

JÓNAS BLONDAL

Summary of the Story

To call the story of "Jonas Blondál" a comic, is actually not quite suitable. The word "comic" is derived from "comedy", but "Jonas Blondal" is anything but comical. It is a sad, serious story with a moral to it. The term "tragedic" would therefore be more accurate.

The History of Iceland

The Atlantic island of Iceland and its inhabitants form the historical and cultural background of this story.

On the threshold of the 20th century Iceland experienced a period of increased independence – for many inhabitants a positive development after centuries of suffering and oppression. Yes, the Icelanders had indeed lived through very gloomy times.

In 1387 Iceland was subject to the Danish crown and suffered increasingly under the growing political dependence. With no merchant fleet of their own and geographically secluded, they were exposed to the despotism of the Danish Merchants and the trade monopoly of the crown meant very poor economic conditions for the Icelanders.

The situation eased temporarily due to successful business relations with England and the Hanseatic League, but restraint on trade imposed by the Danish in 1622 aggravated the situation considerably again. Unscrupulousness, inadequate provisions, and exploitation of the population even led to the death of more than 1000 people in 1755/56 from starvation.

But that's not all. In the history of Iceland catastrophes of a different kind claimed countless lives time and again. Only a few decades after the outbreak of smallpox in 1347, the plague caused havoc between 1402 and 1404 and killed 40,000 to 50,000 people – no less than two thirds of the entire population. Severe winters, volcanic eruptions and repeated raids by foreign sailors also claimed their toll on human lives.

With the advent of the struggle for independence during the middle of the 19th century, Iceland's situation improved rapidly. The most prominent forerunner in this struggle was Jón Sigurðsson, who for the most part lived in Denmark. Finally in 1874 the "Althing", the people's assembly of Iceland, agreed to a constitution, which would grant more self-determination to the Icelanders. On 17th June 1944, Iceland gained final independence as a democratic republic.

The Story

The time is 1894 and the place is Reykjavík, in those days a town with almost 5800 inhabitants. In Eiriksgata, not far from the harbour lives a family called Blondal, descendants of Norwegian immigrants.

Amalie and Ivar Blondal originally had three sons: Sigurð, Grímur and Jónas. However, at the beginning of this story two of them are already dead. The eldest son, Sigurð, drowned in 1881 during a boating accident at the tender age of eight. Grímur, the second son, died of a serious illness at the age of 15. The story begins with his funeral. Jónas, born in 1882 and now twelve years old, is therefore the Blondals only remaining child.

Straight after the funeral, while the mourners are still at the wake, a bitter quarrel flares up between the couple. The bone of contention is none other than their son Jónas: Ivar Blondal, a very successful whaler for many years, for the first time that evening makes the request that at least one of his sons should learn his trade. This



Iceland: This Atlantic island on the Arctic circle was the scene of devastating disasters for hundreds of years



When Jónas hears that he is to accompany his father on the next whaling trip, he is very happy

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is what tradition demands – even if there is only the youngest son left. Ivar is aware, that Jónas has not reached the right age yet but, nevertheless, he plans to take him on his next journey.

Of course, Jónas is very enthusiastic about his father's idea, but his mother protests. She accuses her husband of being irresponsible and indifferent. Never would she expose her last remaining son to unnecessary dangers. Although she puts up a fight, she does not succeed in changing his mind.

As agreed, on 5th June 1894 father and son turn up at the local seamen's employment office in Vesturgata. Again, Ivar Blondal is unimpressed when the clerk voices reservations about taking a twelve-year old on the trip. As planned, Ivar and Jónas sign on for the "Eiríkur Rauði", a whaler moored in Reykjavík but sailing under the Norwegian flag.

13th July 1894: The day of departure has arrived. Soon Jónas is given simple tasks to perform on board, and the days pass without any unusual occurrences. After only three days the "Eiríkur Rauði" hits on a pod of whales. For the first time Jónas experiences for himself, what up to then he had only known from the thrilling accounts of this father: the catching and processing of a whale. Pure adventure – at least that's what he had thought up to this moment. But his childish imaginations have nothing to do with the harsh reality of this profession. Blood everywhere, shouting men and a nauseating smell. In the coming days Jónas repeatedly has to witness these scenes, but he finds it impossible to get used to them. On the contrary, with every new successful catch, his aversion to the events on board grows. His excitement gives way to thoughtfulness, and his thirst for adventure turns into compassion for the helpless creatures.

The End

Magnus Hasund, the Commander of the "Eiríkur Rauði", doesn't fail to notice that Jónas feels increasingly uncomfortable with the conditions on deck. Often Jónas can be found lost in thought and almost listlessly standing at the railing, talking to his "friend" "Finn", a humpback whale calf, which continuously follows the ship since the killing of the mother cow.

To distract him, Commander Hasund sees to it that Jónas is given some work below deck. That same day, in the dimly lit rooms below, he discovers an axe, which he secretly takes to his room.

How Jónas wants to use this "weapon" becomes apparent a short time later: On the night of 16th to 17th August, under a full moon, he leaves his cabin and sneaks to the ship's bow, where the large tool boxes are kept.

There he tries to put his childish plan of sabotage into action. In his naivety, he thinks he can save the whales by destroying the tools. But he hasn't got enough strength to even move the harpoons. In his anger and disappointment he turns to the coils of rope and severs two harpoon ropes – hardly visible – at their anchorage. An act of desperation with no major effect ... you might think.

The following morning when they spot whales, the crew starts making preparations for a catch despite signs of a gathering storm. Who should operate the harpoon on this day is decided by casting lots. And it falls to Ivar Blondal.

Meanwhile the weather worsens and the sea gets rougher. Jónas, is standing at the railing, feeling very sick. When the men spot him, they ask him to go back to the boathouse, as it is not safe for him to remain outside. However, he stumbles over a rope, and falls over board. None of the seamen notice the accident and his cries for help go unheard in the wind. Fortunately the whale calf "Finn" is nearby and Jónas manages to take hold of his dorsal fin.



On 13th Juli 1894 Jónas and his father Ivar Blondal go aboard the whaling ship "Eiríkur Rauði"



The sense of adventure increasingly gives way to thoughtfulness. Ivar Blondal tries to calm his son by talking to him

The tool boxes: With childish naivety Jónas tries to sabotage the fishing activity on board



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At this point in time a terrible fate takes its course: While Jónas clings to the whale calf for dear life, fighting for survival, Ivar and his assistant Halldór Kvalstad take aim at several whales. But due to the heavy sea they miss several good opportunities.

Finally he fires, but misses his target and hits the water.

When the harpooning rope suddenly as if by magic starts to tighten and uncoil itself, the puzzled men look through their binoculars. They see a horrible sight:

Ivar Blondal shot his very own son. Connected through a harpoon, Jónas dies together with his "friend" "Finn".

The men are standing at the railing, paralysed with horror and unable to move. In their bewilderment they notice too late, that the harpoon rope has uncoiled entirely and its end has dropped into the water. Jónas himself had cut the rope the night before ...

"This is a Tale without Happy Ending"

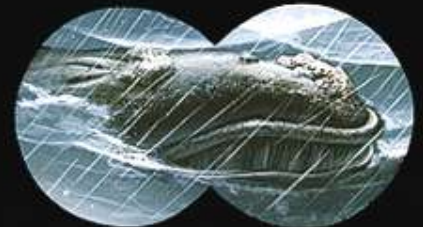
With these words the comic begins – and so it ends. "Jónas Blondal" is not just a story about a young boy from Iceland. It is a story about whaling and the ethical questions it raises. With a such a serious theme, the story is not intended to be entertaining or amusing.

True, a story without a happy ending does not follow the popular recipe for success. And with regard to stories of purely entertaining value a sad ending might even prove to be a hindrance. But when a story has a documentary character, the message is emphasised all the more. Successful stories like "The Boat" (filmed in 1981, adapted from the novel by Lothar-Günther Buchheim) or "Awakenings" (adapted from the novel of the same name by Oliver Sacks, filmed 1990) show this very clearly. Other examples are, "Rain Man" (written by Ronald Bass and Barry Morrow, filmed in 1988) or "The Perfect Storm" (novel by Sebastian Junger, filmed 2000).

"Jónas Blondal" has a documentary character. Whether this story can succeed without a happy ending, is up to the individual reader. Of course, a tragic finale often leaves the reader with an unsatisfactory feeling of helplessness and disappointment. However, deep stories have a more profound effect on the mind than entertainment of the more trivial kind. "Jónas Blondal" gives food for thought. An examination of the subject of whaling deserves seriousness (please also note [about the story](#) > [comic's message](#)).

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The comic "Jónas Blondal" developed over a period of about eight years and contains 301 fully illustrated drawings on 52 pages. Story, drawings, text and lettering are all by the same person.



A right whale has been sighted and is targetted



The "Eiríkur Rauði" on her return to her home port Reykjavík on Iceland