

BOOK CLUB KIT

author of The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven

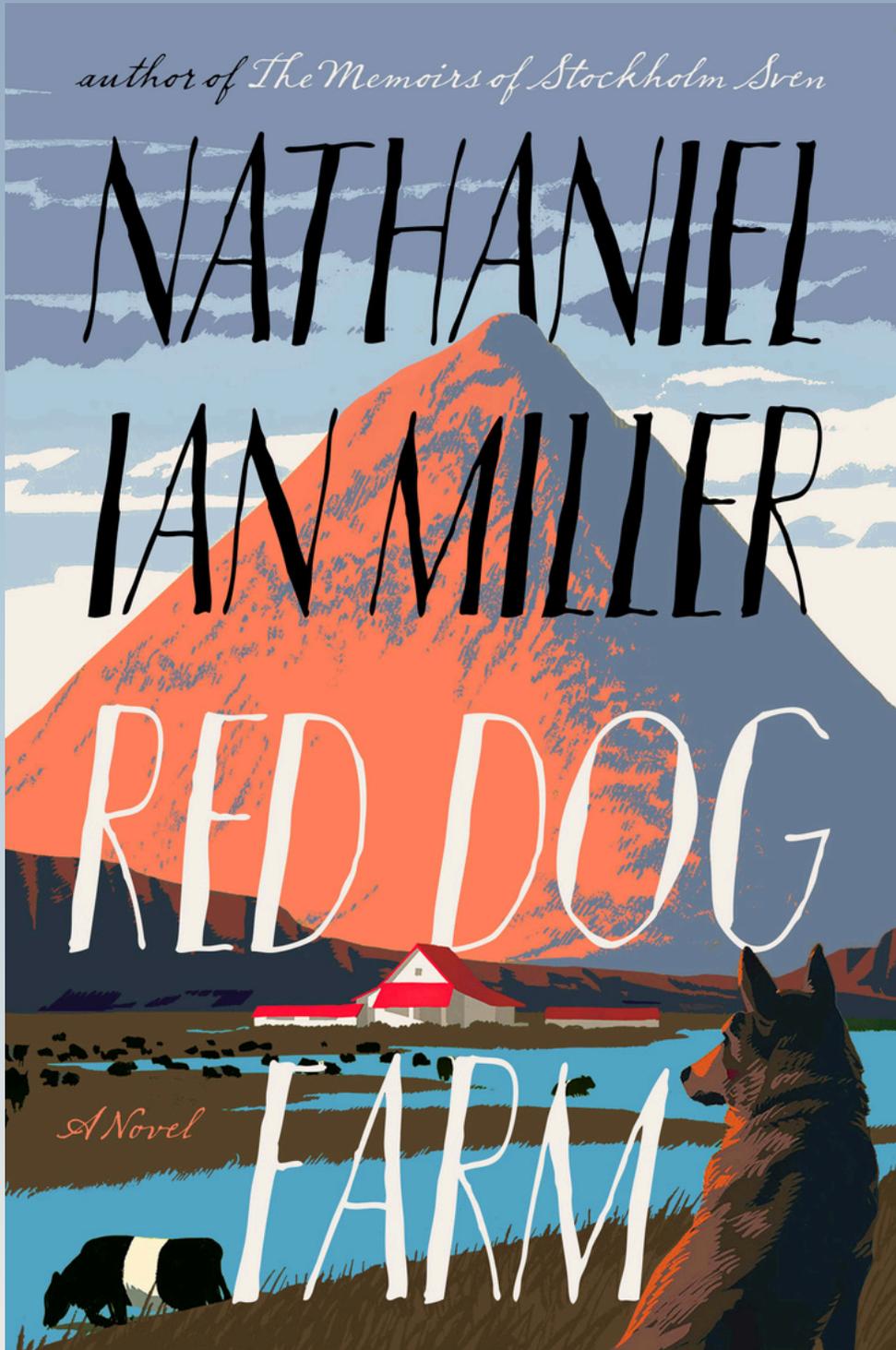
NATHANIEL

IAN MILLER

REDDOG

A Novel

FARM



Dear Reader,

Over the twelve years that I've farmed my place here in Vermont, it's been suggested to me many times by friends and people who maybe could've been friends had they not said this, that I should write about farming. Invariably, my answer is, "No, thank you" (or a less diplomatic variant of the same). Writers dislike being told what they should write about, and will go to almost any length to avoid complying with the suggestion, even if the suggestion is a good one.

But what's the point of being a contrarian if you can't suddenly do things contrary to your own obstinate position?

And so I found myself on a family vacation to rural Iceland in 2019. *The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven* hadn't come out yet, but I'd already written it, including the chapter in which Sven finds Iceland very much not to his liking, and basically gives it short shrift. This weighed on me as I absorbed the beauty of the place.

Much of the trip I spent staring at machines and round bales, remarking ad nauseam to my wife, son and Aged Ps about how similar Icelandic farming is to Vermont farming—both a bit ridiculous, really, in the concessions and innovations required to make it work. We also visited Vestmannaeyjar, the Westman Islands, where we hiked to the top of Eldfell, the site of a major eruption in 1973, and toured the Eldheimar volcano museum. I didn't know that groundwork was being laid for a future book, but that's the best kind of groundwork.

Cut to the time of *Sven's* publication in 2021, when my editor had advised me to be well-entrenched in a new project so I wouldn't fall prey to the usual things that predate upon writers immediately before and after their book comes out: malaise, anti-climax, self-recrimination, hopes inflated and necessarily deflated. But I wasn't entrenched; I hadn't even picked up a shovel.



Eventually I started work on an elaborate dystopian thing— this was still the first flush of Covid, so traveling for research was out, but the story took place in the Rocky Mountain West, which I know well, and it had a lot to do with sotol-making and cigar-rolling, which were my preoccupations of the moment. I enjoyed the world-building, as they call it, but when it came time to write the thing I found it too sprawling, unwieldy, burdened by exposition, and plus, everyone and their mother was writing post-apocalyptic fiction. So I shelved it—maybe you'll see it one day, probably not—and turned, instead, inward. To the real, to the tangible and personal and gritty. A family story, a hard story. Originally it was going to be short and take place entirely in the Westman Islands around the time of the eruption and evacuation. That changed, of course: scrapped, re-worked, integrated. Because I suddenly found that I wanted to write—could almost say needed to write—the one thing I'd always sworn I wouldn't: a farming story.

Here it is before you: *Red Dog Farm*, originally titled Grýtt, which I thought was very clever because it sounds like “grit”—a word I love—and means “rocky” in Icelandic, and because there's one thing to know about farming in Iceland (or Vermont): it's rocky. And wet, but wet doesn't sound good in English or Icelandic (blautur). Anyway, I was quickly disabused of that title.

You—readers, booksellers, and librarians, who I insist are all now dear friends—showed so much love for *The Memoirs of Stockholm Sven* that an old cynic like me can't help but kindle fond hopes. They are as follows:

I hope the novel absolves me of my (Sven's) earlier libelous remarks about Iceland, though I am sure the Icelandic tourism bureau, if such an entity exists, would still not like it very much, and I hope that it makes no one (or only a certain very specific type of person) want to take up farming.

But really, because I'm a terrible salesman—the world's worst—and I think I've now successfully convinced you that this is a farming book, when in fact it's about love and family more than anything else: I hope this tight-knit group of characters—Young Orri and his mother, father, grandmother, best friend, the love of his life, and his obnoxious neighbor—I hope they become as close and real to you as they are to me.

Thanks for reading.

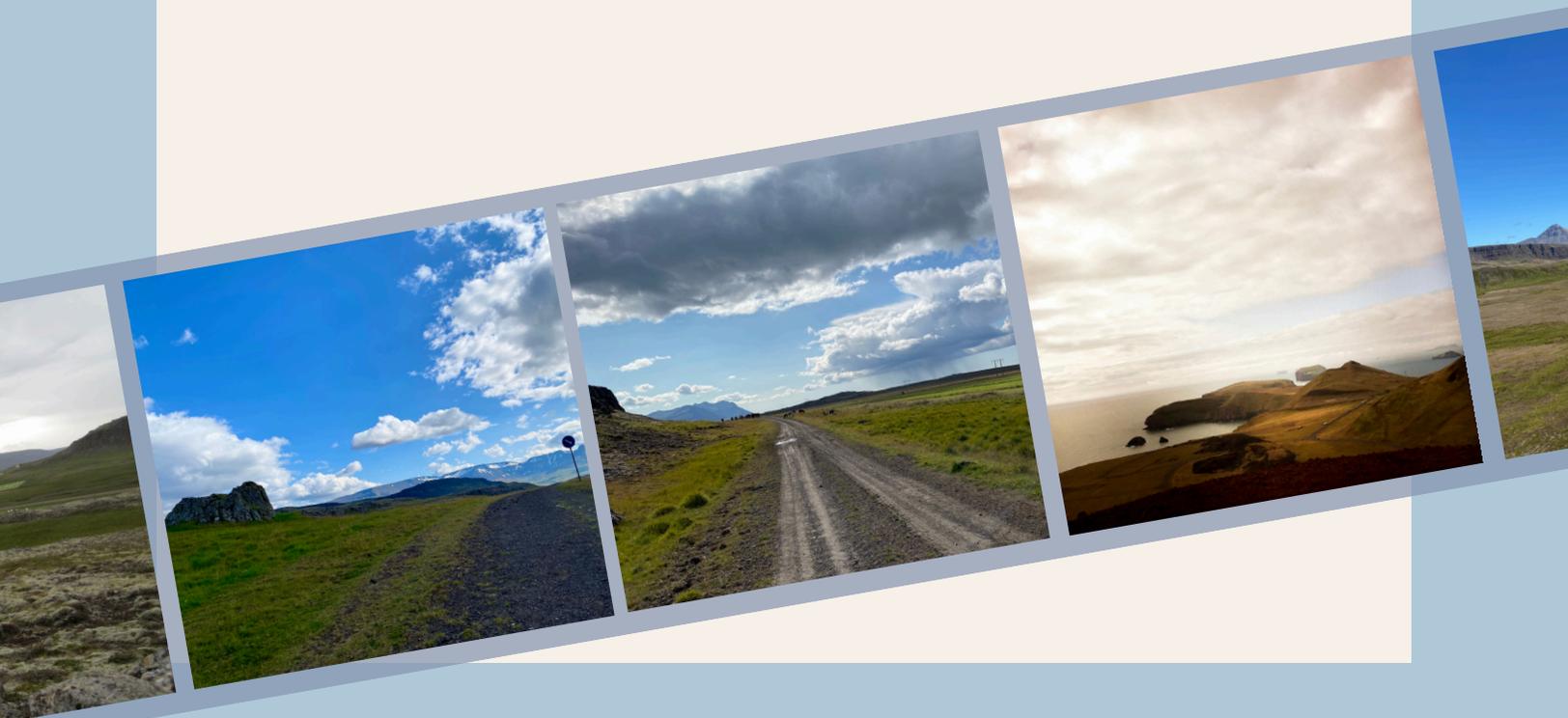
Yours truly,
Nathaniel Ian Miller



Discussion Questions

- 1 Early on, Orri reflects: “I was young. It seemed that farming could be simple. It certainly seemed that it could be beautiful.” How does his view of farming change after he comes home from university, and why does it shift?
- 2 Pabbi holds particular views on farming, often to his own detriment. Why does Pabbi insist on farming in his own way? Why does he refuse to allow tourism on the farm?
- 3 “Pabbi resented springtime even more than winter. Its false promise was a personal insult.” Why does Pabbi hate springtime? What does this reveal about how he views and experiences the world?
- 4 As we follow Orri during this year on the farm, we see nature in all its beauty—and tragedy. What moments were most impactful for you?
- 5 Pabbi tells Orri that after the Eldfell eruption he thought his father “might’ve taken some grim satisfaction in having it confirmed that the world was every bit as bad as he’d supposed. He wasn’t a parent, he was never made to be a parent.” What parts of Pabbi’s relationship with his father inform how he interacts with Orri, and how?
- 6 Why does Pabbi keep Orri from farming when he’s young and only allow him to learn when he returns from university?
- 7 Mamma talks bluntly about Pabbi and Orri’s mental health while herself disengaging from the farm, Pabbi, and Orri. In what ways does she offer support for them? In what ways is she herself suffering while holding it back?
- 8 Mihan and Orri meet online then develop their relationship through messages and phone calls. What draws them together and makes their connection significant?
- 9 After Mamma leaves and Orri effectively takes over the farm, his calls with Mihan grow difficult and short. How is his daily life impacting their relationship? Are there things that he holds back? How is their relationship tested?

- 10 Rúna becomes a steadfast friend to Orri, as if they innately understand each other. Yet she seems to truly own herself in a way few other characters do, while Orri struggles to understand his wants. What similarities do they find with each other? What differences make her certain where Orri questions?
- 11 Many of the characters experience some kind of difference (Pabbi's mental illness, Runa's sexuality, Mamma's Jewish heritage, etc.) that makes them feel isolated from others, including their friends and family. How do the relationships between these characters change over the course of the novel as they learn more about each other's differences?
- 12 Iceland's landscape becomes almost a character in the novel. Were there particular moments that stood out to you? Why?
- 13 Rykug is present throughout the novel, often as a helper but also sometimes as a hinderance. What is the significance of naming the farm "Red Dog Farm"?



Pronunciation Guide



æ like the *i* in *crime*
ú like the *oo* in *soon*
ei, ey like the *ay* in *day*
é like the *ye* in *yesterday*

á like the *ow* in *brown*
í like the *ee* in *breech*
ö like the *u* in *sure*
ó like the *oa* in *float*

y like the *ee* in *screen*
þ like the *th* in *theremin*
ð like the *th* in *loathe*