

Theodolinda Hahnsson

*Aspen Rock*  
*Christmas Presents*



Translated with an Introduction by Alisa Manninen

Trialogue Books

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*Contents*

Introduction	vii
<i>ASPEN ROCK</i>	1
<i>CHRISTMAS PRESENTS</i>	53
The Works of Theodolinda Hahnsson	77



## **Introduction**

Theodolinda Hahnsson (1838–1919) became an author when *Aspen Rock* (*Haapakallio*) reached its readers in 1869. This also marked another beginning: the first time that a woman had published a novella in the Finnish language. Aleksis Kivi's great classic of rural life, *Seven Brothers* (1870), is regarded as the first major novel written in Finnish by a Finnish-speaking author. From this point onwards, a new kind of Finnish literature began to emerge alongside Finland's tradition of Swedish-language literature. In addition to authors who have found enduring fame as national icons (Kivi himself is the archetype of the misunderstood genius), that growing wave was also swelled by a host of other names who, while popular in their time, have not lingered in public memory. Hahnsson belongs to the latter group, yet she was a quiet trailblazer. Her life reflects many of the key developments that transformed Finland's literature in the nineteenth century and her writing drew upon the world she saw around her, as well as values that were important to her.

Born a rural pastor's daughter in the southern parish of Tyrvää, the youngest of ten children, Sofia Theodolinda Limón received no formal schooling, to her sadness. That opportunity was reserved for her brothers; even the few girls' schools that existed were found in towns and were mostly a matter of giving the daughters of the gentry a bit of social polish. But Theodolinda's brothers were willing to teach their sisters. One particular subject that they turned to was the Finnish language.

The Limóns were Swedish speakers, as were almost all of the upper classes and civil servants. Those few who had been born to Finnish speakers had to learn Swedish in order to build careers. However, the era of Swedish rule came to an end in 1809, when the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars allowed Russia to extend its reach westwards: Sweden could no longer maintain its hold on Finland, which became an autonomous grand duchy of Russia. Suddenly, Finland had a new capital, Helsinki, and a need for institutions that would govern it from within. The people who ran those institutions were Swedish speakers, but they were increasingly committed to exploring the idea of Finland as a country in its own right and with its own culture, which would further justify its administrative and even political independence. This required granting greater opportunities to Finnish speakers, in which the expansion of education played a major role.

Swedish-language literature flourished in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of many beloved classics, such as the works of Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the national poet. The greatest achievement of Finnish-language literature was the *Kalevala*: compiled by Elias Lönnrot from folk poetry he collected on his field trips, the first version of the national epic was published in 1835 and inspired patriotic pride by bringing Finnish folklore and mythology from the rural margins to national prominence. It offered a vision of a fascinating culture that preceded Swedish rule—but it was the past. The present was the next step. Could literature be written in Finnish that spoke of the concerns of today? Could it attract readers and be financially viable?

The creation of the public school system in 1866 brought literacy to the masses (largely Finnish-speaking, with Swedish-speaking populations concentrated along the coast) in a new way that laid the groundwork for the huge growth of the newspaper industry in the 1870s and the rise of new publishers in the 1880s. Previously, the church had been responsible for ensuring that people met what were considered basic standards of literacy, with varying success. Now, a

## *Introduction*

reading public was created, more well-informed than before and hungry for the entertainment and knowledge that reading provided. This was what the Fennomans, supporters of the Finnish language and Finnish culture, had been hoping for: the people, with the masses joining the gentry, demonstrated that they wanted to read literature and were willing to pay for it (and those who did not have the means to do that turned eagerly to alternatives, such as the growing number of public libraries).

Before publishing became a true industry supported by a wide-ranging public of readers, Theodolinda had already begun to experiment with telling her own tales. Finnish was the language of her father's servants and the community he served. The women often spent autumn and winter afternoons indoors, working on their crafts, and young Theodolinda entertained the family's maids and hired helpers with her translations of Swedish fiction. They kept on asking her to tell more stories. When these women complained that such things had not been printed in Finnish, Theodolinda wondered how they might respond to more relatable stories, featuring environments and incidents much like those they knew from their everyday lives.

Theodolinda Hahnsson's first readers were in truth listeners, and they did not know the identity of the author whose work they commented on. Her daughter Hilja Haahti recalled Theodolinda's account of how she first began to express her creativity:

Here no one suspected anything; everyone believed that she was recounting some Swedish book again. The success of the anonymous author was splendid: the listeners praised Miss for having now told the most amusing tale of all. It had the most familiar elements, the kind that they themselves had seen and experienced, but also beautiful and exciting things that made you wipe your tears or hold your breath in anticipation as you waited to find out what happened.

One evening after another Theodolinda continued what she had begun or began something new and then something new again. No more did she run out of topics.

Although the specific details of these stories have been lost, they likely represented the kind of fiction with which Hahnsson eventually debuted when she published *Aspen Rock*: rural tales into which were woven the beauties of nature and the comforts offered by family and friends, given a touch of darkness and tension by the recognition of existing social and moral injustices and the struggle to find one's own place. Inspired to move from oral storytelling to written fiction, Theodolinda began to jot her thoughts down.

The Limón family had subscribed to the Finnish-language newspaper *Suometar* from the very beginning. It had been founded in 1847 by students who soon sought to expand its audience beyond Swedish-speaking Fennomans. The publication of letters from rural writers offered a look at news from the Finland that existed outside the established cities and eventually a path for the increasingly literate masses to participate in public discourse. The eldest son gave his sisters a Christmas present: a second subscription, copies of *Suometar* that were meant just for them. Theodolinda became familiar with Finnish as it was written by the educated gentry who wanted to make it a language used in all fields of life, from politics to science and education, in addition to hearing it spoken by the country folk to whom it was the first language in which they had ever expressed their thoughts. She had the inspiration and the ability to write. What she lacked was guidance and support.

Literature in Swedish had begun to be published from the 1840s onwards by women such as Fredrika Runeberg (née Tengström), who wrote Finland's first historical novel, and Sara Wacklin, who showed a flair for social comedy in her collection of short stories about her northern home region of Ostrobothnia. However, Theodolinda had no

## *Aspen Rock* (1869)

When it is summer in the countryside, young people are drawn to Aspen Rock. The beauty of the nature around it is timeless, but so are the human emotions that disturb the peace of this idyll: lies and prejudices, power and wealth, all these challenges must be confronted before the right hearts can find their way to each other.

## *Christmas Presents* (1891)

As the town prepares for Christmas, the mother and sister of a young student are hard at work to give him a homecoming to remember. Without the money to buy grand presents, they must search for the spirit of Christmas in other ways. Family reunions bring old and new friends together to share their hopes for the future and make them come true.

With *Aspen Rock*, Theodolinda Hahnsson (1838-1919) became the first woman to publish fiction written in Finnish. In a career that spanned decades, she won popularity with stories that gave her readers a chance to experience things that were familiar and dear to them, from the beauties of nature to the charms of regional customs, with an added dash of excitement and drama. Hahnsson brings Finland's nineteenth-century society faithfully to life as her characters face the triumphs and tragedies of ordinary people in their search for happiness and their own place in the world.

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