



THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

# How Genre Governs Creation in the Medieval Icelandic Sagas

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Yoav Tirosh

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# The New Middle Ages

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*To Uri, who made me suffer  
(and to Natalia, Felix, Yaron, and Amir, who made me happy)*

*(and Shachar Schidorsky)*

## FOREWORD

While “genre” was originally more or less synonymous with a system of classification, genre theory evolved in the twentieth century into an analytical tool trying to understand the aesthetics and communicative functions of narratives. Genre theory has been pivotal to the ongoing discussion of how meaning is created and in analysing the complicated relationship between authors and audiences. Generic expectations have been identified as a key element when it comes to the reception of text. Yoav Tirosh’s present study of genre in the Icelandic sagas is a dynamic addition to the debate and particularly valuable for its focus on medieval narratives, informed by more general literary approaches.

The issue of how to categorize prose narratives from medieval Iceland has been present ever since the dawn of modern Old Norse scholarship around two centuries ago. The first scholars tended to be descriptive rather than analytic, and what they chose to highlight was the value of each type of text for the study of a particular historical past. The *Íslendingasögur* concern the settlement and “saga” age of Iceland whereas the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) provide information about the period from 1100 to 1300. The *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur* are both preoccupied with the past of the Nordic countries, the shift between to “historical” *konungasögur* from the “legendary” *fornaldarsögur* being set around 870 by nineteenth-century scholars. Thus, the taxonomy invented for Icelandic prose narratives has focused on time and space, prioritizing putative source value over the narrative elements or the sagas’ narrative function. However, ever since Old Norse scholarship took a leap into the atomic age in the early 1960s, it has been characterized by a Jaggeresque

lack of satisfaction with the source value approach to genre, and yet tradition has prevailed. The old taxonomical terms, partly established and then constantly reaffirmed by scholarly editions from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, remain firmly in place, and maybe that is the main reason genre studies are still somewhat in their infancy within the field of Old Norse studies. It has been hard to resist the dominance of the editions.

Given the need for a fresh approach to the issue, Yoav Tirosh's thought-provoking study of the very nature of genre and categorization is an important beacon to lead the field out of the framework provided by old and ramshackle definitions. Tirosh is asking the four most important questions about genre in his neat and incisive study. To begin with, he addresses the power and importance of the notion of genre and goes on to connect this with the specific issue of the *Íslendingasögur* and the history of Old Norse studies. Furthermore, Tirosh demonstrates how genre can be used as an analytic tool to extract the meaning of each text and increase our awareness of the very nature of these texts within the larger narrative systems.

In his book, Tirosh adopts a bird's eye view to a complicated issue, utilizing his engagement with film studies to illuminate the generic conventions of medieval narratives that somewhat like films were not only textual but also audio-visual, given that most of the medieval audience interacted with these texts through the medium of a storyteller or, after the transition of the texts from oral to written narratives, through a public reader with a manuscript performing its text to a wider audience. His approach is refreshing and useful and certainly provides a pathway to study the complicated issue of saga genres in a novel manner. The book is concise, but it may still be a harbinger of a new era of narratological saga studies where scholars do not simply accept the older categories but strive to work with them to make our understanding of medieval meaning more nuanced and subtle.

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## PROLOGUE

“I won’t say the exact [television content] rating, we’re waiting to see. We’re still, like, up against it, but we’re trying to get it. It’s TV-MA [Mature Audience] right now. [...] It’s all subjective and bizarre, and it’s genre related. Right. So, like, say, for instance, the ratings board might say something like, well, this is a Sci-Fi movie, so it’s too much. If it was a horror movie, it’d be fine. But it’s a Sci-Fi movie, so it’s not fine. Or it’s a superhero movie. That was the whole thing with *Batman vs. Superman*. I remember the ratings board said, we just don’t like the idea of Batman fighting Superman. I was like, but how is that your [...] That has nothing to do with the [television content] ratings.” —Zack Snyder, *The Joe Rogan Experience*.<sup>1</sup>

I have often pondered why genre matters. It’s just a way of naming something. The modern obsession with classification is something that I’ve always tried to move away from, not towards. Why, then, write a book about genre?

Because genre is about access. Genre is about identity. Genre is about relationships.

Three personal life experiences may illustrate these statements.

*One, Access.* In the mid-1990s, around the age of 11, I approached the municipal library’s help desk in my hometown, and asked for a copy of Orson Scott Card’s sci-fi novel *Speaker of the Dead*. The librarian did not recognize the book title, so I said “oh, it’s the sequel to *Ender’s Game*.”

<sup>1</sup>Transcript from happyscribe, <https://www.happyscribe.com/public/the-joe-rogan-experience/2114-zack-snyder> (extracted 02/09/2024).

Ender's *GAME*. That word, "Game," elicited the response: "Oh, we don't do orders for children's books." I was an emotional child, and this Kafkaesque barrier was too much for me to handle, so I stormed out of the library crying. *Ender's Game* is a somewhat violent science fiction novel about a misunderstood kid who is tricked by grownups into nearly destroying an entire alien species. Ender's "game" is not a game at all. I could order a science fiction book, but I could not order a children's book. Card's title cleverly played with the idea of what a game is, and as a result misled this ill-informed librarian into cataloguing it as a different genre. I refused to enter that library for a year after, and probably never ordered a book in my childhood without my mother standing by my side.

*Two, Identity.* My best friend growing up was a fascinating and frustrating conversationalist. We spent most of our teenage years arguing about how to define and qualify things. How to define books, how to define films, how to define music. My friend was a teen of taste. He refused to watch anything that qualifies as a TV show, except for sketch comedy like *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, or *Seinfeld*, which, he explained, was not a sitcom but, rather, a sketch show. He would not consume popular things, and if so, only things that were popular many centuries ago like Chaucer. At one point we started listening to the singer/songwriter Yoni Bloch. Bloch was an Internet sensation, in the times when Internet sensations meant that around 100 people knew him. However, one day, our favourite underground artist broke out and started being played on the radio. My friend did not stop liking Bloch. When I told him that he now officially likes a pop artist, he disagreed. Bloch was not a pop singer. He was art-pop. My friend falsely, I would argue, altered Bloch's generic alignment because the title "pop"—despite Bloch's easy lyrics and catchy tunes—did not fit with his vision of self. Rather than change himself, he changed the world around him. I just brought this up with him in conversation the other day. His opinion of Bloch's classification has not changed. To his credit, he has started watching TV shows. He explains that the fault was always with me and the bad shows that I recommended.

*Three, Relationships.* In 2019 I sat with my then-girlfriend-now-wife Natalia for coffee, a few months before submitting my doctoral thesis, which was about the Icelandic sagas, their genre, and their reception. In the middle of a calm and pleasant conversation, she suddenly had an odd, trickster smile on her face. "You know," she said, "my friend said that he thinks that the sagas were actually meant to be read as the tabloids of the era. Who had sex with whom, how much money they had, and who they

had beef with. It's all about gossip, really." Boy, did I get upset. I cannot defend the words and tone of my voice on that doomed date, and the result was the biggest fight that we ever had and hopefully will ever have. My beloved gf was calling my beloved sagas gossip. These were intricate and sophisticated works of art. How dare she belittle them, by slapping on to them a generic title meant for the mindless masses? It turned out that, after calming down and thinking things over, I realized that she had a point. I also realized that by getting so upset, I was practising the very generic snobbism that I try so hard to avoid. Finally, I realized that genre mattered to me a great deal. It nearly cost me the most important relationship that I ever had.

Only an important concept could mean that much and hold so much power over people's words and actions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Work on this book started back in 2014, when Luke John Murphy and I tried to game out how to get me funding for a doctoral thesis about the medieval Icelandic saga *Ljósvetninga saga*. Its 2025 iteration looks—one hopes—nothing like those thoughts scribbled on that mobile office white board, yet it is surely thanks to that conversation that I figured out my interest in various levels of authorship and how sagas were put together.

Several funding bodies have supported this project in its decade-long journey. Thanks to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) for their support of my project ACTiME-Approaching Cultural Trauma in Medieval Europe (no. 101064468), and to the Icelandic Center for Research (RANNÍS) for their awarding me funding for my doctoral thesis work. Thanks also for financial support from the Viking Society for Northern Research Support Fund, the Aarhus University Research Foundation publication support, and the *Disability before Disability* project (run by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and supported by RANNÍS), and the University of Iceland Recruitment Fund (no. 1010-1013145).

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All of the people and institutes mentioned here played a critical role in my formation and the forming of this book, and are therefore surely to blame for any faults one might find herein. So please take it up with them.

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