as creating attachment sites (Haraway 2008, 36). The other three legends take place in the humans' realm. In “Of a bear” (Icel. *Frá bjarndýri*), a widow comes across a bear who has recently given birth to two cubs in an area of her farm where hay is kept. She provides it with cow's milk during its month-long stay (Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 331). In “The bear at Sævarhólar” (Icel. *Bjarndýrið á Sævarhólum*), two versions of the meeting are given in the different editions of *Skafffellskar þjóðsögur og sagnir*. In the 1945 edition, the housewife came across a female bear with her two newborn cubs at the teat when she went into an outside kitchen to start a fire one morning (Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178). In the newer edition, it's a male farmer who sees the bear when he goes to the kitchen to take smoked meat (Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 91). The 1945 edition of the tale describes how the housewife gave the bear cow's milk and didn't light the fire the first few days of the bear's stay, as not to disturb it. The farmer slaughtered yearlings for the bear and their son sought out the bear's company and gave it food (Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 179). The newer edition of the tale describes the farmer giving the bear sheep and ram meat. For thirteen days the bears were also given milk daily (Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 91). In “She-bear repays a favour” (Icel. *Birna launar fyrir sig*), a male farmer comes across a bear's den by accident near his farm. The bear is lying on two cubs and he felt as though she was pleading with him to leave her and her young in peace by the way she looked at him. The man had already killed two bears in his lifetime but decided to give her “life and feed”. He brought leftover food to her that others believed was for the dogs (Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 87). The description of the communication between the bear and the man builds on the pre-established convention of narrators reading a bear's motivations from its bodily language. As discussed in the first section of this article, this can be seen as early as in the medieval *Finnboga saga ramma* (1959, 284–285). It is also clear in a legend collected in

1901, which states that when a bear raises its forelegs it is asking for mercy (Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, II, 293–294). It is noteworthy that in “She-bear repays a favour”, the act of not killing the bear is presented as the gift of life. Here, we see a power dynamic skewed in favour of the human encroaching onto a tale of supposedly amicable relations. This power dynamic is not present in tales of *álfar* and *huldufólk* and appears to be specific to animal others.

Building on Mauss' argument that the objects of exchange are never completely separated from those who exchange them, Heijnen suggests a parallel between human exchanges with *huldufólk* and Icelandic trade with the foreign world, citing the nature of the *huldufólk*'s gifts (e.g. clothes, accessories) in contrast with the humans' more mundane goods and services (Heijnen 2013, 149; Mauss 1993, 10–13).³⁰ Viewed through this lens, we see not only how humans identify themselves in bear legends, but also how strongly the bear as a folkloric being is tied to the landscape Icelanders see it emerge from. Humans' gifts to bears are heavily associated with agriculture, with animal produce playing an important role. In the 1945 edition of “The bear at Sævarhólar” in particular, we see cultural ideas about gender roles seep through as the housewife gifts the bear with milk and the man with livestock. Milk is also the gift of the widow in “Of a bear”. Cattle farming and dairy production have historically been associated with female labour in Icelandic culture.³¹ Two tales tell of men who become stranded on ice and are assisted by bears. These are “Of a bear and a farmer” and “The bear at Sævarhólar”. In the latter tale, the bear's assistance in this way comes many years later and concerns the son of the couple who gave her food and shelter. In “Of a bear and a farmer”, like in the tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear, the man is allowed to suckle at the teat with the cubs he petted. He appears to assume the place of a child in their family, receiving milk and sharing seals caught by the adult bears. Unusually, a male bear features in this tale as part of the bear family, but takes a less prominent role in the nurturing of the man. The bears give him a ride home, which is also the case in “The bear at Sævarhólar” (Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 299–300; Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 92; 1945, 180). As well as providing warmth and guidance that is necessary for survival in a hostile environment, bears in tales of reciprocal relations often reward humans with dead seals. In three tales, these are provided

³⁰ In some cases the gifts of *huldufólk* are tied to the coastal landscape, like those of bears. In one legend *huldufólk* at Keta are said to have caused a whale to wash up on shore during a food shortage (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 27).

³¹ See Hastrup 1990b, 274; Power 2022, 49–50 and practices described in Jónas Jónasson 1961, 156–157. The same dynamic has been observed in Scandinavian folk life and legend scholarship, see e.g. Söderlind-Myrdal 1977 and Cederström 2021.

as a parting gift, left by the bears outside the human's door (Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 300, 331; Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 91; 1945, 179).

In “She-bear repays a favour”, the bear's gift of choice is not a material one, but that of good fortune. Nonetheless, the connections with the marine environment — and in particular the harnessing of its resources — are still not lost. The bear speaks the words “[I] prophesy that you will never lack good fortune” and in the text, this is put into the context of the man's good luck at sea, in particular shark hunting (Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 86–87). This fits with Hastrup's observation that a close conceptual connection existed in the minds of Icelanders between bears and marine resources (Hastrup 1990a, 250–251). While unusual, the consequences of the she-bear's gift draw on associations between bears and prowess in fishing which are discernible in older narratives. It is the presentation of the gift which is atypical of bear narratives. The she-bear approaches the man in the dream sphere to speak these words, similarly to the she-bear in “The bear at Sævarhólar”, who reveals in a dream to the male farmer that their son's salvation on the ice was her reward for their good treatment of her many years ago (Guðmundur Jónsson 2009, 92; 1945, 180). This stands out from other dream narratives about bears, discussed in the first section of this article, in which their purpose is symbolic. The manner in which bears penetrate the dream sphere in “She-bear repays a favour” and “The bear at Sævarhólar” does, however, bear striking similarities to tales about *álfar* and *huldufólk*, who often enter this realm to dole out punishments, request help and to compensate humans for their good deeds.³²

Conclusion

Bear narratives displaying similarities to legends of amicable relations with *álfar* and *huldufólk* build on pre-established ideas and motifs presenting the bear as near-human. These are to be found in sources dating as far back as the medieval period and include the idea that bears are capable of communication with humans to a greater extent than other animals, descriptions of transformations and transferral of properties between human and bear, and representations of the social and family life of bears mirroring our own. At the core is the notion of a shared experience between human and bear. In this regard, Icelandic bear narratives exhibit similarities to the narrative and folk belief traditions which have

³² Some examples of *álfar* / *huldufólk* legends in which rewards are announced in dreams can be found in Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, I, 23–24; II, I, 19–21; III, I, 54–58, 106–108; III, II, 25–27; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 10–11, 12–14; III, 26, 28, 37–38; Oddur Björnsson 1977, 132; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 15 and Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 36–37, 83.

developed around the bear in diverse cultural contexts. Around the world, the similarities and kinships shared between humans and bears are tightly woven into myth and legend (Henderson 2020, 252).

Portrayals of bears which emphasise shared or similar experiences with humans lend themselves well to narrative motifs and ideas often associated with *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends. *Álfar* and *huldufólk* are portrayed as leading parallel lives to humans and facing challenges that mirror those that a human audience might experience. Although they are “Other”, underpinning their behaviour are often motivations easily understood by us. By employing narrative motifs common to *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends, 19th century narrators – and perhaps those in centuries before – further develop existing conceptions of bears as being human-like, in a way that serves to bring them further into our realm. By placing the bear in the dream sphere, the narrators of “The bear at Sævarhólar” and “She-bear repays a favour” allow it expression through speech. In the waking world, meanwhile, bears are at most believed to understand humans, and human understanding of bears' thoughts is limited to what narrators interpret from a bear's body language. Communication, as Lindow observes, is the basis of society. In legends about humans, speech can have the function of reaffirming one's status as a member of society (Lindow 1982, 274).

The notion of a common nature is most explicit in “Bear births a child”, in which a polar bear appears human at the point of birth. In bears, human narrators sometimes see fear, desperation, grief and a desire to nurture the next generation. Characterisations of bears as human-like have the potential to spark an emotional reaction in their human audience. We witnessed this during fieldwork regarding the importance placed on the maternal role in narratives about female bears. Merete Rabölle, a farmer at Hraun in Skagafjörður, incorporated her knowledge of a bear's reproductive life into her discussion about the bear that had arrived at the farm alone, and ultimately been shot by the authorities in 2008. She described how the bear had given birth to three cubs, and how the third birth must have been relatively recent. It could be that her husband Steinn anticipated that this information could lead to an emotional response when he said, immediately after Merete had told us this, that although it's a pity that polar bears must be killed, he found it important to take into account the conditions people live with who are situated in areas vulnerable to bear arrivals (Steinn Rögnvaldsson & Merete Rabölle 2020).

Undoubtedly, contemporary social attitudes and sensibilities played a large role in how narratives were told, developed and transmitted. This can be seen in the emphasis on the maternal role in sympathetic portrayals of female bears, and also in the comparative lack

of violence in the tales bearing a resemblance to *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends. The source for the tale of the Grímsey islander and the bear, a children's periodical, gives a strong indication of the intended domestic audience for these kinds of tales. By transferring elements of some of the less challenging *huldufólk* and *álfar* legends onto tales of bear encounters, storytellers create an impression of a near-equal relationship between human and bear. For a foreign audience, the transmission of these tales gives an impression of Icelanders as a people in harmony with nature, uncomplicated by the unpalatable realities that follow real life polar bear arrivals. In tales of reciprocal relationships between humans and bears, power imbalances seen in real-life encounters are either absent or only partially addressed. It could be that through these means, some of the challenges posed by tales of bear arrivals are alleviated – challenges still experienced by modern day storytellers. When asked whether he'd tell his grandchildren about his encounters with polar bears, the retired senior police officer Kristján Þorbjörnsson replied “no, certainly not [...] I often tell them stories about the foals and the lambs. But never about polar bears” (Kristján Þorbjörnsson 2020).

Appendix

Summary table of similarities between legends of *álfar* and *huldufólk* and the six bear legends subjected to analysis in this paper

Motif or feature of legend	Bear legends	Examples of legends about <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> ³³	Notable differences
Rewards announced in dream sphere	Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92; Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 85–87.	Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, I, 23–24; II,I, 19–21; III, I, 54–58, 106–108; III, II, 25–27; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 10–11, 12–14; III, 26, 28, 37–38; Oddur Björnsson 1977, 132; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 15; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 36–37, 83.	Rewards of <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> are often material objects, while the two instances of bears announcing their rewards in the dream sphere concern help at sea and good luck. When <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> give immaterial gifts, it is often stated that they cannot afford to do otherwise. Financial hardship, needless to say, is not a consideration for polar bears. In this respect, the society of <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> still mirrors human life to a greater extent than that of bears, even in legends which make use of similar motifs and ideas.
Humans gift milk	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606, 606–607; Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 331.	Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason & Oddur Gíslason 1954–1959, III, I, 106–108; III, I, 54–58, 106–108; III, II, 25–27; Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 9–10 (buttermilk), 10–11; III, 6–7, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 36–37, 45; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III,	Gifts of milk to <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> are sometimes more like offerings, left in a certain place for invisible beings to collect. In other legends, <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> take the milk themselves from

³³ List is not extensive and further research would yield more examples.

		31–32; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 26, 28–34.	humans' livestock. In bear legends, milk is simply presented to the bear.
Milk gifted to humans	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606–607; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 299–300	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 11; III, 37, 41, 41–42, 42, 42–43, 46–47, 49–50; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III, 34–35; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 26–27.	In bear legends they give their own milk rather than dairy produce. <i>Álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> often give buttermilk or cream.
Humans gift food	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606–607; Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92; Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 85–87; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 299–300.	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 9, 12–14; III, 25, 26, 37–38; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III, 15–16; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 27–28.	Gifts of food to bears are often in the form of whole livestock, whereas <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> receive more manageable portions. Similarly to gifts of milk, food gifts are often left out for <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> to collect.
Food gifted to humans	Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 299–300, 331.	Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 11–12, 25, 26, 26–27, 27; III, 6–7, 23, 29–30, 41, 44, 49–50; Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III, 45–46; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, I, 24, 34–35.	Bears give marine produce (seals) while the food gifts of <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> are either unspecified or similar to a human diet. One notable exception is the whale they are said to have caused to wash ashore at Keta (Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 27). Some legends of <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> offering food culminate in humans' rejection of the food, and therefore of the good fortune that would have followed its consumption. This element is absent from the bear legends of food exchanges.

<p>Birth takes place in the company of humans</p>	<p>Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606.</p> <p>In “The bear at Sævarhólar”, the birth appears to have taken place on the humans' land but in their absence (Guðmundur Jónsson 1945, 178–180; 2009, 91–92). This is also suggested in “She-bear repays a favour” and “Of a bear” (Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, II, 85–87; Jón Þorkelsson 1956, 331).</p>	<p>Many examples. See esp. various narratives in Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 15–24, III, 29–36 and Sigfús Sigfússon 1982–1993, III, 36–46. Midwife to the Fairies legends have been assigned the number ML 5070 in Christensen's type-list <i>The Migratory Legends</i> (1958, 91–99). See study of 100 Icelandic variants in Almqvist (2008).</p>	<p>Bears simply give birth in humans' spaces. Unlike in “midwife to the fairies” tales, there is no indication that human intervention is necessary for the success of the birth. These tales do not follow the pattern of “midwife to the fairies” legends. Furthermore, bears give birth in human spaces while <i>álfar</i> and <i>huldufólk</i> births nearly always happen in their own realm with the human as a guest. This is, however, not without exception– see Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 22–23. Another notable difference is that the human in “Bear births a child” takes the bear's child.</p>
<p>Narrator describes the appearance of newborn</p>	<p>Jón Árnason 1954–1960, I, 606.</p>	<p>Emilía Biering 1971; Bergsveinn Skúlason 1950, 49–53; Ingibjörg Lárusdóttir 1944, 84–86; Guðmundur Gíslason Hagalín 1952, 142–156; Ingólfur Jónsson 1974–1975, I, 17–21.</p>	

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