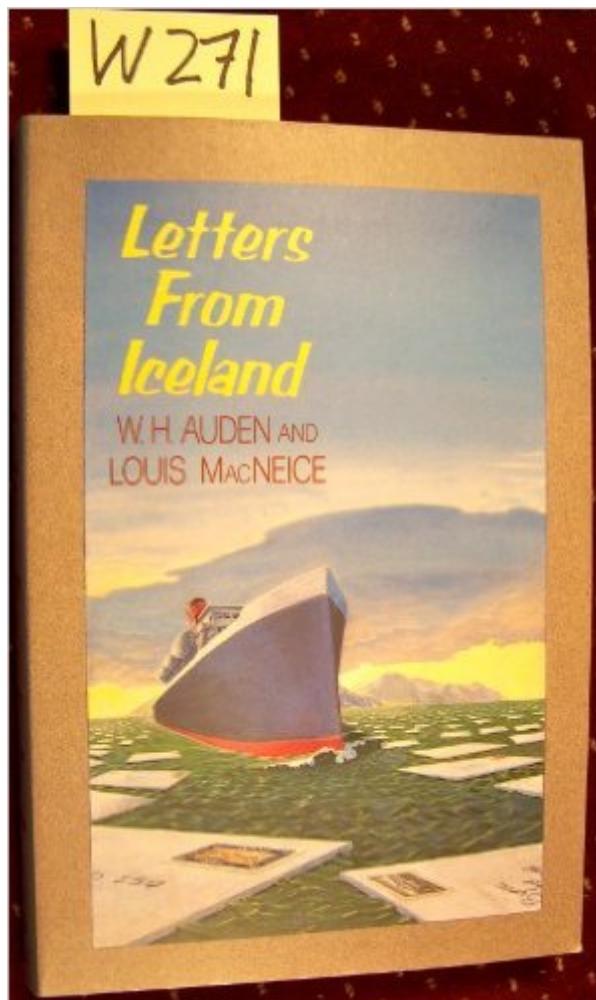


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Letters From Iceland (Armchair Traveller Series)



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A very unusual and enjoyable travel book by the British poets WH Auden and Louis MacNeice. In the mid-30s, Auden and MacNeice undertook a tour of Iceland. Auden and MacNeice were then apparently supporting themselves partly by journalism and writing, and apparently had a contract for a travel book. Auden had an interest in Scandinavian mythology and the saga literature dating back to his childhood. The result is a unusual and rather entertaining book. To a large extent, this book is a pastiche. Much of the book is ostensible letters to friends in Britain describing the trip. Many of the letters are in the form of verse and several of Auden's letters are addressed to Lord Byron using a verse form of which Byron was fond. The poetry is a combination of description of the trip, witty commentary on current events, and some more serious reflections. The technical quality of the poetry is often impressive. Other parts of the book are equally unusual. In a set of prose letters written by MacNeice, he adopts the character of a single woman traveling with a group of English schoolgirls. Another section is a set of selections from prior travel books on Iceland. The real focus of the book is not Iceland but the authors' preoccupations. Much of the poetry is very enjoyable and some of it is excellent. Despite the virtues of this book, it is somewhat dated. A fair amount of the book will be hard to understand without a fairly detailed knowledge of interwar Britain. To make it more readily comprehensible to most readers would require a fair amount of annotation, something no publisher would be willing to pay for at this time. This book is probably of most interest to individuals (like me) very fond of and curious about Auden and his milieu.

In the movie "Away From Her," a brilliantly written story and well directed and beautifully acted drama about a man losing his wife to Alzheimer Disease, there are several scenes where he reads to her these beautiful, poetic excerpts from this book... they of course use appropriate parts of the book to suit the context of the film, but it is lovely on its own. While it is technically a travel book, it is filled with this brilliant poetry that is well worth reading and owning.

Letters from Iceland (Armchair Traveller Series) is first and foremost a travel book, but it also covers history as it was first written in 1936, literature and humor. In 1936 poets W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice took a summer journey to Iceland and sent letters home that are a combination of poetry and prose. This is an interesting snapshot of the two poets and their journey to Iceland after World War I and before World War II. Sometimes lighthearted and filled with joy and love for the country, other times a bit snarky and mirroring a subtle disappointment in the journey. Having been to Iceland I enjoyed their tales of the food, the people and the traditions. This book won't be for everyone, but if you like poetry, literature, and Iceland then the three elements will provide you with a really enjoyable read!

First, since everyone to whom I speak about this book asks, I will say how I first chanced upon it. I was reading a 2006 review of Rebecca West's masterpiece of travel literature, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and bit of Auden was quoted to describe her choice of medium: "I want a form that's large enough to swim in, / And talk on any subject that I choose, / From natural scenery to men and women, / Myself, the arts, the European news: / And since she's on a holiday, my Muse / Is out to please, find everything delightful / And only now and then be mildly spiteful." I was simply delighted by the stanza and decided to secure the book of poetry that contained it. I found it was titled *Letters from Iceland*, but then found that it was mostly just that--a collection of letters! There is one long Letter to Lord Byron that appears in parts throughout, but most of the book is just very pleasant letters with excellent descriptions of persons, manners, and other things of Icelandic sort. A chapter or two is just excerpts from various travel guides, but they are pieced together for a very enjoyable effect. The bits of lore or history are also great incentive to enter into Icelandic literature. The author is insightful on matters of gender and religion. The only part that I could not enjoy was the Last Will and Testament, which ran on for pages and had an unpleasant rhyme scheme (ABA). I would be surprised to hear that anyone has ever read the whole thing aloud. It is witty every so often, but nothing to compare to the rest of the book. I had never thought to visit Iceland, and Auden

doesn't seem to recommend it, but if I do go (and now I certainly might!), I will glad to have read this little book. It reads quickly; highly recommended for leisure.

Vintage Auden, but only half of it is actually *about* Iceland. And as fascinating as it is, it's dated. Don't expect up-to-date vignettes about this country, which has changed drastically since Auden visited in the 30's.

The writing establishes the status of Iceland in mid-last century which is interesting for its contrasts with contemporary times. The poems written to poets then long deceased provide food for thought even if they are written perhaps more hurriedly than their supposed recipients might have worked.

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