



SARIANNA KANKKUNEN

Terrains of Imagination in Contemporary Finnish Literature

Harassing Habitats in Maarit Verronen's Fiction

Studia Fennica
Litteraria 16

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STUDIA FENNICA LITTERARIA 16

The publication has undergone a peer review.

The collection of archived publications of the Finnish Literature Society is included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

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Series Cover Design: Timo Numminen

Cover Layout: Eija Hukka

Series Layout Design: Markus Itkonen

Layout: Sisko Honkala

EPUB: Tero Salmén

ISBN 978-951-858-925-2 (Print)

ISBN 978-951-858-926-9 (EPUB)

ISBN 978-951-858-927-6 (PDF)

ISSN 0085-6835 (Studia Fennica. Print)

ISSN 2669-9605 (Studia Fennica. Online)

ISSN 1458-5278 (Studia Fennica Litteraria. Print)

ISSN 2669-9540 (Studia Fennica Litteraria. Online)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.21435/sflit.16>

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A free open access version of the book is available at <https://doi.org/10.21435/sflit.16> or by scanning this QR code with your mobile device.

BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt, Germany 2024

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Introduction

This study examines Maarit Verronen's literary works and their relationship with space. The spaces and places depicted in Verronen's works range from Antarctic glaciers to the urban islands of the Helsinki archipelago and the narrow confines of a miniature apartment. Among contemporary Finnish authors, Verronen has gained a reputation as an architect of imaginary worlds and a spokesperson for the outsiders of society. Her works are known for their strange, dreamlike environments, and peculiar protagonists who are drawn to desolate places and obsessive pastimes. Verronen's oeuvre provides a rich corpus that is simultaneously distinctive and representative of developments within the field of Finnish literature in the last three decades. These developments involve such phenomena as the ontological instability of postmodernist fiction, the rise of dystopian fiction, the trend of individualization, the reassessment of the grand nationalist narratives, and the interest in environmental issues. Since all these phenomena can be associated with the heightened role of space in contemporary life, I have chosen to approach Verronen's works from the viewpoint of space and place. This study aligns itself with the contemporary approach referred to as spatial literary studies, which is connected to the so-called spatial turn within the humanities.

Verronen's longstanding and prolific career has given her a unique presence in Finland, although the author herself is famously withdrawn. Her impact in the field of Finnish fiction can be described as the early adopter and pioneer of certain genres. Her work paved the way for Finnish science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian fiction, all of which have been areas of rich literary production in the last three decades. Verronen presented these genres to the public; her shortlistings for the Finlandia Prize in 1993 and 1995 were among the first instances when works of fantasy were included in the selection.

Besides particular genres, Verronen's oeuvre can be linked to the pronounced spatiality of contemporary fiction, a feature that has been pointed out by Wolfgang Hallet (2014). As Michel Foucault (1986) envisioned in the 1960s, space and spatiality have been vital for the understanding of late modernity. From environmental concern to dystopian visions, Verronen's works of fiction process and assess dreams and nightmares that contemporary culture assigns to space and spatiality. Verronen's oeuvre thus provides a viewpoint in the vistas of Nordic and northern understanding of space in the early 2000s. This study sheds light on the role of urban nature, for instance, in Verronen's city visions, and analyses her configurations of a dystopic

future and climate change. As the following analyses demonstrate, Verronen's works of fiction foreground the question of spatial agency and probe the ethical and moral implications that arise on phenomena such as homeownership, the erosion of public spaces, homecoming, or the notion of habitat and its application in social rather than ecological discourse.

For those interested in spatial theory, this work offers case studies of the application of spatial concepts. Literary spaces and places were already a focus of scholarly interest well before the spatial turn. The turn, however, has offered literary scholars an abundance of new concepts and a fertile ground of intellectual debate. This study provides analyses of Verronen's literary worlds that combine spatial theory to the knowledge of literary tropes and genre conventions. It is my hope, therefore, that this work showcases how spatial theory can guide literary research and serve as a tool for close reading.

Maarit Verronen: Between Realism and Postmodernism, North and South

Maarit Verronen (b. 1961) was born in Kalajoki, a small town on the west coast of Finland, in the region of Northern Ostrobothnia. She studied astronomy in the northern city of Oulu, worked as a part-time university lecturer, and completed a licentiate, i.e., a predoctoral degree, in 1991, before committing herself fully to authorial work. Her first published works of fiction appeared in small science fiction and fantasy magazines, which, along with the success she had in writing contests, gained her a name among readers of speculative fiction. Early on, her works of fiction transgressed genre boundaries, which contributed to her becoming one of the first authors to make their way from Finnish science fiction fandom¹ to the larger public. Verronen made her literary debut with the short story collection *Älä maksa lautturille* ('Do Not Pay the Ferryman,' 1992), which received the Kalevi Jäntti Prize.

Verronen's work as a pioneer of speculative fiction was one of the grounds on which she was granted the State Prize for Literature in 2018. In 1993 and 1995, her novels were shortlisted for the Finlandia Award, the most prestigious literary award in the country. Despite her success in the field of literary awards, Verronen has been consistent in her withdrawal from publicity, having appeared rarely in public, and even then mostly at minor cultural events, public libraries, and occasional articles about the Helsinki archipelago.

Since her debut, Verronen's works have taken two opposing paths. Her perceptive and unassuming prose, the style she developed in her fandom publications (Verronen 1991; 1986), has increasingly found its subject matter from everyday things and banal settings, which are then, unexpectedly, treated with an element of shock, peculiarity, or absurdity. Works like these include *Kulkureita & Unohtajia* ('Wanderers & Forgetters,' 1996b), *Luotettava ohikulkija* ('A Passer-By You Can Trust,' 2002a), *Keihäslintu* ('Spearbird,' 2004a), and *Saari kaupungissa* ('Island in the City,' 2007). In these works,

1. Finnish science fiction and fantasy fandom is characterized by active publishing, which has helped to educate new writers on the field. Another feature of the field is its high level of collective voluntary work, which culminates in Finncon, the annual convention. For a thorough overview of Finnish science fiction fandom, see Hirsjärvi (2009).

Verronen's long-term interest in the fantastic evolves into a search for the abnormal in the mundane, and human frailty is simultaneously the source of oddity and the target of observation. Alongside these plain narratives, another line of work begins to emerge and develops in the direction of genre fiction. *Pimeästä maasta* ('Out of the Dark Lands,' 1995) is a fantasy novel with an imaginary, although allegorical, geography and culture. In the 2000s, Verronen shifts into dystopian fiction: *Karsintavaihe* ('The Elimination Phase,' 2008) and *Kirkkaan selkeää* ('Bright and Clear,' 2010) present a near future of Finland and Europe, offering bleak visions of an oppressive yet unstable society. Finally, the novel *Hiljaiset joet* ('Silent Rivers,' 2018) is a full-blown apocalypse of a dying Earth.

Although critics have often highlighted the originality of Verronen's fiction (see, e.g., Manninen 2013; Soikkeli 2001), many aspects of her prose can be associated or at least compared with the shifts taking place in Finnish literature in the 1980s and onward. The 1980s were characterized by a newly found interest in short stories, as the decades' debutants, such as Rosa Liksom, Juha Seppälä and Joni Skiftesvik,² experimented with the short format. Verronen, too, started her career as a writer of short stories and has continued this line of work over the years.

Many of the short prosaists of the late 1980s and early 1990s sought the element of shock (see Eskola 1996), be it the linguistic vulgarity, violence, and nonconformity of Rosa Liksom's marginalized subjects in the collection *Yhden yön pysäkki* (1985) or the extreme cynicism in the depiction of capitalist society in Juha Seppälä's *Super Market* (1991) (for Liksom, see Sandbacka 2017; for Seppälä, see Ojajarvi 2006 and Juntunen 2012). Instead of the obtrusive strategies and aesthetics employed by her contemporaries, Verronen's early works draw from her background in science fiction and fantasy, a choice that gives her short stories their signature sense of wonder and strangeness. These aesthetic and thematic emphases might have made Verronen's works more unassuming than those of her contemporaries; however, at the same time, these same qualities drew her farther away from the dominant realist tradition of Finnish literature. The prominent works of short fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, while transgressive in many aspects, were heavily committed to the realist and naturalist undercurrents of the Finnish canon. Liksom's works, for instance, make use of postmodernist strategies such as hyperbolics, the aesthetics of excess, and parody, but these characteristics have often been interpreted in the framework of Finnish realist and naturalist tradition (see, e.g., Kirstinä 2007), and rightly so: as Kasimir Sandbacka (2017, 14–21) suggests in his study, Liksom's narrative art engages with the reassessment of the modern project. Against this background, it is easy to see how certain components of Verronen's prose fiction – elements of fantasy, dreamlike settings, abstract and minimalistic detailing – contributed to the critics', scholars', and readers' sense of Verronen's originality.

2. Rosa Liksom (b. 1958) started her career as a literary *enfant terrible* with outrageous and linguistically experimental short stories. From there on, she has developed into an esteemed writer whose topics range from Finland's cultural relationship with Russia to historical turning points of the twentieth century. Juha Seppälä's (b. 1956) experimental prose, sharp social criticism, and linguistic precision have made him one of the most acclaimed authors of his time. Joni Skiftesvik (b. 1948) is known for his short prose that often thematizes historical topics and seafaring. Skiftesvik has received the Runeberg Award (2015) and the Pro Finlandia medal (2005).

Verronen's position with regard to the realisms of Finnish literature is, however, a complicated matter. Perhaps the greatest disparity between Verronen's oeuvre and realist fiction is the way her works eschew societies and collectives in favor of the subjective experience. In the Finnish context, this preference for subjectivity is significant because, as many scholars have pointed out (see, e.g., Juntunen 2015, 101–2), most of the canonical novels of Finnish literature distinctively revolve around collectives. In this regard, Verronen's narratives may draw comparison to the postmodernist short prose of Liksom, who also depicts marginalized groups, minorities, and social classes. Verronen's characters, however, should not be interpreted in the context of underprivilege and social marginalization – the exclusion of Verronen's outsiders, vagabonds, and wanderers is ontological and existential rather than societal.

While Verronen's characters inhabit a distinct world of abnormality, individuality, and peculiarity, her prose fiction does approach realism in the realms of style and representation. This realistic tendency is discernible at the level of language, which in Verronen's case is simple, unobtrusive and accessible, thus adhering to realist ideals. The lack of linguistic experimentation, a foundational trait of modernist and postmodernist prose, and metafictionality, the cornerstone of postmodernist literature, also suggest an influence from realist traditions. Moreover, Verronen's tendency to favor coherent and closed plots – another factor in the accessibility of her prose fiction – further positions her fiction closer to the realisms than the postmodernisms or modernisms of Finnish literature.

A similar sense of wonder that is present in Verronen's texts can be found in the works of Leena Krohn. Krohn did her breakthrough in the 1980s with *Donna Quijote ja muita kaupunkilaisia* (1983) and *Tainaron* (1985). Krohn's stylized, carefully composed text fragments combine dreamy visions with dystopian fears and philosophical problems. Stylistically, Verronen and Krohn are very different, as Verronen's works of fiction are less fragmentary and more plot-driven than Krohn's, and Krohn's language, although clear and restrained, is more aesthetically oriented than Verronen's plain discourse. There are, however, similarities between the two authors: Verronen and Krohn both work with short prose, draw from speculative genres, and employ the genre of allegory. In her study on Krohn's fiction, Pirjo Lyytikäinen (2013a, 18–47; 2014) highlights the frictional nature of an allegorical text; the strange and peculiar world of an allegorical text is meant to estrange the reader so that the literal interpretation of the narrative makes way for an allegorical reading. Krohn's fragmentary narratives and their open endings follow this basic principle (Lyytikäinen 2013a). Some of Verronen's narratives, especially the novel *Pimeästä maasta*, invite the allegorical interpretation by outlining the storyworld only in broad terms and with the help of toponyms that emphasize the moral nature of places. Unlike Krohn's texts, Verronen's narratives can be read as works of fantasy, which makes their association with the genre of allegory looser.

Another point of comparison is the so-called 'School of Evil' (*pahan koulukunta*), a loosely defined group of authors whose works were associated with moral criticism, the theme of evil, and lack of values.³ Ville Sassi (2012, 15–27) presents an interesting

3. Authors who have been associated with the School of Evil include Annika Idström, Esa Sariola, Eira Stenberg, Juha Seppälä, and – in Sassi's (2012) study – also Matti Yrjänä Joensuu.

analysis of the construction of this so-called school and describes how the cultural and societal changes of the 1980s led critics and literary scholars to interpret the presence of moral themes as a disruption within the tradition of the Finnish novel. Verronen's appearance in the field of literature was read against this literary discussion to the extent that Leena Kirstinä (2000, 212) designated her the forerunner of a 'School of Goodness.' Kirstinä's assessment was based on Verronen's early works, especially the Silberwald stories (1992) and the novel *Yksinäinen vuori* ('The Lonesome Mountain,' 1993), which draw from the genres of adventure novel, romance, and heroic sagas. In hindsight, Kirstinä's judgment might have been hasty, especially if we consider such works as *Keihäslintu*, which takes a painfully sharp-sighted look at the cruelty of human nature and underlines its message with a metaphor of species extinction. Kirstinä's view on the ethical stance of Verronen's prose fiction does, however, gain support from Pertti Lassila's (2007) critique of the novel *Saari kaupungissa*, in which Lassila praises Verronen's 'intellectual optimism.'

As this study proposes, Verronen's works, as postmodern as they may seem, are in many ways committed to the ideals of Enlightenment and the sovereignty of reason and rationality. The latter half of Verronen's career exemplifies how her oeuvre frequently embraces postmodernist themes and techniques while upholding values that are not postmodernist.

From intertextuality to fragmentation, Verronen's works employ multiple postmodernist techniques. *Karsintavaihe*, *Kirkkaan selkeää*, and *Hiljaiset joet* make use of the crossing and mixing of genres; *Luotettava ohikulkija* draws from magical realism and relies on a dreamlike atmosphere; and *Saari kaupungissa* is a fragmented portrait of a woman and her hometown, a narrative that continuously breaks down the linearity of traditional storytelling. The dystopian duology relies on a wealth of intertextual hints at classics of the dystopian genre. Thematically as well, the works touch upon many of the pivotal topics of postmodernist literary fiction: *Luotettava ohikulkija* is a medley of narratives on freedom, yet one that also produces a fine-tuned analysis on the paranoia that inevitably follows when the human subject is presented with the freedom of choice. *Karsintavaihe* and *Kirkkaan selkeää* foreground the effects of technology and market capitalism upon space, society, and relationships and present these phenomena in a critical manner. *Keihäslintu* consists of short stories that often take place in ambiguous locations and fantastic miniature worlds that draw similarities to historiographic metafiction.

Yet each of the mentioned works subscribe to values that can be related to rationality and reason. In *Karsintavaihe* and *Hiljaiset joet*, these values are articulated through the protagonists' actions and their methodical decision-making and highlighted by the narrator's observationalist tone of voice. *Keihäslintu* – a novel that studies the inhumanity of humans and parallels it with the theme of species extinction – ends with a cathartic scene in which the protagonist is able to distance herself from the cruelty of humankind by expressing her sorrow for an extinct bird. The narrative stages the protagonist's journey – which resembles a scientific enterprise and is set in several scholarly institutions – as a process of not merely mourning but also elevating herself above the murderous instincts that drive the human race. Verronen's narratives hence remain hopeful about scientific inquiry, rational thinking, and the human subject's capability of progress. Whereas the dystopian duology of *Karsintavaihe* and *Kirkkaan selkeää* both embrace the critique of market capitalism, the author's later

works, such as *Vanhat kuviot* ('The Old Daily Round,' 2012), present a sharp criticism of premodern communities and the peripheries of the late modern world that still resist modernity. These works pertain to a line of criticism that can be traced back to the author's second novel, *Pimeästä maasta*. Among Finnish authors, Verronen is one of the few to consistently portray the structural and ideological problems of premodern and agrarian societies. These issues include patriarchy, class division, superstition, bigotry, and tribalism, to name but a few.

As already stated, Verronen's role in Finland has been that of a forerunner in the fields of fantasy, science fiction, and other genres of speculative fiction. Her influence can be observed in the *reaalifantastikot* group and the notion of Finnish weird (*suomikumma*). The former is a group of writers; the latter is a Finnish version of the Anglo-American genre of new weird, which will be discussed in this chapter (for *suomikumma*, see Samola and Roine 2014). Both work as a genre concept. The features of these two genres are similar: they both underscore elements of fantasy and highlight their genre-crossing function (Raipola 2019; for *suomikumma*, see Samola and Roine 2014; for *reaalifantastikot*, see Ollikainen 2017). These features resonate strongly with the oeuvre of Verronen; her literary career consists of multiple genres, genre-hybrids, and a tendency to embrace both the realist tradition of Finnish canon and speculative genres. The term *reaalifantasia* was coined by Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen (b. 1966) as a genre-crossing effort to employ elements of both speculative fiction, such as fantasy, and realist writing. In addition to Jääskeläinen, the group includes J. Pekka Mäkelä (b. 1962), Anne Leinonen (b. 1973), and Juha-Pekka Koskinen (b. 1968). As Minttu Ollikainen (2017) suggests, a key feature of the works of *reaalifantastikot* is the instability of their storyworlds. This phenomenon can also be found in Verronen's works, especially in the short stories of her early career, such as *Kulkureita & Unohtajia*. In these narratives, people and places disappear or transform overnight, time does not flow as it usually does, and identities are lost or suddenly found.

Verronen's two dystopian novels, which were published in 2008 and 2010, were received well and read widely. By taking up the dystopian genre, Verronen was among many; dystopian fiction, a genre with a short and sparse history in Finland, became a literary phenomenon in the 2010s. According to Isomaa and Lahtinen (2017, 11), dystopian fiction was published in the 1990s and 2000s at a rate of ten to 20 books per decade. A massive leap was taken in the 2010s, with 70 titles published between 2010 and 2017 alone (Isomaa and Lahtinen 2017, 11). The Finnish dystopias of the 2010s include works such as Antti Tuomainen's detective story *Parantaja* (2010), Mikko-Pekka Heikkinen's comic war novel *Terveiset Kutturasta* (2012), Emmi Itäranta's poetic climate fiction novel *Teemestarin kirja* (2012, transl. *Memory of Water*, 2012), and Anu Holopainen's young adult dystopia *Ihon alaiset* (2015). As these examples suggest, dystopian fiction had developed into a versatile literary genre that ranged from comic to tragic and served young adults as well as elderly readers of crime fiction. When compared to other examples of the genre, Verronen's dystopian duology is markedly critical and socially conscious. *Karsintavaihe* and *Kirkkaan selkeää* focus on societal questions: on the problems of working life, trade union affairs, urban planning, finance capitalism, and the overwhelming sense of precarity that defines the human existence within these parameters.

Stylistic, periodic, and ideological associations aside, Verronen's work can also be situated along spatial coordinates. Born in Kalajoki, having studied in Oulu, and

currently residing in Helsinki, Verronen has practiced the blurring of both genre and regional boundaries. This, however, is not a unique trait; as Sanna Karkulehto (2010, 221) remarks in her article on the northern Finnish authors of the 2000s, most debutant authors of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s had left the north for southern Finland, especially Helsinki. Among these are Anna-Leena Härkönen, Rosa Liksom, Kauko Röyhkä, Hannu Väisänen, Katja Kettu, and Riikka Pulkkinen (Karkulehto 2010, 221). Considering the long and viable tradition of subnational regionalism in northern Finland – one that particularly finds its expression in the literature and literary life of the 1960s and onward (see, e.g., Carlsson et al. 2010a, 7–8; Mäkelä 1999; Niemi 1999, 183; Turunen 1999, 195) – it is relevant to reflect on the ‘northernness,’ or the regional association, of Verronen. The edited collection *Jäiset laakerit: artikkeleita pohjoisista naiskirjailijoista* (‘Frozen Laurels: Articles on Northern Female Authors,’ Tuohimaa, Leppihalme, and Työlähti 1998) incorporates Verronen among the female writers of the Finnish north. A similar conclusion is made in the groundbreaking literary history *Pohjois-Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* (‘The Literary History of Northern Finland,’ Carlsson et al. 2010b). The collection’s section on Maarit Verronen, by Anna Alatalo and Jaana Märsynaho (2010), is short and descriptive, but the collection as a whole offers a multifaceted view on the literature written in northern Finland and thus provides context for Verronen’s works.

A proper examination of Verronen’s regional association requires, naturally, a conceptualization on the region, namely, the Finnish north. The editors of *Pohjois-Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* represent multiple conceptualizations of north and refrain from providing direct coordinates of a region that is arguably just as imagined, cultural, contextual, and personal as it is geographical; they do, however, suggest that the literature of northern Finland either represents northern Finland and/or is written by authors who reside in the northern parts of the country (Carlsson et al. 2010a, 9–10). Geographically, Carlsson et al. (2010a, 10) suggest a demarcation that includes Northern Ostrobothnia and some areas of Central Ostrobothnia. As Verronen was raised and studied in Northern Ostrobothnia and published her first works in Oulu, her inclusion among the northern Finnish authors is understandable. This interpretation gains further support from the fact that the novel *Pimeästä maasta* implicitly represents the Finnish north, although the storyworld consists of allegorical and fantastic elements. Instead of the Finnish north, most of Verronen’s northern settings are situated outside Finland: in the Alps of Central Europe, in the Antarctic, or in the Arctic. As Carlsson et al. (2010a, 12) note, the literature of northern Finland has a tendency to build intertextual associations to previous works of the same northern canon. Among Verronen’s works, only the novel *Pimeästä maasta* carries significant and meaningful allusions to the writings of the canonical northern authors, especially Timo K. Mukka. More numerous are the works that represent the Finnish south: *Saari kaupungissa*, *Muutama lämmin päivä* (‘A Few Warm Days,’ 2019b), and the many local histories and works of nonfiction, such as *Sulhanen* (2014) and *Varjosaari* (2019c). Instead of emphasizing northernness or regionalist self-determination, Verronen’s prose fiction seems to be critical of these tendencies. *Vanhat kuviot*, a collection of short stories, thematizes regionalism through representations of isolated communities, and associates it with antimodern and patriarchal ideologies. A similar tendency can be discerned in Verronen’s extinction trope, which is examined in more detail in the ‘Living Space and the Troubles of Homecoming in *Pieni elintila*’ section of Chapter 6.

Juha Ridanpää (2006) considers the conceptualization of the Finnish north a phenomenological question, as the essence of the region is, according to him, a deeply personal and relational matter. Along those lines, my suggestion would be to consider Maarit Verronen not a northern or southern Finnish writer but rather a writer whose work has transgressed regional boundaries and deconstructed the existing imaginations of the Finnish north and south. Verronen (2004c; see also 2019a) herself has expressed a strong argument against categorizing her within the regionalist northern or southern groupings.

VERRONEN, NORDIC AND EUROPEAN LITERATURES: FANTASY, DYSTOPIA, AND OTHER POINTS OF CONTACT

Verronen's early publications drew attention due to their foreign and unexpected settings. In his critique of Verronen's debut collection, Antti Majander (1992) approaches Verronen's fiction as a representation of 'Generation Interrail' and spends a good amount of the critique analyzing the foreign settings of the stories. He then concludes that these choices attest to the author's exceptional open-mindedness, which, according to him, sometimes borders on recklessness (Majander 1992). Majander's critique exemplifies the reception of a debutant author whose subject matter and setting deviate from the mainstream of Finnish fiction in the early 1990s. Verronen's authorial image became less Finnish and more European, especially because her debut was followed by works of fiction that continued along the same lines: the second book takes place in Central Europe and is inspired by local myths about the Alps and the numerous short stories are set in either imaginary landscapes or Nordic, Central European or Balkan places. But, besides providing settings and inspiration for her fiction, the Nordic, European, and Anglo-American context is in numerous ways intertwined in Verronen's writing. A closer look at the international literary influences and context of Verronen's works also illustrates the many shifts and trends that shaped the literary market in the 1990s and 2000s.

Fantasy, horror, and science fiction were not genres of mainstream fiction in 1980s and 1990s Finland, nor was it customary that works of fiction drew elements from these genres. In the Nordic context, however, Verronen's genre preferences seem less peculiar.

In the 1980s,⁴ Norwegian literature developed a focus on fantasy and myth. Harald S. Næss (1993, 347) suggests that this can be observed especially in children's literature; but, as he himself notes while writing about Kjartan Fløgstad (b. 1944) and Jan Kjaerstad (b. 1953), postmodern authors of the 1980s that wrote for adults experimented with fantasy and imagination too (Næss 1993, 330–32). In addition to Fløgstad, coined as the magical realist of Norwegian literature, Norwegian writers that can be associated with postmodern interest in fantasy and genre blending include satirist Ragnar Hovland (b. 1952), writer and translator Mari Osmundsen (b. 1951), who writes under a pseudonym, and children's author Tormod Haugen (1945–2008). The shift toward fantasy can be seen as a departure from the aesthetics of the 1970s; as Næss (1993, 307) outlines, Norwegian literature of the 1970s was characterized by the documentarist style and the subject matter of everyday life.

4. Verronen's first novel was published in 1992, but her short stories began to appear in magazines in the 1980s.

Osmundsen's narratives in particular, which from 1980s onward incorporate elements of fantasy, myth, and folk tales, bear a close resemblance to Verronen's prose. Osmundsen's works of fiction, as Rakel Christina Granaas (2012) writes, maintain faith in the individual, however weak and insignificant they may seem, and embrace a sense of optimism and hope. Verronen's early works such as *Älä maksa lautturille* and *Yksinäinen vuori* draw, equally, from the folk tales and mythology while containing a message of hope. For both authors, the fantastic is not only an aesthetic device but an ethical stance; the wonders, the miracles and the sudden magical element in the middle of an everyday scene call for the reader's curiosity and accepting and playful attitude.

Although there are similarities between Norwegian and Finnish literatures in the 1970s – realism, emphasis on social and structural issues, and the documentarist style – Finnish literature did not see a turn toward fantasy in the 1980s. Something similar did happen, though, in the works of some female authors. As Liisa Enwald (1999, 211) points out in her article on women's feminist writing in the 1980s, female authors experimented with myth and fantasy and explored them as ways to challenge the narrative form. Verronen, although never associated with the feminist writing of the 1980s and 1990s, explores feminist themes in her novel *Pimeästä maasta*. The novel is an allegorical fantasy that discusses embodied gender and its production in society.

By comparing the fantastic and mythic elements in Verronen's fiction to Norwegian and Finnish contemporaries, one can say that fantastic elements seem to be related to three impulses: the need to react to and rebel against the literary ideals of the 1970s, the breakthrough of postmodernism, and the emancipatory aspirations of the feminist writers.

Another important point of comparison between Verronen's oeuvre and Nordic literatures is the role of crime fiction. Crime fiction is an active field of literary production in all Nordic countries. In Sweden, as Rochelle Wright (1996, 407), points out, crime fiction started to gain appreciation as early as the 1960s, when the previously held ways of understanding literature were being challenged. A turning point, according to Wright (1996, 407), was the publication of Maj Sjöwall's (1935–2020) and Pär Wahlöö's (1926–1975) *Roman om Brotts* series (1965–1975) on superintendent Martin Beck. The series is often seen as a precursor of the Nordic noir genre. Nordic noir itself can be defined in multiple ways, but the classic definition acknowledges the genre's geographical setting in Nordic countries as well as its role as 'a response of the inevitable failure of the optimistic social democracies to fundamentally alleviate human suffering,' as Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir and Gerardine Meaney (2020, 2) encapsulate.

Verronen's works do not involve novels that have been published or marketed as crime fiction or Nordic noir, but in some cases her narratives bear a closer resemblance to these genres. These novels coincide with the high tide of Nordic noir, which started in the mid-2000s (Bradley, Nestingen, and Seppälä 2020, 6). The novel *Osallisuuden tunto* ('The Sense of Complicity,' 2006) not only focuses on a mystery of a missing man and a perfect murder, but also refers directly to the most famous unsolved homicide of Finnish crime history, the Lake Bodom murders. Most importantly, the novel depicts the problems of Finnish reformatory schools, and highlights neglected social groups such as orphans, childless elderly, and drug users. *Osallisuuden tunto* thus discusses the failures of Finnish society, involves social criticism, and conjoins

these two with a crime mystery in a manner that is typical for Nordic noir. By shifting the point of view from the detectives to the perpetrator, Verronen's novel, however, develops into a treatise on guilt. Another example of Nordic noir in Verronen's fiction is the novel *Varjonainen* ('Woman of Shadows,' 2013), which is a thriller-like narrative of an undocumented entry to Finland and the immigrant's sophisticated, although criminal, ways of blending in in Finnish society. Again, the novel employs elements of Nordic noir and thus gains suspense and tools for social criticism, but, by modifying the perspective and avoiding closure, the novel turns from a crime story into a self-reflective look on Finnish society. Verronen's novels are rewritings of the genre: they maintain the core ideas of Nordic noir but underline the metaphysical aspects of these narratives.

Verronen's early involvement in science fiction and postapocalypse – her first published work, a collection of short stories, includes a postapocalyptic narrative – foreshadows her two influential dystopian novels of the late 2000s. *Karsintavaihe* was published in 2008 and its sequel *Kirkkaan selkeää* in 2010. Her novels are part of a global trend. As Basu, Broad, and Hintz (2013, 8) point out, the influx of young adult dystopian fiction was noted for the first time in a 2008 article in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, which evaluated the previous year's literary phenomena. Dystopian and postapocalyptic fiction turns into movements that also dominate the literary market well into the 2010s in the Nordic countries. In Sweden, authors such as Johannes Anyuru (b. 1979), Magnus Nordin (b. 1963), Stina Nilsson (b. 1990), Lisa Hågensen (b. 1966), and Anna Jakobsson Lund (b. 1978) publish dystopian and postapocalyptic novels with Nordic perspectives. As with Verronen's dystopias, these Swedish novels employ the dystopian narrative formula but modify it with themes and issues that are current to Nordic societies: the frailty of the welfare state, the viability of an open and democratic society, the challenges that extremist political movements and racism pose for societies previously known for their uniformity, and the role that climate change and nature play for Nordic cultures and self-understanding.

Yet another distinctively Nordic aspect in Verronen's oeuvre is the intense fascination for snow and ice, Arctic, and winter. Some of her narratives both aestheticize and romanticize the north; the best example of these is the novel *Kylmien saarten soturi* ('Warrior of the Cold Isles,' 2001). Others do the opposite: *Pieni elintila* ('The Tiny Living Space,' 2004b) disassembles the myths and hero legends associated with polar expeditions and creates an alternative narrative that relies on internal rather than external expansion. Some of her works depict snow and other winter imagery with a sensitivity and sense of wonder that bears an association to Peter Høeg's novel *Frøken Smillas förnemmelse för sne* (1992; transl. *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, 1993). Snow as a fantastic, otherworldly element that both threatens and protects the human subject appears in the novel *Yksinäinen vuori*, as well as in many collections of short stories, such as *Kulkureita & Unohtajia* and *Löytöretkeilijä ja muita eksyneitä* ('The Explorer and Other Lost People,' 1999).

Looking at the European and Anglo-American context, Verronen's works coincide with the genre of new weird, a concept that appeared in the discourse of speculative genres in the late 1990s and early 2000s. New weird is often understood as a hybrid of fantasy, science fiction, and horror but, as China Miéville (b. 1972), Jeff VanderMeer (b. 1968), and M. John Harrison (b. 1945) – the authors behind the movement – have stressed, it is the progressive spirit borrowed from 1960s

This book is the first comprehensive study on Maarit Verronen, an award-winning Finnish contemporary author whose career spans four decades and encompasses multiple genres. The study explores experiences of space in Verronen's writing, drawing from spatial studies, an interdisciplinary approach within the humanities. In addition to offering a longitudinal analysis of Verronen's oeuvre, the study contextualizes her works within Nordic and European literatures. It provides new insights into contemporary literature's emphasis on space, spatiality, environmental issues and the genres of dystopia and fantasy. The book is intended for scholars of literature and spatial studies, as well as anyone interested in Finnish literature or speculative genres.



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ISBN 978-951-858-925-2
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