

Press release

Finnland. Cool.

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

FILI
FINNISH LITERATURE EXCHANGE

www.finlit.fi/fili

FINNLAND. COOL.
FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR.
GUEST OF HONOUR 2014.

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. 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.

Further information:

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

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 Sámi 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".

Maria Antas, Expert in literature, Head of Literature Programme FILI

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