

FINNLAND. AAMU.
FINNLAND. BIBLIOTHEK.
FINNLAND. COOL.
FINNLAND. DRÖM.
FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR.
GUEST OF HONOUR 2014.

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FINLAND AT THE OPENING OF THE
FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR ON 7 OCTOBER 2014

Madame Commissioner,
Your esteemed Excellencies and Ministers,
Mr State Minister,
Mr Lord Mayor,
Mr Chairman Riethmüller,
Mr Director Boos,
Dear friends of literature,

Finland has the pleasure and privilege to be represented as the theme country for the Frankfurt Book Fair now starting. We are full of enthusiasm about the opportunity to be with you here today.

Who, then, are we Finns? And what have we to offer the world of literature and the literary public?

We are a country whose women were the first in the world to be granted full political rights, where literary freedom by all metrics stands at a world-leading level, whose educational system is renowned throughout the world for producing results, and whose competitiveness is of the highest order.

We are a country where the javelin is thrown further than anywhere else, and where modesty is a virtue. We put the world to rights just as easily in a sauna, whacking each other on the back with a birch whisk, as in a city café, browsing the social media while we sip our cup of latte.

Finnish literature sizzles intellectually and comforts emotionally. A symphony of tension-charged language and narrative, sweeping from melancholia to ecstasy, from despair to omnipotence, and from solitary tears to communal roars of laughter.

The ancient sage Väinämöinen, the foulmouthed and ill-mannered witch Louhi, the Son of the Thunder God,

seven tussling brothers and Moomintroll and his friends can all be found romping around in our books. A small boy glides along in a reed basket, propelled by the powerful Nile currents. A girl travels by train across the Soviet Union. A criminal investigator and mother solves murder mysteries in the metropolitan area, while someone makes the following poetic confession: " For me, the Finnish language is both a window and a home. I live in this language. It's my skin."

Finnish literature is a folk tale, one that is told around isolated camp fires and sets the cheeks glowing and the imagination galloping. A historical autobiography blending fact with fiction. A razor-sharp yet snug contemporary analysis, trashing family member and decision-maker, countryman and foreigner, past and future, with equanimity.

In a word: Finland. Cool. As our fair slogan so succinctly puts it, in fact.

Finnish literature is something of a fledgling. Even as late as 1830, when the Finnish Literature Society was founded, there was no word in our language for literature. We made do with a different way of saying it, or used the Swedish term "litteratuuri". The Society's protocol marked the first appearance of the Finnish word – kirjallisuus – which was invented by physician and philologist Elias Lönnrot, best known as a collector of traditional Finnish oral poetry.

Young, then, but quick to flex its muscles. Literature has created Finnishness, and Finnishness in its turn has created literature. I shall give you a brief glimpse, making use of a few different dimensions.

The first is an impulse for the rise of Finnish society.

We were parted from Sweden in 1809 and transferred under Russian dominion as an autonomous Grand Duchy. The Russia of that time was indulgent and allowed room for nationalistic feeling. Adolf Ivar Arwidsson, one of the early promoters of the Finnish cause, gave the following definition: "We are no longer Swedes, we do not want to become Russians, so let us be Finns".

And that's just what we started to be. The national epic, Kalevala, was born, stirring the national romantic spirit in Finns towards independence.

Our first work of fiction emerged – Seven Brothers, by Aleksis Kivi. Its message was to emphasise the importance of reading and writing skills – that only in this way could an individual become a fully fledged and independent member of society. It should not escape a mention that this book fair will witness the publication of an excellent German translation of this work.

Many other works of value have also appeared, along with the rise of education for all.

Even today, close to 150 years since Seven Brothers was first published, the message still applies. We

Finns are a nation of readers. Around 80 per cent will read at least one book a year, while a third will read one book a month. We are among the world's leaders in literacy.

Our libraries stock a range of books to satisfy the most avid of readers. Finns visit a library on average ten times a year, and books borrowed number around 70 million. This equates to one borrowed book per month for each and every Finn, if not more.

This may well be the answer to a question often asked: what on earth do you find to do on those long winter evenings? This might also answer the question: how on earth do you manage so well in the Pisa surveys?

The second glimpse concerns internationalisation.

According to an old saying, "Finland is an island". We are seen as a small, distant country of sparsely populated areas spread far apart. Literature built a bridge from the island to the mainland, opening a door to the world.

Translated literature has played a pivotal role on this outward journey. The national awakening movement considered the translation of foreign fiction into Finnish to be nothing less than a civic duty. First in line were works from the Nordic countries, and from Russia and Germany. Translators took on two roles, not only developing our written language through translation, but also having to develop it to accommodate the content of foreign literature.

Finnish writers also trod the pathways of the world, both physically and in fiction. And they took their readers with them.

"I have lived in Egypt although I have never visited the place". So said Mika Waltari when asked about the genesis of his great novel *The Egyptian*.

This and many other similar examples explain how book upon book opened up the farthest corners of the North to the world. It also explains the essence of literature; that you can journey south from your "island" without once stepping on a bridge; that you can live in places that you have never visited.

By the same token, the world found the path to Finland and to our literature. Waltari took more than just Finns to live in Egypt. Another example from bygone days is Frans Emil Sillanpää, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1939. Upon receiving the historic telegram, his message was: "I am deeply moved and give thanks on behalf of my country and myself for this honour. It gives me great pleasure to accept this prize." As you see, and as I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, modesty is part of the Finnish character.

Our recent literary successes demonstrate that international hits can emerge from small language areas. In 2010, Sofi Oksanen's *Purge* became the new spearhead of literary exports – translation rights for her books

were soon granted for over 40 languages. In the wake of *Purge*, works by Riikka Pulkkinen, Katja Kettu and Rosa Liksom sold rapidly in a number of countries, with translations begun in many languages. Currently it is the women who are beating paths for Finnish writers.

We now walk these paths in all directions, books tucked under our arms. In our imaginations and thoughts there are no islands, no bridges, no borders.

The last glimpse is here. Literature is not just Finnish, or German, or any country's. Literature is one common home: the human mind and all that derives from it.

The thought has crossed my mind as to what would happen if a book I'm reading had no external markings or identification. So that I would have no knowledge of who had written it, nor would the content reveal where or when the story took place. The story would be pared down to a tale of human thought and feeling.

What kind of book would that be?

It would be just the kind of book left to us by the ancient Greeks, the kind written by Shakespeare, the kind described in Chinese calligraphy, one written by Marquez, Soyinka, Doctorow, or the screenwriter of the latest blockbuster.

It would be the universal message of the human mind, which has as its core that we are the same as we have always been, whether in our love, our hate, our envy, our compassion, our happiness or our success, or in the presence or absence of our beliefs.

Is there, then, anything left to write? With the various conflicts around the world, many of them equivalent to war, we have still much to learn from each other. Literature has the power to open the way to understanding how the same human minds express themselves in different cultures. So I maintain that where reading or writing are concerned, you can never cry "enough!"