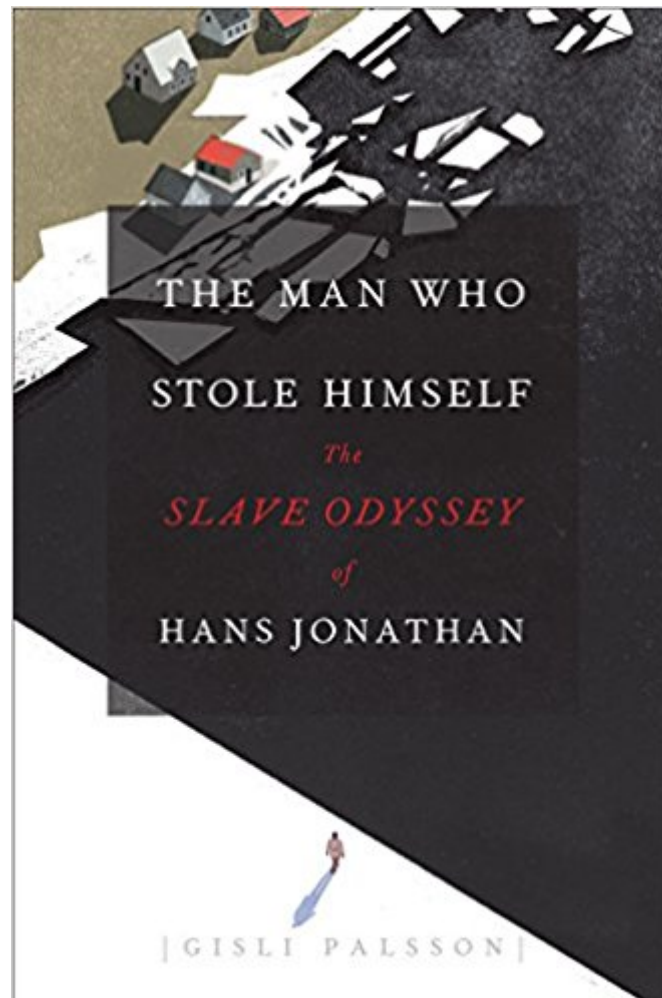




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The Man Who Stole Himself: The Slave Odyssey Of Hans Jonathan



Synopsis

The island nation of Iceland is known for many things—majestic landscapes, volcanic eruptions, distinctive seafood—but racial diversity is not one of them. So the little-known story of Hans Jonathan, a free black man who lived and raised a family in early nineteenth-century Iceland, is improbable and compelling, the stuff of novels. In *The Man Who Stole Himself*, Gisli Palsson lays out the story of Hans Jonathan (also known as Hans Jónatan) in stunning detail. Born into slavery in St. Croix in 1784, Hans was taken as a slave to Denmark, where he eventually enlisted in the navy and fought on behalf of the country in the 1801 Battle of Copenhagen. After the war, he declared himself a free man, believing that he was due freedom not only because of his patriotic service, but because while slavery remained legal in the colonies, it was outlawed in Denmark itself. He thus became the subject of one of the most notorious slavery cases in European history, which he lost. Then Hans ran away—never to be heard from in Denmark again, his fate unknown for more than two hundred years. It's now known that Hans fled to Iceland, where he became a merchant and peasant farmer, married, and raised two children. Today, he has become something of an Icelandic icon, claimed as a proud and daring ancestor both there and among his descendants in America. *The Man Who Stole Himself* brilliantly intertwines Hans Jonathan's adventurous travels with a portrait of the Danish slave trade, legal arguments over slavery, and the state of nineteenth-century race relations in the Northern Atlantic world. Throughout the book, Palsson traces themes of imperial dreams, colonialism, human rights, and globalization, which all come together in the life of a single, remarkable man. Hans literally led a life like no other. His is the story of a man who had the temerity—the courage—to steal himself.

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Customer Reviews

“An intriguing work of microhistory. . . . Through this engaging tale of one man’s attempts to find a home as a man of color in nineteenth-century Scandinavia, Palsson uses Jonathan’s previously obscure but picaresque life as a lens through which to examine questions of imperialism, slavery, race, and cultural identity.” • (Publishers Weekly) “With wondrous sleuthing, Palsson has recreated the life of a runaway slave, whose story lay hidden for centuries in the memories of an Icelandic family. Hans Jonathan, born to a slave mother in St. Croix and transported to Copenhagen as a boy, escaped in secrecy to Iceland. There he lived as tradesman, farmer, and married man. Palsson paints vividly the multiple worlds that Hans Jonathan saw “from vindictive slave-owners to folks willing to challenge the doctrines of race. A gripping read, *The Man Who Stole Himself* shows the powerful resonance that slavery and freedom have for our own time.” • (Natalie Zemon Davis) “Palsson has much to teach about eighteenth-century Dutch colonialism, the Dutch West Indies, and the trade in sugar and slaves, but this deeply-considered book is not the typical “epic history” of world events. Rather, in its portrait of one man who became extraordinary by claiming his rights to an ordinary life, it puts the monstrous on a human scale.” • (Politics & Prose) “An altogether dramatic and remarkable story.” • (Booklist) “If you’re a history buff, this incredible story of an escaped slave will enthrall you. . . . *The Man Who Stole Himself* is an amazing story about how one lucky man used his wit and education to escape slavery, but it’s also about how people in small Icelandic communities understood race at a time when none of them had met anyone of African ancestry before. It’s simply riveting.” • (Ars Technica) “*The Man Who Stole Himself* is absorbing and captivating. Palsson engagingly assembles and thoughtfully narrates the biography of Hans Jonathan, who was born into slavery on St. Croix, came of age enslaved in Denmark, and claimed his freedom in Iceland. Palsson offers up a meditation on slavery and race “past and present” thoughtfully raising complex issues involving race, memory, and family. Palsson does not offer easy answers either; rather, he pushes readers to ponder through these issues on their own. A beautifully written and accessible book.” • (Terri L. Snyder, author of *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America*)

Gisli Palsson is professor of anthropology at the University of Iceland. He is the author, editor, or coeditor of many books.

The book reads like a novel but it is entirely based on facts. Hans Jonathan, a 7 year old son of a slave, and therefore a slave himself, moves from the Danish Virgin Island of St. Croix to Copenhagen in Denmark, where he becomes a war hero. For that he gets his freedom from the Danish king but his "owner" wins the case against the King and Hans Jonathan - before getting sent back to St. Croix - flees to Iceland. This is an important book. Anyone concerned with human rights should read it.

This book is a new "Roots" and it's so thrilling and brilliant. I really want to recommend this book. Gisli Palsson rolls out Hans Jonathan's story piece by piece. Fantastic that so much information can be found about a man, who lived from 1784-1824, from St. Croix to Copenhagen and from there to Iceland. The author also takes up the discussion about racism, - also of today.

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