

# From Kalevala to comic: A literary walk through Finland

## Literature without borders: Young contemporary fiction from Finland

One of the interesting Finnish novels coming out this autumn in German is **Riikka Pulkkinen's** "The Border", a highly appropriate term to describe the dynamics of Finnish contemporary fiction. **Riikka Pulkkinen** directs in a subtle, philosophical way to the different borders people have to face in their life time. Who can decide on who is to die and when? Who decides when a girl is sexually mature? How can we protect small girls from seeing too much too soon? The term itself "Border" can be found at many different levels in new novels. You might not find many writers of foreign origin, but in the Finnish novels themselves, Finland as a concept and entity is questioned over and over again. In **Johanna Holmström's** novel "Asphalt Angels" all characters are struggling with split cultural identities: a Finnish woman with Swedish mother tongue becomes a devoted Muslim, whereas her husband from Algeria wants to become a proper Finn. In her most recent work, a photographic book about women dressed in Burkas, **Rosa Liksom**, formerly known as an outstanding author of Finnish and Russian characters, intriguingly places her women in environments easily recognizable as "typically" Finnish. What is strange, what is familiar, and how can they be integrated? The viewer's eye struggles with different conventions.

Also in **Leena Parkkinen's** most recent novel a well-known landscape, the Finnish archipelago, is viewed with new eyes. An old lady returns to an island, where a mysterious death occurred decades ago, and she is unexpectedly accompanied by a young woman from Iran, who also sees the landscape and the stories it has to tell with strange eyes. But a stranger is not necessarily a sad character; she also has the ability to create a warm humour.

But borders are not only marked and transgressed by telling stories of immigrants settling into Finland, but also by allowing Finnish characters to be impacted by the global possibilities. Finnish family histories nowadays show the youngest generation to be emigrants: Finland is a country you have to leave to seek a broader picture in a foreign cosmopolitan environment. The youngest member of the family in **Juha Itkonen's** novel "A Momentary Glow" goes to Berlin to look for more knowledge about theatre than she could gain in Finland.

And in **Philip Teir's** novel "The Winter War" a young woman travels to London to gain experience of life and to broaden her horizons. She finally connects with the demonstrators of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and these open a new perspective of the world economy. Finland alone has simply become too small for the young generation of authors.

Of course, somebody may argue that there is also a strong interest towards Finnish history, preferably the traumatic civil war in 1918 or the Second World War. This is true, but at a literary level the stories written by **Katja Kettu**, **Leena Lander** or **Sofi Oksanen** always question themselves: the narrative structures and the story itself are torn into pieces, questioning the possibility of narrating about history in a cohesive way. Historical fiction, be it war or more personal stories, is tearing its characters into pieces, making them vulnerable and very humane, never seeing the whole picture, living in a constant psychological conflict with the outer world. Macro history blends with micro history.

One of the most archetypical ways of retelling history has become internationally very well known by **Arto Paasilinna's** humorous upside down-kind of storytelling. The fools save the world and smart people are proven to be the losers. This literary tradition has been thriving since the first ever Finnish novel: "The Seven Brothers" from 1870. Laconic language, with a quantity of irony is loved by Finnish readers, but is sometimes hard to translate into other linguistic and cultural contexts. One of the most beloved writers in this tradition is **Tuomas Kyrö**. After several quite advanced works of fiction he started writing humorous and satirical stories – and became one of the most popular writers of contemporary Finnish fiction. In his novel "Kunkku" he experiments with the genre of narrating history, but which took a different turn to how we know it today. Finland, instead of Sweden, became the successful monarchy, exporting music and pickled herring. Bad taste (the king loves tits and tennis more than anything else in the world) and simple humour rule – but wait and see: **Tuomas Kyrö** will astonish you one day. And while waiting for that day, readers can enjoy another easy and smooth read by going on a road trip with two estranged brothers and an urn in the novel "The Probate" by **Roope Lipasti**. In the meantime, the reader can also reflect on how Finnish male persons are depicted in the novels: aren't they a little lost?

Gender has been a prominent topic during the last twenty years. Looking back at the list of winners of the prestigious Finlandia Novel prize, quite a few have been writing about homosexual issues and characters.

**Further information:**

Press Office Finland. Cool. | c/o WBCO GmbH | Silvia Lenz | Krögerstraße 2 | 60313 Frankfurt | T +49.69.13388037 | F +49.69.13388033 | s.lenz@wbco.de

The cultural elite rapidly accepted the agenda of the HBTQ-movement, but are still waiting for the Finnish parliament to legislate on full marital rights for homosexual partners.

**Miina Supinen** and **Laura Gustafsson** have both been delving into ancient myths, Greek and Finnish, and placing them in a contemporary setting. It's as queer as it can get, mixing traditional concepts on gender, sexuality and pornography with harsh criticism on conventional thinking and oversimplifying the media landscape.

Finnish weird is a new concept for describing the kind of fiction that escapes all other literary labels, questioning borders between high culture and popular formats. Former realism, psychological or historical, is questioned in novels by **Johanna Sinisalo** and **Emmi Itäranta**. **Johanna Sinisalo's** stories extend across boundaries in their comments on ecological, gender related and political matters; she allows no doubts about her critical agenda. **Emmi Itäranta's** "Memory of Water" is a more poetic and philosophical story about a world where water has run scarce. A bitter struggle ensues for the life-giving wetness in a Europe ruled by the military in which in addition to the last sources of water, also old secrets and values are threatened. A creditable fiction in 2014? Yes, as in its narration a strange magic is created that at the same time questions our moral values.

One last border that has been questioned and trespassed in the contemporary fiction is drawn between Lapland and Southern Finland. In **Moses Mentula's** novel "Like father, like son" old Sami culture is confronted with the culture of urban Finland. The border lies within a family, tearing two lovers apart, letting the small child witness the clash of cultures, just as in **Riikka Pulkkinen's** novel "The Border".

### **Finnish crime literature places guardians of the law and criminals into the spotlight**

As in other countries around the world, thrillers and crime literature are highly regarded by the Finnish readers and therefore continuously top the Finnish book charts. From only 20 new published books a year during the mid-nineties this has now risen to more than 90 new issues of crime thrillers in Finland. In the meantime increasingly more are being translated into German and is strongly competing with established Swedish and Norwegian authors.

It is common in Germany to classify all Scandinavian criminal literature as "Schwedenkrimi" (Swedish Crime), nonetheless there are major differences: Objective realism – in the description of the milieu as well

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as personalities of the protagonists – in addition to a constant down-to-earth narrative are dominating Finnish thriller and crime literature.

Popular names in the Finnish crime scene are for example **Leena Lehtolainen**, **Matti Rönkä**, **Iikka Remes** or **Taavi Soininvaara**, says Paula Arvas PhD, who is the Finnish expert for criminal literature and currently working as programme producer at the University of Helsinki Communications and Community Relations. In her point of view the most promising newcomers are **Kati Hiekkapelto**, **Pekka Hiltunen**, **Antti Tuomainen** and **Saara Kesävuori**.

Compared to its neighbours, the Finnish history of crime literature is a young as the first crime stories in Finnish were not published until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this point, brutal murder, its offenders and victims were reported in the form of flyers on the street. In addition translation was active. For example French and British crime literature was translated into Finnish, which exerted its influence on the young and inexperienced Finnish authors where literature was still in its infancy. Due to this tradition more realistic mystery still dominates Finnish crime literature, but also today whodunits and the hard-boiled novels are published by the Finnish crime authors.

However the protagonists of Finnish crime fiction vary. While the reader accompanies the enlightened and headstrong policewoman **Maria Kallio** on her investigations in **Leena Lehtolainen's** detective series, **Matti Rönkä** introduces in his series **Viktor Kärppä**, a half-Russian with Finnish roots, who operates on a thin line between crime and public service, whereby the reader has to decide on his moral stance. Political correctness is often bypassed in this narrative and as a result the assumed evil can have its nose ahead. In the thrillers by **Pekka Hiltunen**, the London living and underground affiliated graphic artist Lia and her friend Mari, a psychologist with extraordinary powers, put a stop to the dubious games of slave traders, murderers and power hungry politicians. **Kati Hiekkapelto** is expected to be the most promising newcomer in Finnish crime literature and her debut novel marks a fascinating prelude of her crime series about young commissioner Anna Fekete. Topically her series covers explosive aspects such as immigration or multiculturalism.

"The Finnish crime literature is at its core very democratic. In addition to the law enforcement officials the villains themselves are spotlighted", states Paula Arvas, continuing: "Also a typical feature in Finnish crime fiction is its realism, both in illustrating the milieu and characters." With a wink she goes on: "The essential difference between Swedish and Finnish criminal literature is that we have not

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yet achieved such a literary breakthrough as the Swedish Stieg Larsson Trilogy.”

The high international potential that is existent in Finnish thrillers and crime literature has become evident through the works of the two most productive crime authors from Finland. The stories of both have successfully been published in Germany and ensure a second wave of Nordic crime literature for the market. **Iikka Remes** and **Taavi Soininvaara** produce nerve-tickling stories in which they mix elements of political and psycho thrillers into the traditional police crime story. The characters act in international settings with Finland as the starting point and hub. **Iikka Remes** is one of the most read authors in Finland. His thrillers aimed at an adult or teenaged audience frequently top the bestseller lists. He applies as guaranteed to provide top-class suspense in an international format. Chilling suspense is also delivered to the readers by **Taavi Soininvaara**, who simultaneously sends his two agents in different directions during their investigations. The books about **Arto Ratamo**, a scientist who later works as an investigator, have received several awards. Similarly the absorbing stories about the secret organization Mundos Novus and the investigator Leo Kara are a great success in Finland.

### **Specialities of the Finnish Lyric Landscape**

Finland has always been a poetical country. The national epic Kalevala (1849) is an example for traditional Finnish poetry. But also the modernism period between 1950 and 1960 was a heyday of Finnish lyric. The speciality of Finnish poetry also includes the co-existence of two languages: Finnish and Finland-Swedish. Particularly the Finland Swedish lyric decisively influenced the modernism epoch and remains today a vivacious part of the Finnish literature scene, even though Finland-Swedish literature tended towards prose in the last decades.

Currently Finnish poetry is experiencing a high phase. Even if the large traditional publishing houses are issuing somewhat less lyric titles than previously, in Finland overall a lot of sophisticated lyric is being published, mainly by smaller publishers. Interesting publishers from which mainly, but not just, lyric is issued are *Poesia*, a lyric association, as well as the small publishing houses *ntamo*, *Sammakko* and *Savukeidas*.

The broad and diverse field of Finnish poetry is also lively in the lyric journals such as *Tuli&Savu* and *Nuori Voima* that publish contemporary Finnish lyric and translated lyric.

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Many lyric authors publish in blogs, too.

Finnish poetry is in a phase of transformation. Prose is still one of the strongest genres. But also rap and song texts as well as the return of rhyming poetry are included in the phenomenon of current lyric. En vogue are also poems written in dialect as well as humorous poetry. The most important stream is constructed of various formal, technical and grammatical experiments, the so-called search engine lyric and language collages and plays on words.

Furthermore, in the current Finnish lyric there are various subcategories that have their own features and are also allocated to different cities. Stage lyric in the form of Bukowski is particularly encountered in Turku. In Jyväskylä in the environment of the publishing house and the setting of the Masters course in creative writing, a group of actives has formed who bravely test the genre of experimental poetry in the tradition of Language Poetry. A characteristic of the lyric writers around the magazine *Nuori Voima* and poetry group *Nuoren Voiman Liitto* in Helsinki are crossover performances and the tearing down of the boundaries between lyric and prose. Alternatively in the group *Helsinki Poetry Connection* the spoken word culture and rap texts are in the focus.

The public presentation of poems in Finland is rarely in the form of a sterile reading or stiff interview. Lyric is rather presented as a collected performance piece of art, as joint projects by artists from different genres or as an experiment with new forms of performance.

Both the Finnish lyric authors and also literary societies, magazines and other active parties maintain a diversity of contacts with the literature scene in other countries, above all a lively relationship with Germany. The Literaturwerkstatt offers lyric from Finland in different languages on its website *Lyrikline.org*. Currently poems from more than ten lyric authors can be found; also *Electric Verses* offers poems from over 30 Finnish lyric authors in various languages. A bilingual translation project that came to life last year together with the Literaturwerkstatt will see its high point in the autumn with the *VERSSchmuggel-Anthologie*, including the poem of six Finnish lyric authors in German. For this autumn a big tour with Finnish lyric and also prose is planned throughout German-speaking countries as well. The last similar project was in 2011. German-speaking lyric authors are regularly guests in Finland, the next time on a large scale in November 2014.

For 2016 a large European literature project is in planning that is principally initiated by the German literature association *Léttretage*.

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The Finnish lyric association *Nuoren Voiman Liitto* is hereby one of the main partners. The cooperation between the German and Finnish lyric scenes will also be actively continued following the Book Fair 2014!

Further information: [www.lyrikline.org](http://www.lyrikline.org) or [www.electricverses.net](http://www.electricverses.net).

## **Finnish comic literature conquers Germany**

Colorful, young and lively. These characteristics roughly describe Finland's literary scene of Finland and no literature genre can portray this image as well as the comics do. What began in the postwar period to the early seventies with **Tove Jansson's** Moomins is today being expressively continued and with a joy for experimentation by artists from the modern comic scene such as **Ville Tietäväinen**.

These two examples clearly demonstrate the broad thematic and creative variety of Finnish comics. The world of Tove Jansson's Moomins is characterized by the daily problems and external threats to Moomin Valley. But also cheerful adventures are a part of the Moomin universe. Tolerance and friendly cooperation are communicated. The conflicts and methods of resolution which are illustrated in the tales of the Moomins are almost timeless and can be transferred to the present. However, **Ville Tietäväinen** is more specific in his works. He attempts to elucidate social issues and expresses social and political criticism. His stories deal with specific topics that he attempts to pierce in his graphic novels in an artistic and topical way. "Finnish comic authors are well known for their ambitious visual creations and graphic quality. Illustrators like **Ville Tietäväinen** work with experimental, provoking and unique styles in order to continually develop themselves further. We do not have something like a graphic tradition in comics. Because of this, new genres and visual impressions are permanently being created", explains Kalle Hakkola, director of the Finnish Comic Center in Helsinki.

The Finnish comic scene has been highly active for several years and is growing rapidly and not only due to the efforts of the respective authors. In the past year Finnish comics implemented a sales volume of 9.7 million Euros. Furthermore, the Finnish state financially promotes the comic culture, so that Finland's comic scene is organized at its specially constructed Comic Center and can promote new stories and illustrators from here. The Ministry of Culture invests 300,000 Euros per year in the national comic scene. FILI, Finnish Literature Exchange, also supports the export of Finnish comics: translation and printing costs are being subsidized by up to 1,000 Euro for example. Comics hold cult status in Finland. It's not a coincidence that the biggest comic festival in Northern Europe takes place in Helsinki each September.

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“A primary sign of the continuing increasing popularity of comics is that last year two out of ten of the commercially most successful books in Finland were comics”, says Maria Antas, literature expert at FILI. “A further characteristic which distinguishes the Finnish comic scene from those of other countries is that most of the graphic novels are drawn by women”, continues Antas. Comic stories are not for children per se and can definitely please an adult public. “Besides, many Finns are not afraid to admit that they first learned to read through comics”, says Kalle Hakkola.

In order to pay tribute to pioneers like **Tove Jansson**, who would have celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, Finland will equip the comic genre with an impressive showcase with international flair at the Frankfurt Book Fair (October 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>). Many young comic artists will be on site to present the colourful variety of their country. Even the renowned **Ville Tietäväinen** will be there whose social-critical graphic novel “Invisible hands” (published by avant Verlag in 2014) that narrates the story of the Moroccan refugee Rashid who is illegally looking for work in Southern Spain in order to support his family. He was awarded with the Finnish Comic Prize for this unconventional work. One year before, he was already awarded with the Finnish Cultural Fund prize. “It’s very nice to see how graphic novels continue to acquire more fans, also in Germany. The potential in this artistic narrative form is definitely nowhere near being exhausted”, Ville Tietäväinen is pleased about the high popularity of comics and graphic novels in Germany.

Besides social-critical and serious topics the generally most well-known form of comic, the comic-strip, deals with controversial subjects accompanied with a cutting humor (e.g. “Fingerpori”) that is in the style of the traditional underground comic. “The most successful comics are those which were printed in newspapers before their publication as a book. Finland itself is a very small market with only five million inhabitants. Because of this, the authors directly structure their comics to assume an international relevance. For this reason Finnish comics can be understood around the world and the content is current for every culture”, states Kalle Hakkola of the Comic Center.

“The Comic Atlas Finland” provides an insight into the Finnish comic world, and has been published at the beginning of the year by Reprodukt Verlag. In the 240 pages of this anthology, the editors Kalle Hakkola and Sascha Hommer provide an outline of the avant-garde comic scene in Finland with contributions from artists such as **Roope Eronen, Matti Hagelberg, Jarno Latva-Nikkola, Mika Lietzén, Hanneriina Moisseinen** and many more.

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