

*J. E. Lofness*  
Arlington, Vermont March 21, 1946

Dear Mr. Knopf:

It seems to me rather a long time since I have had occasion to write you, and longer yet since I've had so fine a reason for a letter -- my great admiration for "Independent People", and my great satisfaction that, chosen by the Book of the Month Club, that noble book is going to reach so large a number of American readers.

At the last meeting of the Committee of Selection of the BOM when, with unanimous enthusiasm "Independent People" as chosen, it was also unanimously agreed that this book, intended for Icelandic and Scandinavian readers would be better understood and more appreciated by the immensely numerous American readers to whom it will be presented, if it could be somewhat shortened. Nothing cut out from it, in toto, just some of the longer, more developed passages presented in somewhat more compressed form.

We are eager to have the book as fully successful in the U.S.A. as possible, and wondered if it would be out of place for us to put our ideas on this point to the accomplished author of this great novel. The book cannot be presented to American readers in Icelandic. It must be put into English --- always with some loss of savor as is inevitable in all translation. But of course unless it is put into English it would be unintelligible. Our idea is that some compression of some passages would be analogous to translation --- just a way of making the book more intelligible to the readers it is to have here in our country.

I was the member of the Committee deputed to write you about this, perhaps partly because of my life-long interest in Scandinavian life and letters, but largely because of my especially whole-hearted admiration of Indepent People.

No matter how carefully one explains (and excuses) oneself, it remains awkward to suggest changes to a literary master in a rugged masterpiece to which he has given his very finest powers --- even to adapt it to a nation of readers entirely different from those he had in mind when he wrote the book. I won't therefore try to

find any persuasive ways to explain what I've been asked to write you, but just set down --- for the author to take or leave as he decides, of course --- some of the ideas we five members of the Committee of Selection had about the possibilities for shortening some of the passages in this novel.

The passages I select for mention I chose because they show the kind of thing we have in mind.

Pages 110--118 Bjartur's visit to the minister. His slowness in getting around to announce his wife's death is wonderfully characteristic; the passage is one of the most portrait-painting in the book. But we feel that it would convey to the American readers as much meaning as it can have for them, in somewhat compressed form -- just a little less of it.

The same observation could be made about the talk of the men at the funeral, beginning page 121. It is admirable, but somewhat shortened, it would run less risk of slowing down the American reader's attention, and still have the effect the author intended.

Pages 177--181 Ingolfur Arnason (secretary of the co-operative) might explain his ideas enough for Americans to understand all that they can of them, in fewer pages.

From page 278 on "Of the Soul" the same comment.

Chapter 49. Poetry. This brings up a problem always insoluble in translated books. Poetry when translated into another language becomes mere verse--- often rather flat verse. I know no translation of Dante which is not flat and prosy compared to the Italian. And Milton in French moves the Anglo-Saxon readers to tears--- or laughter. I haven't any suggestions here except again, to shorten the passages which center around poetry.

Chapter 59 When Ferdinand was shot --- certainly would be better shortened for American readers, and also Chapters 60, 65 and 70.

I hope you will add to these suggestions, when you forward them to Mr. Laxness, the statement that we are serious-minded literary people, and do not

make such statements without full realization of what we are doing, and without full realization that of course the author must be the final judge in every matter connected with his own book.

May I add, personally, a request to tell the translator, that, having done some translation myself, I notice especially how that kind of work is done, and that I was full of admiration for the fine taste, tact, and command of English he shows in the translation of Halldor Laxness' grand book.

With warmly friendly greetings, as always,

Faithfully yours,

(signed) Dorothy Canfield