

Sjón: why Olso's Future Library is a fairytale come true

The Icelandic poet follows Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell as the latest contributor to the Future Library anthology. He describes the magic behind the project



Root and branch solutions ... a forest outside Oslo will supply paper for the anthology. Photograph: Kristin von Hirsch/Future Library

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My favourite Icelandic folk story has to do with the future. In it we learn about an old couple living in poverty on a desolate farm in a dark and narrow valley somewhere beyond the bluest mountains. The storyteller makes much of their poor circumstances and their old age. They were so frail they could barely move. The man was about 80 years old, she was over 90. Their farmhouse was sinking into the earth.

One day a stranger knocked on their door. It was a rider who had been swallowed by the fog while gathering sheep, only to be released from it days later by the desolate farmstead. The old couple welcomed him into their home. But, they were sorry to say, they had nothing to offer a starving newcomer but a glass of whey.

Just as the man sat down to eat this meagre meal - the old couple hungrily watching his every move from across the table - a young raven swooped down from the rafters and landed in old woman's lap. It croaked softly and looked up at her with its black pearls of eyes. And while she petted the bird the old man shuffled to a cupboard and brought from it a trough brimming with morsels of lamb, hardened butter, dried haddock and other food loved by man and beast alike. The creature opened its beak and together they started feeding it.

Realising the old couple lived at the point of starvation in order to be able to feed the raven, the guest asked them why they were doing it. The 90-year-old woman answered: "It is said that the common raven can live to the age of 200 and we want to see if it is true." Her octogenarian husband nodded in agreement.

I was reminded of this story when the visual artist Katie Paterson asked me to contribute a text to the Future Library in Norway. It is a marvellous project. Each year, for the next 100 years, a new author will write a work for the library. A forest has been planted just outside Oslo and in 2114 the collection will be published in a book printed on paper made from the trees that will grow alongside the literary corpus. Until then the texts remain unread, the imagined and the real stay separated.

Those of us who contribute to the Future Library in its first decades will not know how our works fare. But as the old couple and their fledgling raven have lived on in the folk story, maybe we can hope to survive in our writing, too. There is always hope in folly.