



# Nodes of Contemporary Finnish Literature

Edited by  
Leena Kirstinä

**Studia Fennica**  
Litteraria

**Studia Fennica**  
Litteraria 6



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Edited by Leena Kirstinä

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# Foreword

*Nodes of Contemporary Finnish Literature* is the sixth volume of the series of *Studia Fennica Litteraria* published by the Finnish Literary Society since 2003. It is a subseries of *Studia Fennica*, which was established in 1933. The series includes six thematic subseries: *Anthropologica*, *Ethnologica*, *Folkloristica*, *Historica*, *Linguistica* and *Litteraria*.

The goal of *Studia Fennica Litteraria* is to offer an internationally refereed English-language publication for studies on Finnish literature. The scope of the series is comparative and international. It aims to create a dialogue between Finnish and European literatures.

The volumes previously published in *Studia Fennica Litteraria* are as follows:

- *Changing Scenes. Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle* (Ed. Pirjo Lyytikäinen 2003)
- *Women's Voices. Female Authors and Feminist Criticism in the Finnish Literary Tradition* (Ed. Lea Rojola & Päivi Lappalainen 2007)
- *Metaliterary Layers in Finnish Literature* (Ed. Samuli Hägg, Erkki Sevänen & Risto Turunen 2008)
- *The Emergence of Finnish Book and Reading Culture in the 1700s* (Ed. Cecilia af Forselles & Tuija Laine 2011)
- *Aino Kallas. Negotiations with Modernity* (Ed. Leena Kurvet-Käosaar & Lea Rojola 2011)

*Nodes of Contemporary Finnish Literature* has a dual aim. On the one hand, its purpose is present to the reader some phenomena of recent Finnish literature and sketch some possible directions for future literary history; on the other hand, it also brings to the fore some young Finnish scholars in literature. The anthology could be a manual for students learning the Finnish language or studying Finnish culture at universities; in addition, it could make these literary phenomena accessible to others who are interested in these issues.

This anthology owes much to the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation and to the Finnish Literature Exchange (FILI) which have granted funds



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In Helsinki 9.2.2012

*Leena Kirstinä*

## Introduction

To write any historical presentations of contemporary phenomena is a challenging, if not impossible, task. The perspective might be too short to understand them and their true relationships. However, the risk has been taken, thanks to Brian McHale, who introduced his and Randall Stevenson's inspiring literary history project to the participants of the summer course at the University of Tampere in 2005. Its results have been published in the magnificent work titled *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (2006). It represents a new way of thinking about literary history that has been undergoing changes since the Second World War.

*The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* does not survey the decades, literary movements, or national literatures; rather it presents a 'spatial' literary history, mapping 'hot spots' – crossroads in space and time – around which the works and movements of literature can be seen to arrange themselves.

The traditional positivist paradigm of literary history has been criticised during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of its epistemological problems. The critics targeted literary histories, written in the spirit of nationalism and favouring canonised authors. They did not meet with approval, because they were normative and not historical; literature was separated from historical processes and connected with genial authors and their influence on others. Proponents of the New Criticism demanded competent literary analysis and interpretation.

New Criticism itself was interested in autonomous works, not in history. The premises of writing literary history needed then to be scrutinized, i.e. reception aesthetics paid attention to that literary reception and production should be taken into account. Structuralism promoted the idea to reflect on relations and to stop the flux of time in simultaneous moments. Post-structuralism found the way back to history via intertextuality, with the help of the chains of ideas, figures and tropes, used in literatures, that can be followed between times and places. This is where we are now.

Literatures as a network of relationships and communication seem to be traffic centres or smaller crossroads. Some works act like magnetic fields or form nodes. With the help of soft statistical data and by observing reception, one can try to locate such hot spots in literature. Obviously, every literary year has its own characteristics; some topics or matters attract more attention than others do, and some genre or stylistic traits rise to the fore. Literary prizes, based on the evaluations of expert readers, are signs that illustrate these trends. It is clear that the perspective from which literature is viewed by the observer influences her/his interpretations of the findings.

In this anthology, we study the situation in Finnish literature from the 1980s to the first decade of the new millennium. We want to observe the trends in Finnish or Finnish-Swedish language written prose, poetry or children's literature. Obviously, our volume offers a highly limited view of the subject. There are initial observations; we must be satisfied, if we can form a valid hypothesis of some current nodes in contemporary literature.

During the chosen period, there were many turning points in global political history. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two world-wide economic crises, and the bombing of the WTC towers in New York, 11.9.2001, have all influenced Finnish literature. There were also changes that were important to Finland itself, such as accession to the European Union in 1995. We are also aware of huge nuclear catastrophes (Chernobyl, Fukushima), and the earthquakes and tsunamis in Thailand and Japan, although we do not take them as starting points for our articles. The determination of the first junction year that we consider – 1985 – is not due to Mikhail Gorbachev's reform politics, but to the outstanding literary phenomena, which took place simultaneously at that time.

We will focus on the period from the 1980s onwards, because the 1980s was the decade when the modern really met the postmodern in Finland in different ways. There were ruptures and mixtures of modernism and postmodernism. There are sparkling bubbles in style and rebellious themes that led to new kinds of writing. Their connection with postmodernism was much discussed, especially after 1987, when Markku Eskelinen and Jyrki Lehtola published their pamphlet, *Jälkisanat: Sianhoito-opas* (Epilogue: Guide to Raising Pigs). These young men argued fiercely that Finnish literature and its research were out-of-date because of a continued fascination with and appreciation of mimetic realism. The debate was refreshing; however, their accusations were only partly correct, as the poetics of late realism and the modernism of the fifties were in the process of being renewed (see Anna Helle 2009).

As a sign that something new was coming, the most precious prize for literature, the first Finlandia Prize, was bestowed on Erno Paasilinna, a satirist, whose genre is one of the most weakly developed prose forms in the Finnish language. His satirical work *Yksinäisyys ja uhma* (Solitude and Obstinacy) beat out the competition from established modernists in poetry, Bo Carpelan and Paavo Haavikko, and the new realists in prose, Veronica Pimenoff and Joni Skiftesvik.



## 1985 – the Crisis of Mimesis

The year 1985 points to changes even more clearly, when the following novels appeared: Leena Krohn's *Tainaron. Postia toisesta kaupungista* (*Tainaron. Mail from Another City*); Jörn Donner's *Far och son* (Father and Son); Matti Pulkkinen's *Romaanihenkilön kuolema. Tarua ja totta eli ihmisen kuvaus* (The Death of the Character. Legend and Truth or the Description of a Human Being), and Rosa Liksom's collection of short stories, *Yhden yön pysäkki* (One Night Stands). Krohn, Pulkkinen and Donner were also candidates for the Finlandia Prize. One common trait in these works is the epistemological questions that were raised: what is true in fiction, what relation does fiction have with reality and what is fiction's reality? The question of representation has an important influence on their narrative strategies, and structures. The reader takes the subject position of the *I*-narrator, her/his identity and selfhood. The writing and speaking *I*-person conquered the central station in the above-mentioned prose works. They also share the world-view of disillusionment.

Leena Krohn abandoned everyday kitchen realism at the beginning of her career when writing children's literature, which allows the use of fantasy (*Vihreä vallankumous*, 1970, *The Green Revolution*; *Tyttö joka kasvoi ja muita kertomuksia*, 1973, *The Girl who Grew and Other Stories*). She started to unify ontologically and epistemologically different materials, both fact and fiction, to her narratives. Her novels came to resemble collections of short stories, like her *Pereat mundus. Romaani, eräänlainen* (1998, *Pereat mundus. One kind of novel*) in which every separate episode features a character named Håkan, although he is always different. The Swedish name, Håkan has a connotation of a harmless but stupid person. Similarly, Krohn used the phrase, *Pereat mundus* which refers to a Latin phrase "Fiat justitia, et pereat mundus" and to its famous user Immanuel Kant. Kant paraphrases it as "Let justice reign even if all the rascals in the world should perish from it". This intertextual device creates peculiar humour in this apocalyptic novel where everyone is frightened and waiting for the end of the world.

*Tainaron* was Krohn's breakthrough in prose. It is a travel book and epistolary novel; it consists of extraordinary letters, sent to an unknown recipient by a female traveller when visiting the world of the insects. *Tainaron* connects – as is typical in Krohn's work – the visible and invisible, the real and imaginary, and the human and Nature. She does not write science fiction, but philosophical allegories similar to those written by Italo Calvino. Thanks to Leena Krohn, fantasy in the broad sense of the word, has become accepted as an important part of the contemporary literary canon in Finland, and science fiction has risen in value because of the ecological themes with which Krohn has dealt in several works. She has, then, successors in writing postmodern allegory, such as Maarit Verronen and Risto Isomäki, who writes speculative prose.

Krohn very often examines in her *oeuvre* the ephemeral nature of selfhood and the continuous metamorphosis of identity. Identity is also problematized by Jörn Donner in *Far och son*; he especially focuses on the Finnish-Swedish

identity of a solid *I*, which is represented to be weaker than before. The title of the novel suggests that there is a bond between the father and the son, and it is just that bond for which the son is longing, because he has not known his father who has died before his birth. The main person who resembles the real author is seeking himself in trying to write a novel in which he represents himself by another name as a fictive character of the manuscript. The Finnish-Swedish identity seems to have become postmodern, an empty place without a centre. In the next two decades, the so-called “cyclope novel” with its monologue style of narration was sidelined by the new generation of Finland-Swedish writing prose authors, such as Monika Fagerholm, Pirkko Lindberg, Fredrik Lång, and Lars Sund, to name a few, who learned to use metafictional and self-reflective strategies.

Continuing the change from realism in Finnish language literature of the 1980s, Matti Pulkkinen’s novel, *Romaanihenkilön kuolema* was labelled as postmodern. The authorial voice in the text itself describes the novel as “literarily bankrupt” and an “unfinished draft of an autobiographical anti-novel”. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that this author, much like Pulkkinen himself, has published a book called *The Power of the Word*, which has received the literary prize granted by the Nordic Council. During the celebrations in Stockholm, Finland has suddenly been occupied by the Soviet Union, and the author determines that he will not return to his country. The frame of the novel is mere fantasy and suggests the genre of dystopic utopia. What the reader is reading are fragments, unbound pages and notebooks left behind in Finland on the bench of a small town park, that were found, edited and commented upon by a literary researcher who represents himself as “Makkonen”, an old friend of the author, a fact confirmed by the manuscript itself.

*Romaanihenkilön kuolema* is a self-reflective metafiction that kills at the end all of its central figures, the author and the reader, in spite of the fact that they are paradoxically immortal on the pages, which is quite the opposite of the real reader’s situation, as “Makkonen” is mocking. The novel contains essay-like passages and aphorisms on writing and reading. In its poetics, it tries to apply real politics to the novel form, as the author says. It is partly a book about travel to Berlin and Africa; its illustrations come from the journey to Germany. The newspaper pictures represent tragic events when people were trying to cross the wall (*die Mauer*) from the east to the west. In a sense, the novel is a political essay that criticises especially Soviet politics, the Finns’ overly sympathetic attitude toward the Soviet Union (*die Finlandisierung*) and their naïve belief in development aid to Africans. The *I*-figure, the narrator, by means of whom “the world is written itself”, continually exceeds the borders of reality and fiction speaking of living and dead artists, politicians and authors. Pulkkinen’s novel is a genre-blending type of fiction; according to the narrator, the novel as a genre is omnivorous like a pig. To this poetical definition, the young writers, Eskelinen and Lehtola, showed their admiration in the subtitle of their polemical book *A Guide to Raising Pigs*.

Contrary to the important critics’ expectations, *Romaanihenkilön kuolema* was not awarded the Finlandia Prize that year; rather, it was granted

to Donner's anti-autobiography *Far och son*. After that, the prize was given only to poetry, until 1990 when the novel was again rewarded. In 1992 Leena Krohn's fantasy (*Matemaattisia olioita tai jaettuja unia*, Mathematical Beings and Shared Dreams received it); then the rules of the competition were changed, so that only novels could be considered. The Union of Finnish Publishers, which finances the prize, wanted to promote the novel, the best-selling and most popular genre.

Krohn, Donner and Pulkkinen represent subjective *I*-narration and play with the relationship between language and reality, each having their own purpose and method. The post-structuralist idea of language, denying the transparency of language or its ability to evoke reality, was worked through in many forms of *I*-narration during the following decades. In 1985, Rosa Liksom questioned even the reality of authorial identity by using a pseudonym. Her coming to the literary stage was a performative act: there were ten young women wearing uniforms and fur hats, among them the author, when the announcement of her first book was made. The author was not dead, as Roland Barthes would put it, but hiding, which of course, increased the media's interest in her. It was some years before her real identity was revealed to the public: Anni Ylävaara (b. 1958) in Ylitornio, Lapland, Finland, studied anthropology at the University of Helsinki, lived in, among other places, the free city of Kristiania in Copenhagen. Her pseudonym comes from that time. She is named Rosa after Rosa Luxemburg, the German revolutionary from the beginning of the twentieth century. The Swedish word *liksom* means both 'like' and 'as if' in English. She used it when she was searching for the right word in Swedish.

Rosa Liksom created in *Yhden yön pysäkki* and in the following collection of novels *Unohdettu vartti* (1986, *The Forgotten Quarter*), a new kind of poetics, with her shortcuts. The intrigue is structured in episodic screens as in comic strips. Her stories depict without illusion young people who are trying to find some place to stay overnight, in the railway station in Helsinki or in other halls of European cities or in Lapland. The sections of her shortcuts are geographically indicated by the term, "67 northern latitude". Those who come from the north are allowed to use their own colourful dialect, due to Liksom's sometimes grotesque humour. They tell their unembellished life stories openly as if to a microphone, held out by an anthropologist. Her first novel, *Kreisland* (1995, *Graceland*), is also written as if it had been recorded by an interviewer. Mythical figures by their miraculous birth, Impi Agafina and Juho Gabriel as well as the seer, Mikri Vuoma, relate Lapland's historical development and at the same time Finland's history as they have experienced it from the creation of the northern hemisphere to the time of the Russians' space flights. *Kreisland* is a Lappish epic and at the same time an indirect parody, not only of Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (1849), but also of the whole genre of national epics. Liksom's special ability is to parody cultural-ideological discourses – religious, communist, capitalist – which the northern people, living between the west and the east, have been obliged to learn over the centuries in order to "develop themselves"; the word is put between parenthesis by the ironic novel itself.



Rosa Liksom vivifies a new orality in fiction, a phenomenon that was born paradoxically at the same time as electronic media developed (see Walter Ong 1988.) New oral narration pretends to be like narration around the campfire. Good examples of it are talk shows and other kinds of direct radio programs carried out by telephone conversations between the journalist and listeners. Big Brother-type TV programmes, which have also increased in Finland from the 1990s onwards, are another example of a creation that mimics campfire speech. Imitating spoken language in fiction is known everywhere in late-modern, Western prose (see, Monika Fludernik 1996), but it was very new and that is why it is still astonishing in Finland. Written Finnish is a somewhat new phenomenon. It was developed very quickly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Finnish had become the official language in 1863 and when it began to be taught at school on all levels. The use of dialect was allowed only in private communication. It did not belong to civilised speech manners, but the vocabulary of dialects gave its rich resources to be used properly in literature itself, but in written, not oral transcription. Liksom delivered dialect from purism's oppression, and later on, dialects have also been approved in serious poetry (Heli Laaksonen). Highly canonised works like *Kalevala* and parts of the *Bible* were translated into some dialects; Matti Pulkkinen expressed himself in public interviews using his North-Carelian home dialect.

Some kind of new orality can also be seen in the changing narrator's voices that seem like tracks side by side on a recording or a montage of different narrators' stories which resembles TV viewers changing channels with a remote. The father of this currently very popular technique is Hannu Raittila, who has written many radio plays. He has succeeded in giving to every person his/her own idiolect so that the reader can recognise when an old minister, a Hell's Angel, a car or sausage seller, an administrator of a sound reinforcement system, a member of a devout religious family or an academic researcher is speaking in his novel, *Ei minulta mitään puutu* (1998, I Lack Nothing).

### *1998 – Identity Discussion*

The year, 1985, was a time of problematizing the poetics of realism, the codes of author, narrator, character, action and reader. The roles of author, narrator and reader are nearly interchangeable when writing or speaking alone takes the place of action and when nothing is happening outside the text. In the following decade, the primus motor in narratives does not really change; such concepts as identity, subjectivity and selfhood are still dominant. However, in 1998, there is a change in female writing, and social, national or international issues in literature.

The period from 1980–2000 meant first the explosion of individuality and subjectivity, the rebirth of individualism; Finnish cultural homogeneity was understood to be illusionary. Finland started to become a multicultural society because of the increasing number of immigrants coming, first

from such African countries as Somalia. The resurrection of *I* meant that the omniscient narrator and objective observer were obliged to leave their positions in narration, or the author-like person was mixed with the story, as we have already seen. This meant that biographies, autobiographies, autofiction types of prose, memoirs, dairies, collections of letters, epistolary forms of novel, even e-mail novels were the most prominent genres. Some of them followed the rules of real biographies, in that the name of the author and the main figure was the same; some imitated the autobiographical genre and autofiction. Some authors such as Kari Hotakainen began to mock the publisher who wants the author to write intimate confessions, even though he has nothing to tell. He plays with the conventions of autobiography in his metafictional novel, *Klassikko. Omaelämäkerrallinen romaani autoilevasta ja avoimesta kansasta* (1997, *The Classic, An Autobiographical Novel about a Driving and Open Nation*). Inside, there is another book, which is the writer's dairy from his early career as a poet, titled "It was nice to live, but difficult to keep silent".

The subjective focalisation of narration had also a function to empower the search for new strategies to express such social issues as womanhood, women's human rights and female biological and physical existence. First-person narration signalled the rise of a new kind of feminism. The first hot spot of *I*-writing was *Sonja O. kävi täällä* (1981, *Sonja O. Was Here*), a description of student bohemians of the 1970s, by Anja Kauranen (from 1997 onwards Anja Snellman). It was a critical and commercial success; its innovative feature is that the writer and the principal character is a young woman who had appropriated the old freedoms of men, as George C. Schoolfield (1998) put it. The novel has in its title already a reference to Pauline Reage's pornographic novel *The History of O* (*Histoire d'O* 1954), the sadomasochistic situation of which Kauranen turns upside down. *Sonja O.*, confessions of Donna Juan, paints the Strindbergian fight between the heterosexual man and woman. *Sonja O. kävi täällä* was a turning point toward more courageous and, strictly speaking, female writing.

The doctrine of the eighties – the personal is political – was realised in an anarchic-feminist way by Anja Kauranen in her novel, *Pelon maantiede* (1995, *The Geography of Fear*). In order to defend women's human rights against masculine hegemony, an academic group of assaulted women from the Department of Women's Studies begins to plan aggressive acts of revenge against men and to conquer for themselves the frightening places of city space. Pirkko Lindberg, writing in Swedish, made visible the inequality of the sexes in culture and society by rewriting Voltaire's famous novel, *Candide*. As its predecessor, her *Candida* (1997) is a many-sided pamphlet of its time. The heroine of the novel is a young girl beginning her life as a servant in a 20<sup>th</sup> century, upper-class family. In many works, Anna-Leena Härkönen has described difficulties in female sexuality in *Akvaariorakkaus* (1991, *Love in an Aquarium*) and in motherhood in *Heikosti positiivinen* (2001, *Slightly Positive*). Maria Peura made her breakthrough by handling paedophilia in her first novel, *On rakkautes ääretön* (2001, *Your Infinite Love*) at the same time as everywhere in the world there was sensational news about child abuse.

The year, 1998, then means a change in Finnish feminist literature, although a similar tone as before persisted. It was understood that it is not an easy task for both sexes to grow up, because both of them must become accustomed to their physical existence and the outside world with its demands. Positive models or figures to deal with these issues were needed. Monika Fagerholm and Sirpa Kähkönen present feminist thinking without hostile attitudes to men. Fagerholm's *Diva* (1998) empowers a young girl in her identity project by means of magical realism. Described in Naturalism the fate of a poor country maid was to be spoiled in the city. Kähkönen saves her life in her *Mustat morsiamet* (1998, *The Black Brides*). Black brides – a peasant woman's wedding dress was earlier black – are not ruined; the seductive city life does not crush their hopes totally, because the city gives them opportunities to reach full citizenship, when they can earn their own living, and become the managers of their own lives. They have courage enough to express themselves in their own language, in this case in the eastern Finnish dialect. Kähkönen has written a sequel to her micro-history of *Mustat morsiamet*, now five volumes, in which she shows how women have endured the wartime difficulties thanks to their mutual solidarity.

In the overflow of female voices, it was first impossible to separate men's objections. Men write back! In 1999, manhood became a central theme in several collections of short stories such as Juha Seppälä's *Suuret kertomukset* (*The Great Narratives*); Hannu Raittila's *Miesvahvuus* (*Men Strength*); and Jyrki Vainonen's *Tutkimusmatkailija ja muita tarinoita* (*The Explorer and Other Stories*). Novels like Kauko Röyhkä's *Ocean City* and Markku Karpio's *Naisten mies*, (*The Ladies' Man*), are other examples. The main question was, how to be a man, not how to become a man. As a prime example of this discussion, is Kari Hotakainen's successful novel, *Juoksuhaudantie* (2002, *The Trench Battle Road*), which was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize. It makes visible what a man's life is after the women's fight for freedom and shows how a Finnish man fights for his own identity on two fronts: at home and in the society of the market economy.

The humour of Hotakainen's novel, *Juoksuhaudantie*, is signalled by its title, which refers to a street in a Helsinki suburb, constructed by ex-service men after the Second World War and the main character's definition of himself as a home-service man. He is now the Home Angel, submitted to serve his wife. In this position, he makes a big mistake, when he once hits his wife. This thoughtless act ruins his personality. The novel describes in a tragi-comic way his desperate campaign to get back his family, especially his daughter, by means of a single-family home, which he begins to seek. His situation is hopeless, because his wife and the entire social system seem to be against him.

In the Finland-Swedish novel, *Den finska mannens sorg* (*The Finnish Man's Sorrow* 1996), Fredrik Lång lets the fellow sufferer of Hotakainen's hero speak, also in the first person, about his suffering from the female emancipation in Strindbergian self-pity; for him his wife's longing for her own space is like a form of adultery. The coherence of the Male ego has been

*Nodes of Contemporary Finnish Literature* examines phenomena from Finnish and Finnish-Swedish literature written in the years between the 1980s and the first decade of the new millennium. Its objective is to study this interesting era of literary history in Finland and to sketch some possible directions for future development by identifying literary turning points which have already occurred.

The analysis begins in 1985, when literature in Finland was transformed by a mimetic crisis which problematized the codes, roles, and functions of the author, narrator and reader. The modern met the postmodern during this literary period in many different ways. Another major turning point can be identified in 1998, when a fundamental change occurred in the writing of women and in the way social, national and international issues were presented in Finland's literature. From this point forward, narratives were guided by such concepts as identity, subjectivity and selfhood.

The nine articles found in the anthology are written by some of the most prominent literary scholars in Finland. These distinguished authors examine such varied topics as postmodern allegories, feminism, historiography, autobiographic writing, modern subjects in postmodern conditions, metalyrical poetry, realistic involvement in the novel, successful children's literature, and the intertextuality of Sofi Oksanen's famous novel *Purge*.

This anthology will be of interest to all students of the Finnish language or culture and endeavours above all to make contemporary Finnish literature and its corresponding literary research more accessible to everyone.



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