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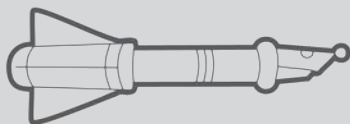
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FSFWA is a national Finnish organization for science fiction and fantasy writers. It was founded in 1984 to raise the standard of Finnish science fiction and fantasy to promote Finnish science fiction and fantasy both abroad and in Finland.



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PROLOGUE

This issue is Cosmos Pen's English special, made for the Finncon 2006. Its aim is to present the Finnish fandom and sf/f to readers both home and abroad. The previous English special was published in 2003, for the Finncon-Eurocon, and the first one in 1990, for the Worldcon in Brighton.

The organized Finnish fandom is still relatively young, only in its early thirties. It has also the tradition of being characteristically non-commercial and based on volunteer work. The Finnish cons, grown with the years to mass events of several thousand visitors, are free. The Finnish field of sf/f fanzines also functions on the same principles.

Partly for this reason there is no commercial field of sf/f magazines in Finland. In many aspects the literary Finnish sf/f is still taking its baby steps. This has brought about some interesting phenomena, at present very visible in the literary field. Literary equivalent of a baby's tantrum?

In the last few years, however, there has been startling positive development in the field of domestic sf/f, especially concerning its increasing recognition and visibility internationally. Part of the story is the success of *Johanna Sinisalo's* novel **Not Before Sundown** (Troll – A Love Story in the U.S.) In its wake evident international interest has emerged about Finnish sf/f.

Recently the texts of domestic sf/f writers have been increasingly published beyond the borders of Finland. The short stories from such writers as *Johanna Sinisalo*, *Anne Leinonen* and *Pasi Jääskeläinen* have been translated to English, French, German and Estonian.

Another success story is *Hannu Rajaniemi*, a Finnish writer living in Scotland. His short story "Deux ex Homine" was published in the anthology **Nova Scotia** in 2005. It was also included in two high quality sf/f anthologies, **Year's Best SF #11** edited by *David Hartwell* and **Year's Best Science Fiction #23** edited by *Gardner Dozois*. The short story was

even short-listed for British Fantasy Award.

Leena Krohn is a Finnish long-standing writer of fantastic fiction. The recent English translation of her novel **Tainaron: Mail from Another City** was also short-listed for the 2005 World Fantasy Award in the novelette category and for International Horror Guild Award in the category of long fiction.

Last but not least in the world conquest of the Finnish sf/f is the anthology **The Dedalus Book of Finnish Fantasy**, edited by *Johanna Sinisalo*, which came out at the end of 2005. As the name implies, its idea is to present Finnish fantastic fiction from the end of 1800 to the present to the Anglo-American audience.

Each of these alone is but a small step, but together they form a whole that anybody would have thought impossible even a few years ago.

The articles in this issue are bound overlap to some extent, but each of them offers its own viewpoint on the subject. The readers of the previous English Special of Cosmos Pen may also find the material partly familiar, since some articles are updated versions of the previous ones.

The article "Sidestream of Mainstream" reviews the present state of Finnish sf/f, its roots and current trends. At present, there are many talented sf/f writers in Finland, but it seems that there is a tendency in the field to link up with mainstream literature rather than with the sf/f genre.

"The Finnish Fandom" on the other hand gives an overview of the Finnish Fandom, or *Finndom* as its also called, the various clubs, fanzines, awards and other activities. The previous version of the article served as the basis for the article by *Jukka Halme*, "The World of Finndom", published in *Emerald City* #109 in 2004.

One viewpoint on the subject is given by *Johanna Sinisalo's* "Happy Days", her award speech in Gaylaxicon 2005, where she received the James Tiptree Jr. award. In Finland,

realism dominates overwhelmingly the literary scene, and even though she already was a very successful short story writer, it was stunning news that her first novel had won the Finlandia award. And so has the continuing international success of her novel been ever since.

Johanna Sinisalo is also featured elsewhere in Cosmos Pen, as the writer interviewed in the "Cosmos Pen's Ten Questions for a Writer". The series has been published in Cosmos Pen since 2003. Its idea is to present domestic short story writers to the public. Get to know what she counts as her literary influences, has she ever come across a literary brother or sister, and where and when would she travel if she had a time machine?

Hannu Rajaniemi on the other hand tells in his article about the field of publishing in Great Britain. Even if the publishing world in out there is of a different magnitude, there are also surprising similarities in the Scottish and Finnish sf/f circles.

As a sample of the regular contents of Cosmos Pen we offer the "Recipe for a Bad Short Story" by *Anne Leinonen*. It is a collection of some typical stumbling blocks found in the Nova short story contest. The article is useful reading for any aspiring writer, whatever the language or nationality.

Short fiction in this issue is represented by *Jaana Wessman's* "Raphael's Angel", from the Baltastica Contest, organized in connection with the Finncon-Eurocon in 2003. The first cross-Baltic sf/f writing contest produced several good quality short stories. Unfortunately, the results have not reached the fanzine publicity they deserve.

I wish to thank all the writers of this issue. Massive thanks especially to *Liisa Rantalaiho* who translated a major part of the articles, including this editorial.

I hope you enjoy the ride. Keep watching the skies!

Pasi Karppanen

SIDESTREAM OF MAINSTREAM

A LOOK AT CURRENT FINNISH SF/F

Pasi Karppanen

If you ask whether sf/f is written in Finland, the answer is clear. Of course it is. But scratch the topic a little, and you'll encounter considerable problems of definition. This article aims to give a short and openly subjective review of the current Finnish sf/f writing and the trends among the writers. The article is an updated version of the one published in the Cosmos Pen's previous English Special, from the year 2003.

Domestic science fiction and fantasy as a genre in Finland is still searching for itself. Now perhaps more than ever. Around 20 - 30 domestic sf/f books are published annually. The majority of that number, however, consists of children's and juvenile literature. At the worst, only one or two so called "real", serious domestic sf/f books are published each year.

The difference is enormous compared to the whole publishing field. In translation sf/f literature gets published in many times that amount. Also compared with the annual domestic mainstream prose, sf/f is just a fraction.

Children's and juvenile literature and on the other hand, science fiction and fantasy seem to be closely related. Seems what is "forbidden" in the Finnish mainstream prose is allowed in children's books. If sf/f is rare in Finnish adult prose, in children's literature the sf/f elements are almost the norm.

During the last years, a group of writers has emerged in Finland who have been inspired by the current fantasy boom all over the world and decided to exploit the marketing niche by mass producing their own, mostly juvenile fantasy books. Unfortunately, they are not good advertisement for fantasy literature.

And quantity does not make up for quality. During the last few years there has been light at the end of the tunnel. Increasingly, the domestic sf/f writers manage to get their work published. Many of the writers, however, seem to actively avoid the stigma of a science fiction or fantasy writer.

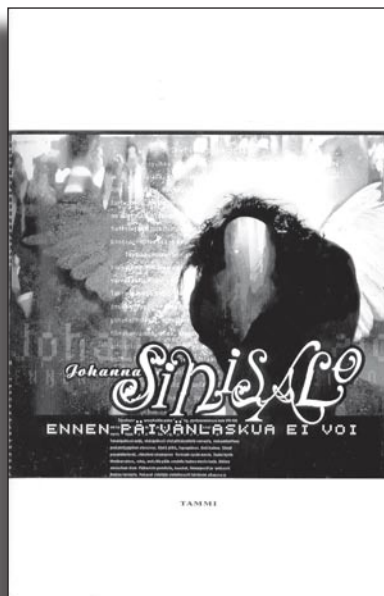
Mainstream and sf/f

Until recently, the main problem of the sf/f published in Finland has been that the most part of it is produced, not by sf/f but by mainstream writers. They use it as just a spice in their

books, without knowing its conventions or history. The tradition of realism has always been very strong in Finland and therefore this trick has become quite popular and many well-known domestic authors have experimented with the genre.

Mostly these experiments have been rather primitive, according to sf/f criteria. The mainstream critics have, however, been bowled over by admiration. Since they have no information of how worn-out the ideas have been, they see those as daring avant-garde literary experiments.

Something like that lay also behind when well-known sf/f short story writer *Johanna Sinisalo* published her first novel **Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi** (Not Before Sundown) (2000) and it winning the Finlandia award. The event itself was unprecedented for Finnish sf/f, just considering its publicity value. Finlandia is the foremost Finnish literary award and the situation might well be



compared to *Ursula K. Le Guin* unexpectedly winning the Nobel literary prize!

Sinisalo herself has even said that she doesn't consider her book to be science fiction at all. She merely tried to write a mainstream work with speculative elements on the background. This is true and considered as science fiction, the speculative element in Sinisalo's novel is thin. But for the mainstream public an idea of *trolls* as a species of big game was enough to raise it up from the mass. Because of the award and Sinisalo herself, also domestic science fiction received a huge amount of positive publicity during the Finlandia year.

Elsewhere in this *Cosmos Pen*, Sinisalo tells more about the reception of her book. She seems to have touched on something essential with her book, and has become a real success story for the Finnish sf/f, not only inside the country but also internationally.

There are other examples of the use of sf/f effects and the indiscriminate of the mainstream public, such as the books **Herääminen** (The Awakening) and **Sarasvatin hiekkaa** (Sands of Sarasvati) by *Risto Isomäki*. Both are accounts of ecocatastrophes. The Awakening is a description of a run-away hothouse effect, while Sands of Sarasvati is about mega-tsunamis.

Isomäki himself is no novice in science fiction. Before The Awakening he had published a collection of short stories and two novels, all

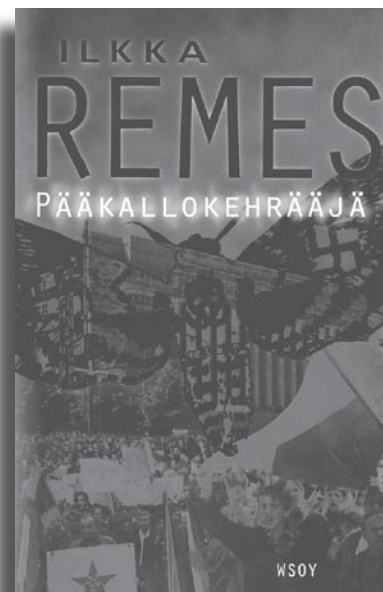
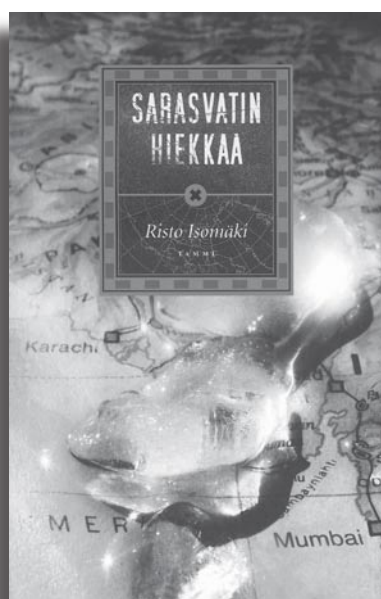
of them showing clear promise. The major part of Isomäki's published works, however, is non-fiction and connected to his background as an activist in the environmental movement.

The same aspect is discernible in both *The Awakening* and *Sands of Sarasvati*. The Awakening was accused of being a cardboard-like, popularised description of a possible ecocatastrophe. Yet even those sf elements were enough to elevate it to the notice of Finnish media. *Sands of Sarasvati*, as well, was short-listed for Finlandia award.

For some authors science fiction even seems to be some kind of a red rag. *Ilkka Remes*, the Finnish counterpart to *Tom Clancy* and the success story of the late 1990's, got clearly scared about the sf/f reputation of his first book, **Pääkallokehrääjä** (Death's-head hawk moth).

The novel is a political thriller taking place in an alternative Finland, where it's become part of the Soviet Union because of different events in the Second World War. Remes himself denied that his book would be anything even remotely approaching sf/f and since then he has kept his distance to the genre.

Another author, although with a very different kind of literary expression, is *Jyrki Vainonen*, who also has been noted among the Finnish fandom for his short story collections and novels. Vainonen himself says that his work represents surrea-



lism, and he has seemed uncomfortable about the fact his books are classified as "fantasy". He appears to see fantastic literature only as fairytales, such as *Narnia* or *Lord of the Rings*, though it of course is a very much wider field.

It seems that science fiction and fantasy have definite commercial potential that has not yet been properly exploited, at least not by the domestic writers. Or let us say that the will and the skill to produce it have not yet met. In fact the best domestic sf/f today is not found in book length prose, but on the pages of genre magazines and fanzines. There we also find the most interesting work of the genre, the best writers, and therefore also the greatest hopes for future.

The Finnish field of sf/f fanzines

Characteristic for the Finnish sf/f field is the total lack of commercial magazines. There have naturally been several attempts during the last couple of decades to start a commercial sf/f magazine, but they have always failed.

Instead, around ten good quality fanzines are published in the country. Truth to tell, a *fanzine* is a somewhat misleading expression, for the best of them are on full prozine level and quality-wise they hold their own against any commercial sf/f magazine.

The most successful, at least the most widespread Finnish sf/f maga-

zine is **Portti** (Gateway), published by the Tampere Science Fiction Society. In twenty years it has developed to a sf/f magazine of over a hundred pages and printed on glossy paper. The magazine is probably the most direct "gateway" to domestic sf/f for most of those unfamiliar with the genre. One could say Portti comes closest to filling the market niche of a possible commercial sf magazine.

Portti acquires the major part of its material from the short story contest it organizes yearly. Just as the magazine, the contest, too, has expanded in twenty years. Nowadays its main prize is 2000 euros. Over two hundred short stories are sent to the contest each year and it is by now undoubtedly the most important literary contest in the field of domestic sf/f.

Although Portti's good results in the domestic sf/f field are undeniable, it dominates the domestic writing field almost too completely. Many fans and writers know the Portti contest, but not the other sf/f fanzines.

What may seem surprising from a foreign viewpoint is that in Portti's case the writers get no other pay for their stories except the prizes given out in the contest (for honorary mentions that's only some tens of euros). The practice like in the USA, for instance, where writers actually *get paid* (for the number of words in the story) is completely unknown in Finland.

A new effort alongside the Portti contest is the Nova short story contest, which is a co-operation project between the Finnish Science Fiction Writers' Association and Turku Science Fiction Society. The prizes are nowhere near the level of Portti, but in spite of that, the contest has in a few years expanded to almost the same level, at least as far as the number of submissions.

The goal of the Nova contest is to encourage new writers and above all offer to writers the chance for feedback Portti cannot give. Everybody who has sent a text receives a feedback from the jury if they so wish. One cannot yet speak about editorial

writer guidance here, but at least it is a step towards the right direction.

Trends in domestic sf/f

Short story form sf/f has rather actively been written in Finland for several decades now and the field of domestic writers has during the while acquired its own special character.

One very typical feature of the domestic sf/f is apparent in its relation to the distinction between science fiction and fantasy. To be exact, a major part of the current domestic sf/f is neither science fiction nor fantasy, at least not in the most traditional meaning. Naturally there are cases where one can definitely place the story on one or the other side of the fence, but most texts are rather placed in some indefinite "grey area" between the pure genres.

This broadmindedness does not always extend beyond the active fandom, though. Young readers of fantasy, it seems, are just as categorical in their opinions as elsewhere



© Pasi Karppanen

Anne Salminen and Tero Niemi got their second Atorox award in 2005 with the short story "A Trip to Reforma".

in the world. For many of them, the word *fantasy* equates with the series of post-tolkien quest novels.

Inside the field of fandom, however, the spectrum is much wider and encourages experimentation with genres. There's one especially interesting type of story that has developed in the field of Finnish sf/f. These stories are mostly placed in Finnish everyday reality, where mysterious events and elements start to appear. They are not science fiction, neither are they fantasy or horror.

This type has very much been in evidence in the Portti contest and it would be interesting to know how much it is due to the jury's conscious or unconscious guidance through rewarding a certain type of stories, how much writing such "fantastic" stories of everyday reality simply fits with the Finnish national character. At least the definite minor key and melancholy that are generally characteristic for Finnish sf/f may easily be accounted for by the Scandinavian character.

The one feature of domestic sf/f that one certainly can blame the Portti contest for is that stories have become longer and longer during the years. The stories currently written in Finland and especially those well placed in the Portti contest are actually no longer *short stories*, but rather *novellettes* and *novellas*. That longer stories have ended up in the first place time after time has contributed to the vicious cycle.

In fact there are some who say that the Portti contest should no longer be called a short story contest at all, but rather a "contest of miniature prose". Most of the longer stories already have a clear novel-like structure and indeed, many see them as substitutes for novels when the writers are in a situation where sf/f manuscripts being accepted by a commercial publisher feels a utopia.

In recent years, perhaps because of changes in the jury, or the critique in the fanzines, the situation has somewhat changed, and also considerably shorter stories have been among the winners. The mammoth disease seems to be receding, at least in the Portti contest.

During the last decade there have been several smaller trends in the

domestic sf/f of which most have been visible through the Portti contest. One interesting feature is how the stories reflect the Finnish society. For instance, when Finland experienced a harsh economic depression in the early 1990's, it was later reflected in the stories. In the beginning of the decade, Finland also experienced its own small scale "new wave".

Visions of future

Today there are a great number of writers on the domestic field who would have both the abilities and realistic chances for a wider breakthrough in literature. In a sense, the same development was probably expected by many already in the 1980's, during the "first generation" of the Finnish fandom. Some works were indeed written by the names of the domestic fandom at that time, but a broader appearance of the field did not then take place.

In a way that is understandable. Sf/f as genre was by that time so new and the general knowledge of the field so thin that it would have been unfair to expect a whole new literary generation from a group of few fan writers. During the last decade, however, within the bosom of fandom, a large group of writers have grown up, and they possess a completely different readiness for a literary breakthrough.

Also the work done by the domestic fandom to increase the general appreciation of the genre has created a completely different situation than the one two decades earlier. If these writers, however, dare not leave the safe "duck pond" of short story sf/f, this generation will encounter the same blind alley as the former. Reasons for why the breakthrough has not happened yet, or why it did not happen during the earlier generation, are various.

One is the already mentioned lack of commercial sf/f magazines. Since there are no commercial magazines and the whole field is oriented towards contests, the whole idea of *earning money* by writing is alien to the writers. Thus, the leap from a fan writer sending one's texts year after year to the Portti contest, to a professional writer fighting for grants and

publishing contracts remains too big.

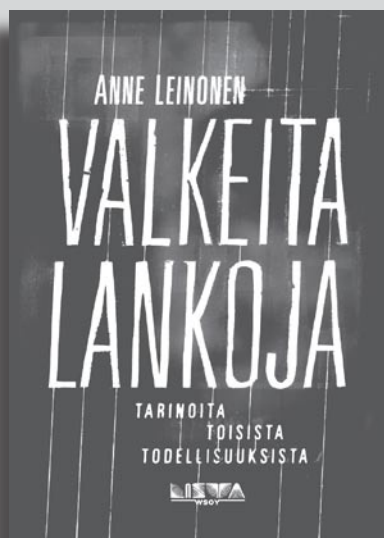
In a way, one can well understand the writers' hesitation. As mentioned already, in practice all current writers who publish short stories in Finland are fan writers. There is no one in Finland writing sf/f professionally, and the writers have to do their writing somewhere betwixt their ordinary jobs, during their free time and at the cost of their family life.

Reasons can also be sought in the general publishing situation. A foreign name on a genre book cover always sells better than a Finnish one and the majority of domestic publishing houses concentrate in practice only on translated science fiction and fantasy. There's also the unfortunate aspect of domestic fanzines that makes it difficult for the writers to become more widely known. The fanzine readers and the wider public of sf/f readers are basically two different audiences.

On the other hand, there is the core of domestic fandom that follows actively both translated sf/f and the genre at large and also reads the domestic fanzines and the short stories published in them. The wider buying public, however, reads mostly translated sf/f, mainly because domestic works are not to be found on the book shop and library shelves. These readers have never heard of most of the domestic short story writers.

For this public, the domestic production of the genre is represented by juvenile mass production so it is no wonder that the domestic sf/f does not have a very good reputation among them. The division between the two publics is quite visible and thus far there is no sign of it getting broken.

There may be, however, some light at the end of tunnel. During the last couple of years several writers who have started among the fandom have made their debut on the Finnish literary field, either with a collection of short stories or with a novel. In a few years, more domestic science fiction and fantasy has been seen than during several earlier decades put together. The situation thus looks promising and gives reason for hope.



The most recent examples date from the current year. *Anne Leinonen*, a successful participant in many Portti contests and an active fan has recently published her own short story collection **Valkeita lankoja** (White Threads). *Pasi Jääskeläinen* is another fandom-rewarded writer who's long and eagerly awaited first novel **Lumikko ja yhdeksän muuta** (Weasel and Nine Others) was also published in 2006.

One of the recent genre events has been the short story collection **Nimbus ja tähdet** (Nimbus and the Stars) by *Tero Niemi* and *Anne Salminen*, two collaborative writers who made a comet-like appearance into the genre publicity through the Portti novel contest.

The battle of the masses

At times, there have been some voices among the fandom saying that one should not even try to create a special niche of domestic science fiction or fantasy literature, since that would only mean its conscious isolation, out of the reach of domestic mainstream readers.

Instead of this there should be a continuum of literature, with "speculative elements of differing degrees", where sf/f would be a natural part of the rest of domestic literature. Such a situation might also be beneficial in that the writers would have a chance to create a literary career and be appreciated by the other domestic authors.

In fact, this seems to be the strongest of current trends, at least among

the writers within the fandom field. In recent years speculative fiction has appeared as a general term for science fiction, fantasy and horror, and some people's vocabulary it has replaced the term science fiction altogether. The webzine **Usva** (The Mist) founded by Anne Leinonen is an explicit supporter of the term speculative fiction.

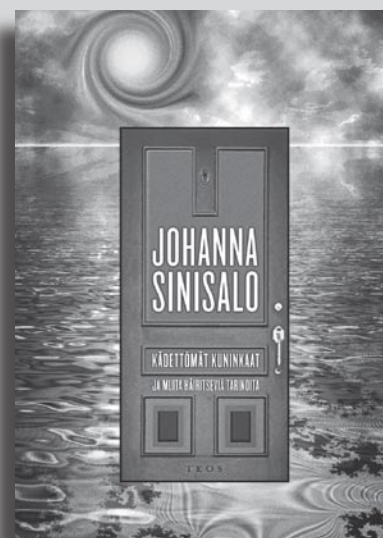
A few years ago Helsingin Sanomat – the largest Finnish daily newspaper – published a rather controversial article, where several writers, Johanna Sinisalo included, publicly disclaimed the label of a science fiction writer and announced themselves to be writers of speculative fiction. The reasons are certainly well-understandable. Many of these writers had for years fought against prejudice, acting as quixotic preachers for the excellence of sf/f, very likely in vain.

Johanna Sinisalo herself has stated she's had enough of all that. According to her, when an average mainstream reader hears the words *science fiction*, "...one can actually see how in the persons brain three metre walls fall into place". No argument for the possible excellence of a book will pass through those walls.

Some, however, have been puzzled and even irritated by the spreading of the term speculative fiction. There's been rather audible grumbling about its artificiality, inexactness, and altogether limited appropriateness. What is this "speculative fiction" that everybody is talking about? Is the idea to sell science fiction out to mainstream, in exchange for possible literary credibility?

There's a grain of truth there. Elsewhere in this Cosmos Pen, Johanna Sinisalo mentions the uncommonly strong position of realistic fiction in Finland. In the light of this it may indeed be that the only way for the sf/f writers to gain access to the mainstream and weaken the stronghold of realism, would be "to disguise" one's work as mainstream literature.

On the other hand, while the writers are wooing one group of the audience – the mainstream readers, able to digest a modest amount of speculative elements in novels – they turn their back to another group, the



readers of science fiction and fantasy.

One can see this in the marketing of the books. Oftentimes it's quite a task to search for domestic sf/f among the mainstream. Johanna Sinisalo's first novel was never marketed as science fiction or fantasy. Neither was her short story collection **Kädetön kuninkaat** (Handless Kings) even though most of the stories in it had been originally published in Finnish sf/f zines.

Any references to sf/f were also missing from *The Nimbus and the Stars*. What is interesting here is that Niemi and Salminen, among the few publishing domestic writers, have stated that they write science fiction, not speculative fiction. One is tempted to ask, that while we need not force mainstream under the label of science fiction, why can't we even call science fiction by its name?

In fact, it seems that lately even speculative fiction as a term has gotten a rival and a launching of a new literary movement is taking place as we speak. Whether the "reaalifantastikot", manage to sell their credo to the buying public, only time will tell.

What the near future is like? Is there an impending storm in the literary teacup, or are the deep undercurrents of sf/f simply changing their direction under the calm surface? Your guess is as good as mine. Right now, it seems, the Finnish genre literature drifts somewhere in the hazy waters between sf/f and mainstream.

Translated by Liisa Rantalaiho.

THE FINNISH FANDOM

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT

Pasi Karppanen

What is this crazy Finnish fandom that seems to be bursting with energy, keeps organizing free cons, and now and then is even coaxed to organize the Worldcon? This article aims for an overview of the Finnish fandom. It is originally based on Ben Roimola's "Short Look at Finnish Fandom" from 1995. A previous version of the article, updated by Pasi Karppanen and Shimo Sunttila, was published in Cosmos Pen's previous English special in 2003.

The origins of Finnish fandom

The first signs of a phenomenon called fandom can be seen in Finland during 1950's. However, it took over two decades before fandom as we know it started to emerge. The reasons for this are various. In 1950's Finland was barely getting back on its feet, economical resources were limited and urbanisation was only beginning. This meant there were no real chances of an organized fandom to get born.

The first Finnish science fiction convention was organized by the Students' Union at Turku University in 1969, but fandom as we know it wasn't born until the Turku Science Fiction Society was founded in 1976. It started to publish its fanzine, **Spin** in 1977, which marks the birth of a first Finnish sf/f zine.

Presently there are almost twenty sf/f clubs spread around the country and a dozen more-or-less regularly published zines, plus numerous

unofficial sf/f, anime and role playing clubs and zines.

Finnish fandom has all the characteristics of fandom everywhere else. There are societies, zines, awards, cons, gatherings and all the other things that together make up the thing that's called fandom. On the other hand, there are also couple of features in Finnish fandom that make it somewhat different from other countries.

What makes it what it is

One thing that has always been characteristic for Finnish Fandom has been its ability to work together. The thing is, there has never been a "Finnish Science Fiction Association" nor will there most likely ever be. The Finnish fandom is a collection of many different sf/f societies spread all over the country, all with their own characteristics and history. Together they form a tight little community that has pulled together from the very begin-

ning and made Finnish fandom what it is today.

Another thing that should be mentioned when speaking of Finnish fandom is that there has never been that big a difference between science fiction and fantasy. Everybody of course understands the differences between genres, but basically the fans and writers of science fiction and fantasy, as far as Finnish fandom is concerned at least, have never been separate groups but a part of one big, more or less happy family.

This is in a great extent due to the circumstances in which Finnish fandom was born. In late 70's and early 80's both genres were just as marginal and the fans of sf/f naturally teamed up. Therefore one should remember that although the societies mentioned in this article are called science fiction societies, most of them are science fiction and fantasy societies. The same thing applies to fanzines as well.

Probably because of this, the current generation of writers – again, when it comes to fandom at least – are a rather heterogeneous group. The same people write science fiction and fantasy and in some cases drawing the line between genres is very difficult, if not impossible. In fact, many writers consider the whole subject of drawing lines between genres restricting and completely unnecessary.

The third thing one should mention when speaking of Finnish fandom are the Finnish sf/f magazines. The fact is there isn't one single commercial sf/f magazine published in Finland. There have been many attempts to publish one, but sooner or later, for one reason or other, they have been cancelled.

In their place, however, there's a wide range of flourishing, professional looking fan-, semi- and prozines. Many of them are very slick, printed on glossy paper and looking just as good as any professional sf/f magazine with a content to match. The zines such as **Portti**, **Tähtivaeltaja**, **Spin**, **Finnzine** and **Kosmoskynä** are even for sale at big bookstores.

Finncons

The first logical step to start presenting the Finnish fandom would probably be the **Finncon**, the most important Finnish national con. Finncons are big events, have been so from the very beginning.

In most respects the Finncons are like any other big con in Europe or USA, with lots of programme going on simultaneously, panels, lectures and other program items, guest of honour's giving speeches and autograph sessions. On Saturday night there's the official con party with a masquerade contest.

The one thing that sets the Finncons apart from foreign cons, however, is that they are *free*. Yes, that's right. There's no entrance fee whatsoever to them. Since Finncon '89, one of the main principles of the Finncon has been that everyone interested should be able to attend. This way any passer-by can just pop in to see what's going on and with any luck find the con interesting – and so a new sf/f fan is born.

"The Finncon brand", so to speak, was created in the first Finncons held in Helsinki in late 80's and early 90's. The Finncons are supposed to be big events, without entrance fee and concentrate on literature. So far most, if not all, guests of honour have been writers instead of television figures.

There's of course a simple explanation for that. For the price of a world class author the most you could get from the world of audiovisual sci-fi is "the third storm trooper from right". Still, the main reason is the fandom's desire to concentrate on literature.

This has proved to be a very well-working formula and so far all Finncons have been successes. Over the years Finncons have gotten bigger, bigger and bigger, becoming a major cultural event in Finland. For a number of years now the number of attendees have been in thousands.

In 1995 Finncon was for the first time held outside Helsinki, in the town of Jyväskylä. From there on the task of arranging Finncon has rotated from town to town. In 1999 for example Finncon was the first time in Turku.

One of the secrets behind Finncon's success is the one mentioned earlier, Finnish fandom's ability to work together. Finland is, after all, a small country and it is small wonder Finncons are such big events. That is why Finncons have always been Finnish fandom's joint effort. The main responsibility has of course always been on the town that arranges the con, but they wouldn't be possible without everyone doing their share.

Naturally, Finncons wouldn't be possible without money, and over the years the Finnish con organizers have gotten very good at gathering funds from government grants and looking for sponsors and other co-operation partners. For example Finncon X, the tenth Finncon, held in Turku in 2003, was also Baltcon and Eurocon. In 2004 Finncon was held in Jyväskylä together with Animecon, making it a huge as well. In 2006 it's Helsinki's turn again.

Other happenings

Finncons are for masses. They are big-scale events, the fandom's showcase to the world of mundanes. Apart

from them, however, there are much smaller and informal gatherings for the fandom. Parties of all sorts, video evenings, summer picnics and so forth. In most of the towns with an sf/f club there are also monthly, in some cases even *weekly* meetings of fandom.

These meetings, or "mafias" as they are also called, usually take place in a bar or a cafe. Whereas most parties, video evenings and so on are mostly for people who already are more or less "inside" the fandom, mafias are free and open to everyone. This is usually the best place to get to know the local fandom if you have just moved to town.

Book fairs and smaller cons

Another important venue for fandom to make sf/f known are the national book fairs. Currently there are two of them. The first of them was the **Turku Book Fair** held each fall. From the very beginning Turku Science Fiction Society has had a booth at the fair and has also arranged sf/f related programme during the fair. This has proven to be a great way to make science fiction and fantasy known outside fandom.

A few years back Turku Book Fair got a rival of sorts, the **Helsinki Book Fair**, which quickly became the bigger of the two. Most of the big publishing houses are now not at Turku but at the Helsinki Book Fair. The people at Helsinki fandom have also co-operated from the very beginning with the fair organization. For a number of years now Helsinki fandom has had their own booth at the fair and the "Science Fiction Sunday" as a part of the official programme.

In Helsinki, there's also the **Tähtivaeltajapäivät** (Star Rover Day). Details of the first Star Rover Days are shrouded in mystery, but in current scale it has been arranged at least twice, in 2002 and 2005. In the Finnish scale, Star Rover Day could probably be called a "mini-con", the number of attendees being only a couple of hundreds instead of thousands and the whole event lasting only one day.

On the other hand, compared to the cons held in many neighbouring

countries there's no reason why Star Rover Day couldn't be called a full-bred con. It has already fulfilled all the criteria of one.

On both occasions there have been big world-class guests of honour (in 2002 *Alistair Reynolds* and *Ray Loriga*, in 2005 *M. John Harrison*), panels all through the day and a con party afterwards. For many Finnish fans grown up with the Finncons, Star Rover Days have been even a revelation of sorts, the first *small* con they've attended!

Another small con is the **TamFan**, which has been arranged semi-annually for nearly a decade now. Like the name suggests, it is held in Tampere and is concentrated in fantasy. Like Star Rover Day, it's only a day long, but in other respects a full-bred mini-con.

A relative newcomer in the family of Finnish sf/f happenings is the **Atonova**, which has now been held thrice in Turku. The name is combined of two separate sf/f awards, *Atorox*

and *Nova*, which both have roots in Turku (more on both later). In 2002 the Turku fandom wanted to arrange a separate award ceremony for them and thus, Atonova was born.

Atonova is not, nor it does have any plans of becoming an actual con. For the lack of better expression one could call it a "literary sf/f afternoon". Although there's been press present each time, the atmosphere in Atonova has always been rather intimate. Considering the sheer size of Finncons, Atonova is a refreshingly small-scale Finnish sf/f happening.

For the fantasy oriented, there is also the **Fantasy Feast**, arranged also by Turku Science Fiction Society. Basically, it's a weekend spent in Sauvo, where the City of Turku has a youth camp centre by the sea. People come there dressed in medievalish or otherwise fantasy oriented outfits to participate in different kinds of games and activities, to sit by a fire to sing, to dance, to eat and generally to have a good time.

Co-ordination is the key

One interesting tradition one should also remember to mention when speaking about Finnish fandom, are the annual co-operation meetings. In these meetings representatives from all the societies recount the past year and tell about their plans for the coming year. The main reason for this is the sheer number of Finnish sf/f societies. The meetings are arranged to help plan future projects, to spread information and to prevent booking future events on same weekends.

For a number of years now the meetings have taken place in a cabin in Tampere, with sauna and pub night afterwards. In other words they are much more than mere meetings, but a chance for the people active in fandom to meet each other, without the hassle of a con to take care of.

One rather unique form of co-operation within the fandom are also the Science fiction researcher meetings.



© Pasi Karppanen

M. John Harrison reading "Light" during Star Rover Day after party.

By now already several Finnish universities have students doing their thesis research on science fiction and fantasy. The researcher meetings are oriented to these students, and they aim on the one hand to share knowledge and experience among researchers, on the other hand to prevent overlapping research. The meetings are often organised in connection or immediately before Finncon or some other big event.

Finnish sf/f awards

Every fandom has its own awards, its versions of the Hugos, Nebulas and so on. Finnish fandom is no exception.

The most important Finnish sf/f award is undoubtedly the **Atorox award** that has been presented annually by the Turku Science Fiction Society since 1983. The name of the award is a tribute to the author *Aarne Haapakoski* and his classic robot Atorox who appeared in numerous novels in the 1940's and 1950's.

Atorox is awarded to the best Finnish science fiction or fantasy short story published the previous year. The winner is decided by a vote of jury that is comprised of jurors from all the Finnish sf/f clubs. It is usually presented at Finncon or some other major sf related happening.

The **Tähtivaeltaja award** (Star Rover award) is presented annually to the best sf book (novel or short-story collection) published in Finland the previous year. The book doesn't have to be an original Finnish work, it could also be a translation, which it usually is. In 2001 it was for the first time awarded to a Finnish book, the short story collection **Missä junat kääntyvät** (Where the Trains Turn) by *Pasi Jääskeläinen*.

The aim of the award is to encourage publishers to publish better sf/f. Especially during the last few years, the awarded books have tended to be sf/f on a somewhat marginal side. Or, as it has also been pointed out, more literally ambitious sf/f.

In 2003 for example, it was presented to *Ray Loriga's* novel **Tokio Doesn't Love Us Anymore** (Tokio ya no nos quiere) and the year before that to *Jonathan Lethem's* novel **Gun, with occasional music**. The winner



Atorox, named after the robot character created by Aarne Haapakoski, is the most coveted Finnish sf/f award.

is decided by a jury and the award is presented by the Helsinki Science Fiction Society. The first Tähtivaeltaja award was given in 1986.

The **Kosmoskynä award** (Cosmos Pen award) is presented by The Finnish Science Fiction Writers Association. The award is the recognition of excellence in the field of sf/f in Finland. Last time it was presented in 2001 to the Finlandia award winner *Johanna Sinisalo* for all the PR work she has done over the years for Finnish sf/f.

The **Kuvastaja award** (Mirror-mere award) presented annually by the Finnish Tolkien Association is so far the latest addition to the Finnish sf/f award family. It was presented for the first time in 2001. The award has elements from both the Star Rover

and Cosmos Pen awards, but with a focus in fantasy. It is being presented annually to a Finnish fantasy novel and its purpose is to encourage publishers to publish better fantasy.

The **Portti award** (Gateway award) isn't an award as such, but more like a poll. It's probably the closest Finnish equivalent to Locus award (whereas the Atorox is sort of a 'Finnish Hugo'). It is given annually in a score of different categories: best domestic short story, best domestic book, best translated book and so on. The winners are decided by a vote and all readers of the Portti magazine are eligible to vote. Unfortunately, its importance is nowadays next to nothing due to the small number of voters.

Another award with a multitude of different categories is the **Lumi-**

mies award (Snowman award) presented by the Oulu Science Fiction Society **Polaris**. This is the most Finnish of all the mentioned awards with different categories each year. There have been categories like "Humanoid of the Year", "Chauvinist SF Act of the Year" and "Disappearance of the Year" and so on.

The last one could be presented to the Snowman award itself though (and has been at least once) since the prize hasn't been presented for a number of years now. Some years ago there were rumours circling that Oulu University sf/f club (more on that later) planned adopting the Snowman award, as Oulu Science Fiction Society has disappeared from the map of Finnish fandom. OYSFK hasn't presented the award yet, though.

Another similar fannish award, not-to-be-taken-so-seriously, is the **Jet Ace Logan award**, presented by a group of people in Helsinki fandom, also called the infamous Mundane collective. It has been presented twice now, both times during Star Rover Day's after party. It is given, and I quote, "to the most idiotic attempt to conquer the Earth" and "to the most stupendous way to foil that plan".

In 2002 it was given to the movie **Reign of Fire** (an army of dragons with only one male) and to *Will Smith* (for his achievements in such films as **The Independence Day** and **Men In Black** movies). In 2005 the winners were the aliens in new **War of the Worlds** movie and *Mel Gibson* in *M. Night Shyamalan's Signs* (stopping the world conquest with a glass of water).

Another award presented by more or less the same people in Helsinki fandom is the **Tuestin award** (Bracer award). It's given for Special Behind-the-Scenes work for Finnish Fandom. The award's idea is to remind you about the existence of people you don't see basking in the spotlight, but whose work fandom couldn't do without.

Finnish sf/f zines and clubs

In many cases drawing the line between zine and club in Finland is nowadays very difficult, if not impos-

sible. Like everywhere else, Finnish fanzines started out very modestly, with only a few xeroxed pages.

Over the years, the field of Finnish zines has undergone quite a metamorphosis. Some of the fanzines have become bigger and bigger, some have maintained their fannish appearance, some have disappeared altogether. Those departed have been left out from the following.

This means omitting clubs and zines like **Tähtiallianssi** (The Star Alliance) and its zine **Vapaa Galaksi** (Free Galaxy), both shutting down their engines at the moment. Tähtiallianssi was a *Star Wars* club and one of the many projects of *Shimo Suntila* from the Turku fandom. The club was born in the general *Star Wars* boom around the time of the movie **Phantom menace**. At present, we are waiting for the final issue of Free Galaxy.

Arcturus, also one of Suntila's projects, and its **Arczine** are taking a time out as well. The idea of Arczine was not to be a regular zine, but a series of special publications. A few of those did appear, among them **Scifistin malja** (The Goblet of the Scifist), a collection of filks. The second Arczine was the end point of a Suntila's mad dash of seven zines for the Finncon X and was aptly named **The Seventh Zine**. It contained *Michael Swanwick's* short story **Dirty Little War**. Swanwick was one of the con's guests of honour, and the idea of the zine was to donate it to Swanwick, for him to give out to people he chose.

For the time being at least, Arcturus' engines have been shut down, after its founder and driving force behind everything, Shimo Suntila decided to take a vacation from fandom and recharge his batteries.

The biggest Finnish fanzines published currently look more like actual sf/f magazines than fanzines. In some cases the society itself has more or less disappeared and all that's been left is the magazine it publishes. This is the case especially with Tampere Science Fiction Society's Portti (Gateway). The same can be said with some reservation about the Helsinki Science Fiction Society and its *Star Rover* magazine.

The following list contains the Finnish zines and clubs that publish them. Unless otherwise stated,

the zines publish short stories (both domestic and translated), news, reviews, articles, illustrations, comics etc., and are published with four issues a year.

Most Finnish clubs have their own pages on the Internet as well. Unfortunately they are mainly in Finnish, but usually there's a summary page for non-Finnish speakers as well. One good place to start surfing is *Jussi Vainikainen's* excellent "Scientifiction links" that can be found at the url <http://kotisivu.mtv3.fi/jussiv/sf/suomisf.html>.

Portti

Tampere Science Fiction Society
Editor Raimo Nikkonen
<http://www.sci.fi/~portti/>

Tampere Science Fiction Society's **Portti** (Gateway) is undoubtedly the biggest and most successful Finnish sf/f zine. It is a professional-looking, printed on glossy paper, colour on the cover and even on some of the inside pages. About 130 pages, published since 1982.

The Tampere Science Fiction Society also arranges an annual sf/f short story competition, undoubtedly the most important Finnish sf/f writing competition, with big cash-prizes. The winner gets 2000 euros and 2200 euros is split between the runners-up. The competition has been arranged since 1986 and the prizes have become bigger and bigger. Over 200 short stories are submitted to the competition annually.

One can't deny the fact that Portti is the most successful Finnish sf/f zine. On the other hand it tends to be an island of sorts and one could argue whether it is a part of fandom anymore. Portti's competition also dominates rather heavily the short story writing scene. Up to the last years the stories published in Portti, and the winners of Portti's competition especially, also tend to dominate the yearly Atorox poll.

Portti, sorry to say, also has rather terrible web pages.



Tähtivaeltaja

Helsinki Science Fiction Society

Editor Toni Jerrman

<http://www.tahtivaeltaja.com/>

Helsinki Science Fiction Society is one of the main forces behind the Finncons and the presenter of the Tähtivaeltaja award. For many fans, however, the society is more known through its magazine, **Tähtivaeltaja** (Star Rover).

Tähtivaeltaja is professional-looking sf/f magazine, printed on glossy paper, cover in colour, and about 100 pages, published since 1982. From the very beginning it has been the Finnish sf/f magazine with most edge. One main element in Tähtivaeltaja and the Helsinki "mafia" in general has always been a fascination with black leather and studs and one must admit that in the early days Tähtivaeltaja looked almost as much a punk zine than an sf/f one.

Although the zine has mellowed a bit over the years and become a "real magazine" it hasn't lost its edge altogether and for many fans Tähtivaeltaja is still the best sf zine in Finland. Especially in the early days, the branch of sf Tähtivaeltaja took special care of was comics. In fact, many nowadays well known artists started their career in Tähtivaeltaja.

In recent years especially Tähtivaeltaja has also done valuable work by presenting in its articles new and upcoming trends and writers in the field of sf/f for Finnish readers, often

beating in speed even its foreign counterparts.

For an sf/f publication Tähtivaeltaja is also a rather fleshy zine.

Spin

Turku Science Fiction Society

Editor Johanna Ahonen

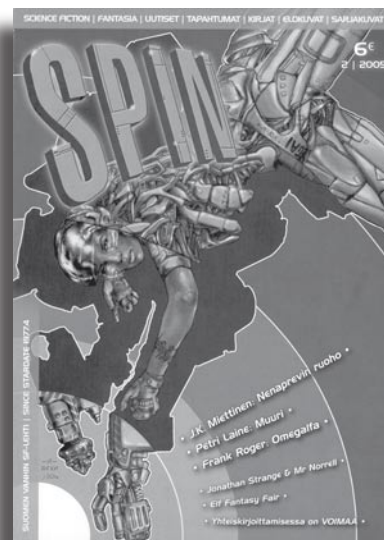
<http://www.tsfs.fi/spin/>

Founded in 1976, the Turku Science Fiction Society is the oldest of the Finnish sf/f clubs. TSFS's **Spin** is also the oldest of the Finnish sf/f zines. It has been published since 1977 and has had its ups and downs over the years.

During the late 1990's, under the editorship of Shimo Sutila, there was a radical raise in the profile and the quality of the zine. Currently it can be counted among the "big three" of Finnish sf/f zines. Nowadays Spin is a professional looking zine, printed on glossy paper, about 80 pages, with colour covers.

TSFS is also one of the exceptions where the society manages to put out a professional looking zine and act as an actual working club as well. One of the reasons for that is the more or less complete blood transfusion it underwent in late 90's, as the old guard stepped aside and the new generation of fans took over.

For many years TSFS was probably the most active and energetic sf/f society in Finland. One proof of this



are the Finncons of 1999 and 2003 in Turku. In recent years, however, it seems that the wind has gone away from society's sails. Currently TSFS's crew is in dire need of fresh forces.

Because of its long history TSFS is also in many ways one of the corner stones of Finnish fandom. It presents the Atorox award, arranges the Fantasy Feast and organizes the sf/f coverage at the Turku Book Fair. Worth mention is also the extensive sf/f library of TSFS, with almost two thousand books.

Finnzine

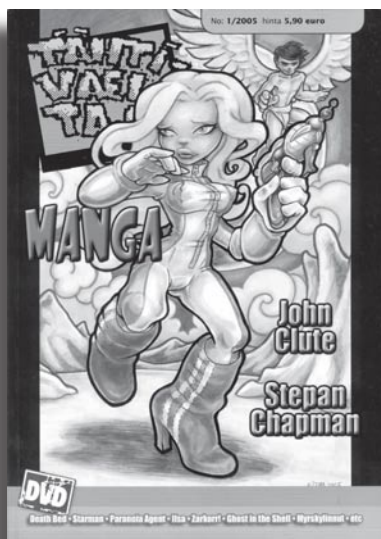
Editor Pekka Supinen

<http://finnzine.com>

Finnzine is one of the few Finnish zines that has no "town based" sf/f society behind it. It was born in 1991 as a Finnish news zine, with a motto "Science Fiction now!" Finnzine's first issues were very amateurish, but it too started soon to look like "a real magazine", much of this is thanks to the layout and the graphic look. Finnzine is about 40 pages, covers in black and white on coloured paper.

Finnzine has remained a news zine, with a strong emphasis on audiovisual sf/f. The zine's trademark are articles about new sf/f movies with lots of pictures.

On the other hand, it publishes a fair share of domestic short fiction and one of its specialities are



long, multi-part sf/f sagas. It is also one of the few Finnish zines that has published sf/f poetry. There are also columns for literary sf /f in Finnzine and the events in Finnish fandom are also well covered in it.

Kosmoskynä

Finnish Science Fiction Writers Association
Editor Pasi Karppanen
<http://kosmoskyna.net>

FSFWA's **Kosmoskynä** (Cosmos Pen) has been published from 1984 and in 80's it was, according to many, the best Finnish sf /f zine. It too has had its ups and downs over the years.

Kosmoskynä's current appearance is a good example about the process which many Finnish sf/f zines have undergone during the last decade. During the editorship of *Anne Leinonen* it evolved from a small writer's zine into a high class literary journal.

Kosmoskynä has had numerous editor-in-chiefs over the years and each run with a new editor has given the zine a very distinctive look. On the other hand, being a writers' zine Kosmoskynä has always concentrated on writing and especially in recent years, in domestic sf/f in general. There are columns and articles on writing, interviews of novelists, information about writing competitions and writer guides. It also reviews *all*



the Finnish short stories published annually in zines.

Like TSFS, also FSFWA is one of those exceptions where the zine and the society that puts it out are equally important. FSFWA has a wide range of activities for writers, such as cost-free feedback service for members, writing courses and so on.

FSFWA also has close ties to TSFS and for example the Nova short story writing competition is one of their co-operation projects. During the recent years FSFWA has had various co-operation projects with other Finnish sf/f societies as well. One could say that currently FSFWA is undoubtedly the most networked society in the Finnish fandom.

in 2007. One of the secrets behind the Jyväskylä Finncons is that 42 has managed to create working ties with the summer festival Jyväskylän Kesä.

42 also has its zine **Alienisti** (Alienist) that is being published about once a year, with the new issue out usually for the Finncon. The zine is about the same size as Finnzine and Kosmoskynä (A4) and although it can't compete material-wise with some of the bigger zines, it's a good example on suiting the activity to the resources.

Usva

Editor Anne Leinonen
<http://usvazine.net>

Usva (Mist) is currently the youngest of Finnish sf/f zines. It's also the first Finnish sf/f zine that's published in e-zine format, to be downloaded without cost as PDF.

Usva has taken on the bold challenge of trying to bridge the gap between mainstream and sf/f readers. Some of the short stories published in it are sf/f only marginally and can be placed in the hazy area somewhere between sf/f and mainstream prose.

Usva is edited by Anne Leinonen, Kosmoskynä's former editor and a successful author in her own right. Only time will tell what becomes of Usva.

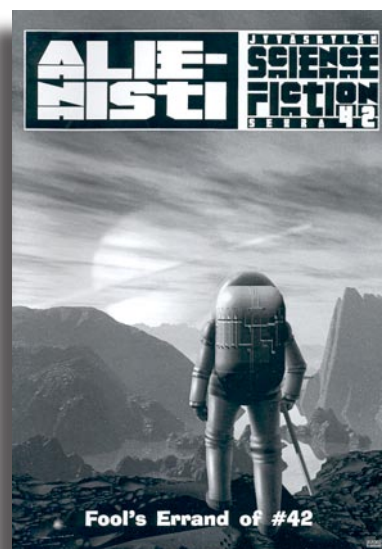


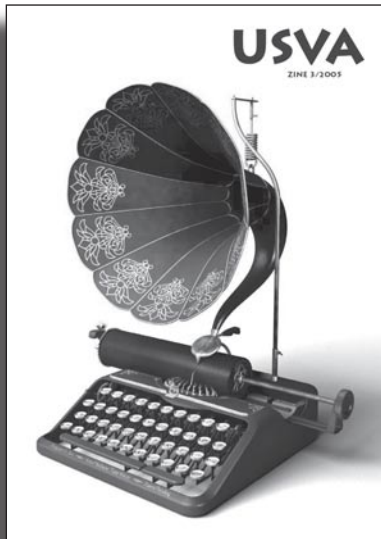
Alienisti

Jyväskylä Science Fiction Society "42"
Editor Kati Mäki-Kuutti
<http://www.cc.jyu.fi/yhd/42/alienisti/>

Jyväskylä Science Fiction Society **42** is one of those societies that have more activity around the actual society rather than the zine. It bursted into fandom at the early 90's and has done a lot since that.

42 was for example the main organizer behind the Finncons in 1995 and 2001. It also organized the Finncon '04 in Jyväskylä and will do so





Enhörningen

Editor Ben Roimola
<http://www.enhorningen.net/>

Enhörningen ("The Unicorn") is the fanzine of the Swedish speaking Finnish fandom. It was established in 1987 by *Ben Roimola*, publishing short stories, articles and literary and audio-visual reviews. Enhörningen publishes both original Swedish short stories and Finnish (and foreign) short stories translated to Swedish.

Enhörningen has also excellent web pages and one could say they are the Finnish fandom's best showcase to the Swedish speaking world. It also serves a wider national public with news and reviews.

Legolas / Hobittilan Sanomat

The Finnish Tolkien Society
 Editors: Oskari Ratinen
 (Legolas) and Anu Polkki
 (Hobittilan Sanomat)
<http://www.suomentolkienseura.fi>

The Finnish Tolkien Society was founded long before the current fantasy boom or the movie versions of **The Lord of the Rings**, all the way back in 1991. Although Tolkien has a prominent role in the society's activities,

it is not solely for Tolkien-fans but for Finnish fantasy fans in general. Currently The Finnish Tolkien Society is the only society in Finland that is devoted purely to fantasy.

The society puts out not one but two zines: **Legolas** and **Hobittilan Sanomat** (Hobbiton Times). Of the two, Legolas is the actual zine, Hobbiton Times more like a members bulletin. Both of them look much like the zine **Marvin** (see next). They are A5 in size, Legolas about 40 pages, Hobbiton Times 20 or less, black and white only. Legolas is also the older of the two, published since 1991, nowadays with four issues per year.

Just as the society, Legolas has never concentrated solely on Tolkien but in fantasy in general. During the last year, there has been more domestic and even foreign fiction on the pages of Legolas and a raise in the overall quality of the articles as well. Legolas is, however, still one of the "little zines" and it has very little chance to compete with bigger ones for example in the Atorox poll.

The Tolkien society is a great example of a club that puts more emphasis on other activities than putting out a fancy zine. It has lots of activities of which most are concentrated around Helsinki. It also has a lot of subdivisions called *smials* all over Finland, some of which are as active as the actual society. The Finnish Tolkien society also presents the Kuvas-taja (Mirrormere) award for the best domestic fantasy book published the previous year.

Marvin – the Lehti

Helsinki University Science Fiction Club
 Editor Teemu Ahonen
<http://www.helsinki.fi/jarj/hysfk/>

Of all the zines in Finland, **Marvin** (Marvin – the Zine) is probably the one that looks most like an actual *fanzine*. It's xeroxed-looking, about 30 pages long and in A5 size, usually filled with lots of weird inside humour and other baffling bits.



For many years it was done by a different group of people each time so you never knew what to expect. Every issue had a different theme, including such as pornography, religion, swords, turkeys, concrete, hot chocolate and so on. There have been issues like "von Märviken" with lots of ufo-related stories, for example an erotic sf story from "Emmanuel Arse", "Gentlemen's War-Marvin" and pulp-styled Marvin special "Stupendous Stories".

The Helsinki University Science Fiction Club is also one of the main forces behind the Finncons in Helsinki. You pronounce HYSFK "Goo-GooMuck". Don't ask.

Escape

Espoo Science Fiction and Fantasy Society
 No permanent editorship
<http://www.esc-ape.net/>

Espoo Science Fiction and Fantasy Society, ESC for short, is one of the newcomers. Espoo is one of the largest cities in Finland, but due its closeness to the capital many don't see it more than a Helsinki's suburb. ESC's goal seems to be changing that conception and showing that even Espoo can have its own unique brand of fandom.

Many of the first issues of ESC's zine **Escape** have had an "Espoo-



ethnic" viewpoint. One of the articles for example stated that "Living in Espoo is like living in Mars". Escape looks much like Marvin, but is even more fannish in appearance. One reason for that may be that many of the fans behind Marvin and HYSFK are active in ESC as well.

In 2005 ESC also organised a small mini-con before Star Rover Day in Helsinki. The con was aptly named **Escon** and was targeted to secondary school teenagers. There has also been talk about the next Escon in a few years time.

Mundane

<http://www.helsinki.fi/~mtkivela/mundane/mundane.htm>

Mundane was the yellow paper of the Finnish fandom and represents the other end of the fine line of glossy Finnish semiprozines. It was made by a group of people from the Helsinki fandom and looked exactly the way some people think a *fan-zine* does, rather crude with only few xeroxed pages.

The articles it consisted of were full of inside humour and therefore were most likely incomprehensible for people outside the fandom. Unique with Mundane was also the fact that you couldn't subscribe to it anywhere. It was put together by

a group of fans in Helsinki and available only through the local 'mafia' gatherings. The issues of the zine are therefore sought after collectibles and owning a first-owner copy is a sign of real fanhood.

Mundane has been dormant for a number of years now.

Turu Mafia Zine

Editor Tero Ykspetäjä

Turu Mafia Zine (Turku Mafia Zine) has more or less the same principle as Mundane. You can't subscribe to it anywhere, but have to be present at Turku mafia to receive your copy.

The main difference between the two zines is that Turu Mafia Zine is much more comprehensible and easier to understand for a non-insider. It consists mainly of news and other bits and pieces you can actually use.

Another thing that sets the zines apart is naturally the age. Whereas Mundane belongs to the mythical past of Finnish fandom, the first issue of Turu Mafia Zine was published in fall 2004.

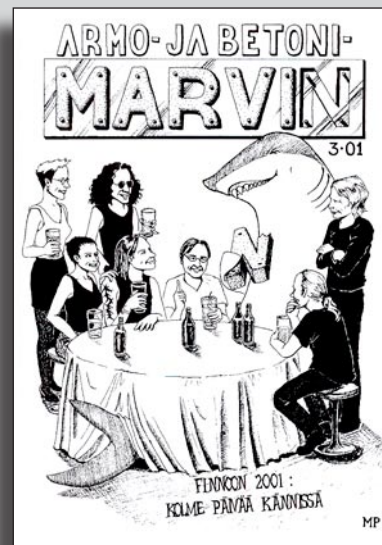
Zine's editor *Tero Ykspetäjä* is also rather active in documenting the events of Finnish Fandom in his excellent **Partial Recall** blog.

Other sf/f clubs

Besides the aforementioned, there are several clubs in Finland which do not publish their own zine. Many of them are younger and were born in the 90's, some even later than that.

As with the zines, there have been numerous obscure sf/f societies over the years. In the mythic history of Finnish fandom especially there were many weird little societies and zines that would make a subject for an article of its own. Such departed ones have been left out from this review. Only those are included that actually show signs of life.

One might say that starting societies is one of the favourite activities of Finnish fandom. Currently there are



clubs like "Ye Olde Cavaliers Scientifiction Boozing Guild" and "The Grumpy Bald Sci-fi Fans Association". Again, don't ask.

The Science Fiction Culture Cabinet at the University of Turku

<http://www.utu.fi/tutka/>

Turku University sf/f Club, **Tutka** (Radar) for short, is the second sf/f club in Turku and was founded in the beginning of 1995. Its idea was to offer an alternative to TSFS, since some people felt it had already become too heavy and bureaucratic.

For a number of years it organized extremely popular video evenings, with pre-shows of sf/f series that were not yet known to the masses in Finland, most popular of them perhaps the **Babylon 5**. With the growing Internet market and downloading the series' from the net, the video evenings lost their popularity.

For some years now, Tutka has been laying low. Recently, however, it has started to gather new energy and there's hope it will some day rise to its former glory. At present, the strategy of Tutka is to function more like a club and encourage its members to be more than just rank-and-file fans.

One of its founding members, and society's current president *Tero*

Ykspetäjä, is also active in other branches of fandom as well, on local as well as national level. Tutka also has an irregular line of publications called **Kabinettikertomuksia** (Cabinet Stories).

Spektre

<http://spektre.fi/>

Spektre, short for "Speculative fiction in Tampere", represents the second generation of fandom in Tampere. There has of course been fandom activity in Tampere as long as fandom has been around but unfortunately the Tampere fandom split more or less in two in a very early stage. Another part grouped around **Portti**, another around **Aikakone**.

Aikakone (Time machine) is a part of Finnish sf/f history. It was originally URSA Astronomical Society's zine, founded in 1981. In 1991 Aikakone society continued publishing the magazine, and behind it were some of the early giants in Finnish fandom. The zine became bigger and more professional-looking and for a number of years, Aikakone was undoubtedly one of the best Finnish sf/f zines, if not *the* best.

Unfortunately in mid 1990's Aikakone began to have trouble getting new issues out on time due to financial difficulties and eventually it was cancelled. Everything was not lost, however, for it left as its heritage excellent electronic archives.

With Spektre around, there's hope the old scars would be forgotten. The start at least has looked promising. Spektre has functioned now a few years. Like OYSFK, it arranges mafias, video evenings and other informal gatherings, but has no plans whatsoever of publishing a zine.

In that time, however, Spektre has played an active role in the fandom. It has hosted the fandom's annual co-operation meeting several times. Spektre also revived a few years ago the swell tradition of the Viikinsaari "Roadside picnic", a summer meeting of the fandom, with a boat trip to a nearby island.

At present, Spektre and the Tampere fandom seem to be the most likely candidate for the next light on the Finnish sf/f skies. Stay tuned.

Oulu University Science Fiction and Fantasy Club

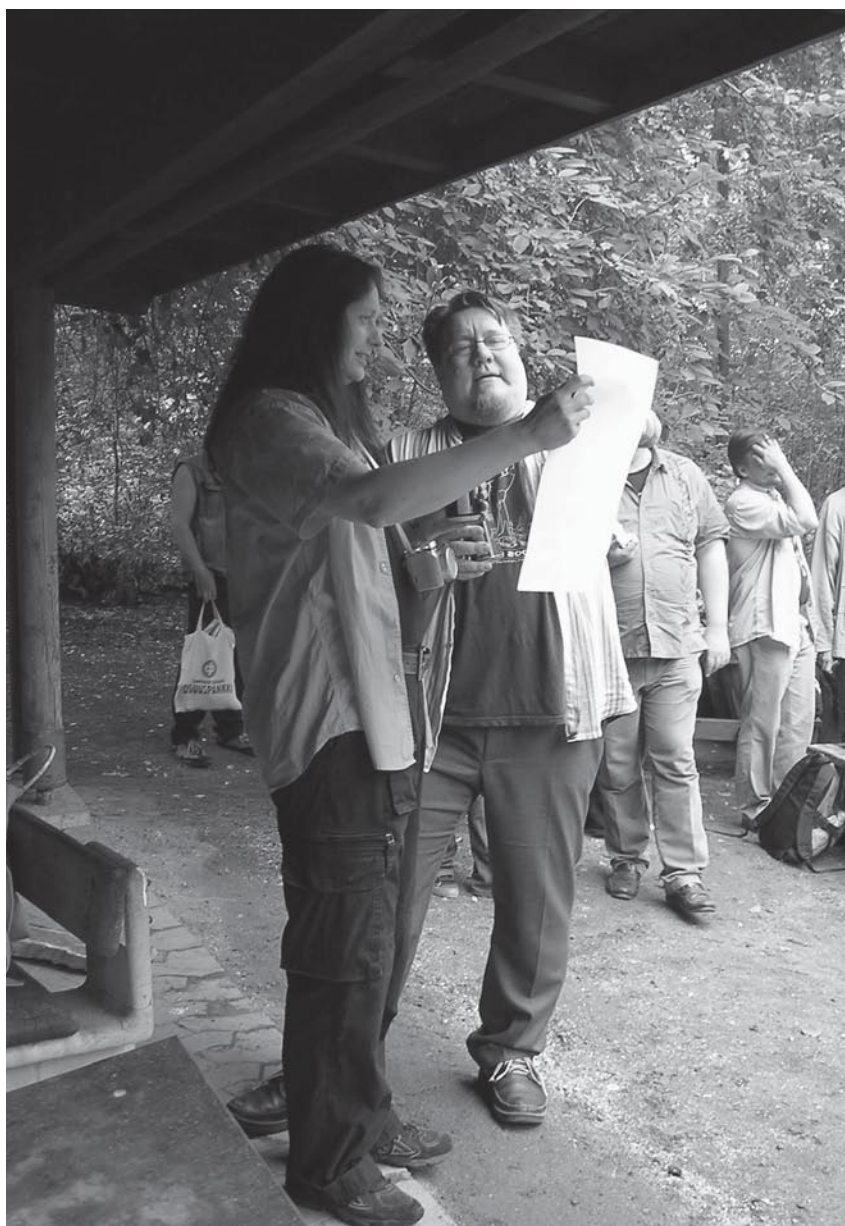
<http://www.student oulu.fi/~oysfk/>

For a number of years, the Oulu Science Fiction Society, **Polaris** was

the active force sf/f-wise in Northern Finland. It published its **Mytago** (Mythago) fanzine and was the presenter of the hilarious Lumimies (Snowman) award.

Over the years Mytago's issues became more and more rare and now it seems the **Oulu University Science Fiction and Fantasy Club** has taken its place. Being a newcomer nothing much can be said about it. OYSFK arranges video evenings and other fun stuff.

Due to geographical reasons OYSFK is a loner in the north, but it has working ties with the rest of the fandom.



© Pasi Karppanen

The gathering of fandoms. Tero Ykspetäjä (Turku) and Jukka Halme (Helsinki) at Viikinsaari picnic in Tampere, discussing about the expedition to traverse the Northwest Passage

Joensuu Science Fiction Society

<http://www.scifi-seura.tk>

Like ESC, The Joensuu Science Fiction Society is also one of the newcomers. It was founded in 2004 and much of the JSFS's activity circle around the society's discussion forum on the net.

JSFS has "mafias" twice a month and like most young sf/f societies it arranges video evenings and other fun stuff. So far it hasn't had very much contact with rest of the fandom, but hopefully that will change some day.

Spock's Hut

<http://www.tky.hut.fi/~shut/>

Spock's Hut, located in Helsinki, is one of the sf/f societies in Finland almost solely concentrated on audiovisual sf/f. Like the name implies, SHUT was originally founded as a *Star Trek* club and its zine **Outpost** was something like a Trek version of **Free Galaxy** (although founded much earlier).

Although most of the articles in *Outpost* did concentrate on Trek related issues, the society itself wasn't simply for fans with pointy ears. The last news told that the society had directed its interest in other major branches of tv sci-fi as well.

At the moment it seems the society's engines are running only on half or rather, *impulse* power and there hasn't been a new issue of *Outpost* in ages. Declaring someone dead is risky business, though, especially with *Star Trek* involved.

Finnish sf/f webzines and related sites

When the first version of this article was written back in 1995 Internet itself was only beginning to take form. Since then the net and world in general has changed considerably. Now most exchange of information between Finnish sf/f societies

is done through the web, a concept that itself would have been pure sf when the fandom was born.

Considering Finland's reputation as being in the forefront of new technology, it's surprising that compared with many other countries, there have been only very few sf/f webzines. Most Finnish sf/f societies and zines have their own web pages, but in almost every case they exist merely to promote the actual zine, not as an independent media.

One explanation for that are the historical reasons. During the course of the last thirty years, Finnish fan- and prozines have taken the role webzines have in countries where fandom was born more recently. Had the Finnish fandom also been born later, not thirty years ago, there would probably be much more sf/f related webzines.

In the last years even this seems to have changed. When the previous version of this article was published in 2003, there were just a couple of sf/f discussion forums in Finland. Since that time their number has practically exploded, after the necessary software has become accessible to everyone.

However in many cases the life cycle of a discussion forum has been quite short. Many forums that have started looking very flourishing have disappeared quietly. Especially writer forums have multiplied rapidly and it is very probable they end up only competing with each other. This means it is very difficult to estimate which all of the forums currently on the web will survive.

As far as websites acting as an independent media, **Babek Nabel** ("Free Thought", known affectionally also as "Leban Kebab") is probably the closest one. It was started in 2001 by the fans in Helsinki as a fandom discussion forum that would work better than several separate mailing lists.

Babek Nabel was originally known as Avoin Kirja ("Open book") but was forced to change its name in 2002 due to copyright reasons. During the time it has been on-line, Babek Nabel has indeed seemed to achieve its goal. Nowadays a big part of the general fandom discussion takes place there.

Risingshadow on the other hand might very well be the place where the future of Finnish fandom is. Most of the members there seem to be young fantasy fans and the discussion that takes place there is very active. It also has excellent bulletin boards for sf/f related news and upcoming "mafias". The interface in *Risingshadow* is also much nicer than in *Babek Nabel*.

And naturally, there are many, many others. There is a discussion forum for fantasy fans called **Green Dragon**, several forums for sf/f writers, for example FSFWA's **Net Colosseum** and **Deathwriters.com** and many more. As far as activeness is concerned, there seems to be a strong next generation of sf/f fans growing up in Finland.

In conclusion

So there you have it, the Finnish fandom in all its glory. This was of course only one view on it and somebody else might have given a different picture altogether.

The only way to get an absolutely accurate view is of course getting to know the Finnish fandom personally. And that is easiest to do by visiting one of the Finnish cons. If you missed Eurocon 2003, why don't you visit some of the Baltcons or Eurocons after that. You didn't think 2003 would be the last time, did you?

Partly translated by Liisa Rantalaiho

Sites of interest

Finncon

<http://www.finncon.org/>

Finnish SF FAQ

<http://www.tsfs.fi/sffaq/>

Finnish Science Fiction Resources

<http://kotisivu.mtv3.fi/jussiv/sf/suomisf.html>

Links for sci-fi writers

<http://koti.mbnet.fi/pasenska/links/links.htm>

The World of Finndom

<http://www.emcit.com/emcit109.shtml#Finland>

Partial Recall

<http://partialrecall.blogspot.com/>

HAPPY DAYS

JOHANNA SINISALO'S TIPTREE AWARD SPEECH

Johanna Sinisalo

Dear ladies, gentlemen and all the rest. That I'm standing here now is for me a piece of the most speculative fiction ever. For you to understand the sheer thrill and extreme feelings I'm experiencing, you must know a little bit about science fiction and Finland.

In Finland, sf fandom is very young. I'm in my forties and I'm practically one of those who established fandom there. I recall that the whole Finnish fandom was basically organised by just a couple of dozen people, so it really felt we all actually knew each other.

Of course that wasn't so – there were thousands of non-active fans – but we formed some kind of task force, and in a couple of years there were several sf and fantasy magazines in Finland. They published the usual stuff, reviews and articles and interviews and such, but also short stories. At first, they were translations, but then the domestic stories started to get into print.

I started to write sf short stories in the early eighties, and they got a very good reception. It must be said that there was an easy explanation for my early success: there were so few domestic writers that there really was no competition. Because people were telling me I was good – that means, Finland good, not really 24 carat good – I went on writing and getting my works published.

Eventually the Finnish fans, who had attended international cons and brought ideas and new traditions to Finland, decided we had enough

domestic writers to take the next logical step: to create a national prize for the best short story of the year. Thus far, I have received that prize seven times. Perhaps we really need more writers.

I have worked in advertising and in the late nineties I began to write for television on the side. Soon I realised that I really have not enough capacity for them both. I quit my daily job and started a career of a full-time writer.

That time I had published thirty-something short stories, so the next logical step was to write a novel. That became **Not Before Sundown**, here known as **Troll - A Love Story**, which I wrote on three themes: the clash between culture and nature, the problem of otherness, and, above all, about human power structures.

When it was finally published, no one called it "the novel about power structures"; they called it "the troll novel" or, even more interestingly, "the gay novel". No one asked me why I wrote about power structures. A couple of people wanted to know why I wrote about trolls. Everybody wanted to know why I wrote about gay men.

Luckily, I had an answer right there. This is a book about power

structures. If there is a relationship between a man and a woman, the power balance and the shifts in it are seen as sex-related. But when both persons in the relationship are of the same sex, you can see much more clearly the power structure between them.

And, of course, it was interesting to write about the otherness from the angle that being a part of a minority is the norm of the main characters, the heterosexuals, and white chauvinist pigs are this time "the others".

Well, I haven't told you yet that if realism is the mainstream type of literature in most western countries, in Finland it definitely is the only type that counts. And so, you can imagine the reaction when this particular troll gay book won the Finlandia Prize, which is the most prestigious literary prize in Finland and could be compared to the Booker Prize in Anglo-Saxon countries. The biggest newspaper in Finland published an article with a headline: "the wrong book won". Talk about problems of otherness.

But then came the translations.

Not Before Sundown has been translated this far into 8 languages, including Japanese, and there are more to come. But the most thrilling

thing was to be translated into English.

I truly can't imagine how it might feel to have English as the native language. There are about five million Finnish-speaking people in the world. I know as a fact, that from all of the literature that is published in United States, only three per cent of it is translated stuff. Three per cent. And this three per cent includes all other languages. Spanish, French, Chinese, German, you name it. A Finnish book shouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell to get to that market.

But eventually that happened.

And now I have to go back to the very early days of the Finnish fandom. How we had these impossible dreams. That perhaps one day one of us could break the language barrier. How perhaps one day one of us would – no, no, this is too much – would be recognized in Anglo-Saxon fandom, perhaps being short-listed to an award of something?

But we really did not believe that would ever happen. That was totally science fiction to us.

But here I am. Overwhelmed. In the middle of some science fiction.

Well, all this could not have happened without some important and brave people. First, my publisher in Finland, who dared to publish a book no one was really able to categorise. Professor Auli Viikari, who made the final decision that my book would win the Finlandia Prize.

Then, my English and American publishers, who also took a risk. Of course all of those Anglo-Saxon readers who read the book and recommended it to their friends and wrote reviews and comments. But I think there was one group of people I owe most gratitude, and they are the Finnish fans. As soon as they realised my novel was going to be translated into English, they began promoting it. And I think that without their unrelenting work of trying to bring

the book to the attention of the right people I wouldn't stand here today. This is an award for us all.

This is a great, great honour. I really can't express my happiness and joy to be awarded this kind of a prize that I always have greatly admired and respected.

I want to thank you for all my heart, thank you for having me here, thank you for giving the opportunity to meet all you wonderful people.

When I gave a speech having my Finlandia Award I started it like that: "I'm having the happiest day on my life." Little did I know then of happy days.

James Tiptree, Jr. Award is an annual literary prize for science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender. In 2005 it was awarded to Joe Haldeman's "Camouflage" and to Johanna Sinisalo's "Troll - A Love Story".



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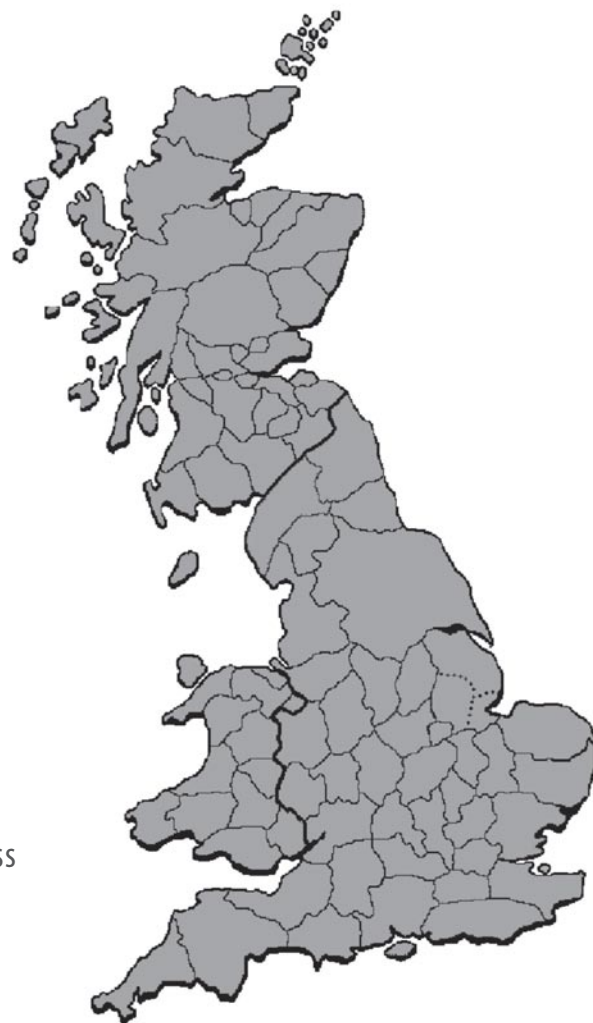
Johanna Sinisalo interviewed by Toni Jerrman in Helsinki, shortly after the Tiptree award ceremony in Gaylaxicon 2005 in Boston .

THE ISLAND OF CUT-THROATS

A FINNISH WRITER IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Hannu Rajaniemi

"If you dream of a future as a professional writer, remember that you'll almost certainly face an exhausting youth, a restless manhood and an insecure old age," writes Mika Waltari in his classic "Do you want to be a writer?" Waltari might have lived in the United Kingdom. For an aspiring author, it might as well be, to paraphrase another Finnish auteur, Renny Harlin, Cutthroat Island, full of literary shipwrecks and bloodthirsty publishers. And perhaps a treasure somewhere.



Building blocks of a career

At least in theory, the career path of a professional Anglo-Saxon writer has a very distinct shape. It all begins with short stories in competitions and magazines. Writers of speculative fiction are in a fortunate situation: there is enough of a market for short stories to provide a nice bit of extra income for a successful writer. Although **SciFiction**, edited by *Ellen Datlow*, which had the best word rates in the business for years, recently closed its doors.

However, writing novels is a must in the long run. It is of course possible to construct a novel out of an existing series of short stories, and this technique has worked very well for *Charlie Stross* and *Hal Duncan*, among others. But the true rite of passage for a writer is the original First Novel, whatever the method used to produce it. After that, it's open skies – an

agent, a fat contract for three to four books, fame and adoration, and invitations and other dreams come true.

At least in theory.

In reality, punching through the grey wall of obscurity is more difficult than ever before. There are masses of skilled, ambitious writers and competition is fierce. But the structure of publishing itself has changed radically during the past two decades.

Book-eat-book world

The UK publishing industry is a giant machine that annually churns out over 120 000 book titles, including reprints. Shockingly, the publishers responsible for this torrent of paper number only a handful. Publishing has become a playground for giants such as Time-Warner.

From the point of view of a beginning writer, this means limited options. As little as ten years ago

there were more than forty small and middle-sized publishers, but nowadays one is forced to knock on the big boys' doors. Not that an ordinary writer would have any business going directly to publishers. The big publishing houses have long since adopted the American model of not accepting manuscripts from writers not represented by a literary agent.

The agents themselves have growing avalanches of manuscripts pushing through their doors. An agent based in London commented that she receives about fifty manuscripts a day, and takes on perhaps half a dozen writers a year.

Even genuine talent may not be enough to win the heart of an agent. The *Sunday Times* recently made an experiment. They sent the first novel of *V. S. Naipaul* – a Booker Prize winner in the 70s and widely regarded one of UK's most important living authors – to twenty publishers and agents.

All twenty responses were cold rejections. *Christopher Little*, who represents *J.K. Rowling* among others, did not think Naipaul was “sufficiently original”. Ever since the con was revealed, literary critics have accused the publishing world of favouring shallow media-sexy writers at the expense of talent.

The situation is not improving. To top it all, publishers are in the danger of losing control of publishing. A bookshop war looms in the horizon: the supermarkets offer bestsellers (especially Harry Potters, of course) at a bargain price, and the bookshops are planning to strike back.

The colossal Waterstone’s recently bought the Ottakars chain, and the result was a Gargantua of high street bookshops, controlling over 40 per cent of UK’s book retail. To compete with the supermarkets, the newborn giant now has to invest in the potters and the danbrowns more than ever. The worst-case scenario is that publishers have to get used to brown-nosing Waterstone’s purchasing department heads.

Best-selling does not necessarily mean inferior quality, of course. The Potter novels are at the end of the day good, solid entertainment, and

Philip Pullman has finally achieved the recognition he deserves. On the young adult market (growing with quidditch speed) one can already find rather abundant examples of originality – even full-blown New Weird such as the **Mortal Engines** series by *Philip Reeve*. The profile of genre literature is increasing in general, although much of it masquerades as mainstream. *Kazuo Ishiguro*, *Philip Roth’s The Plot Against America*, *Audrey Niffenegger’s The Time Traveler’s Wife* and *David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas* are all speculative wolves in sheep’s clothing, to mention but a few.

Don’t quit your day job

It’s not difficult to topple the card house of literary dreams even further. Earning a living writing speculative fiction is not easy even in the UK. Aiming for the U.S. market improves the situation a little, but even so the average advance for a first novel, according to a study conducted by author *Tobias Buckell*, is roughly 2000 pounds, around four thousand euros.

The Hugo winner *Susanna Clarke* allegedly received the biggest

advance in British publishing history – over a million pounds – but writing **Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell** took ten years. Big advances imply big risks, and after a fall from grace, publishers won’t touch a flopped author again. Movie option deals are another possible golden egg. *Richard Morgan* – who also labored for a decade before success – managed to sell the rights to his first novel, **Broken Angels**, for a six-figure sum.

Both Clarke and Morgan are rare exceptions, of course. And it is possible to catch frostbite even after a relative success, if the publisher thinks the book isn’t selling well enough to merit reprints. This is one of the reasons why Ian McDonald – one of the most gifted science fiction writers of the last decade, and my personal favourite – still works for a TV company in addition to writing. McDonald, by the way, is a rare breed, combining three UK heritages: he is the son of a Scots father and an Irish mother, grew up in Manchester and currently lives in Belfast.

Share and share alike

Fortunately, rules can be broken. Internet and sheer pig-headed-



© Tero Yksipetäjä

Glasgow’s futuristic Armadillo SECC, the main venue for Worldcon 2005 held in Scotland.

ness has made it possible for a growing generation of young writers to bypass the normal channels of the publishing world. The spearhead in this frontier is of course the ubiquitous *Cory Doctorow*, followed by *John Scalzi* – who blogged his first novel – and the matrioshka-brained *Charlie Stross*, whose acclaimed **Accelerando** is freely available online.

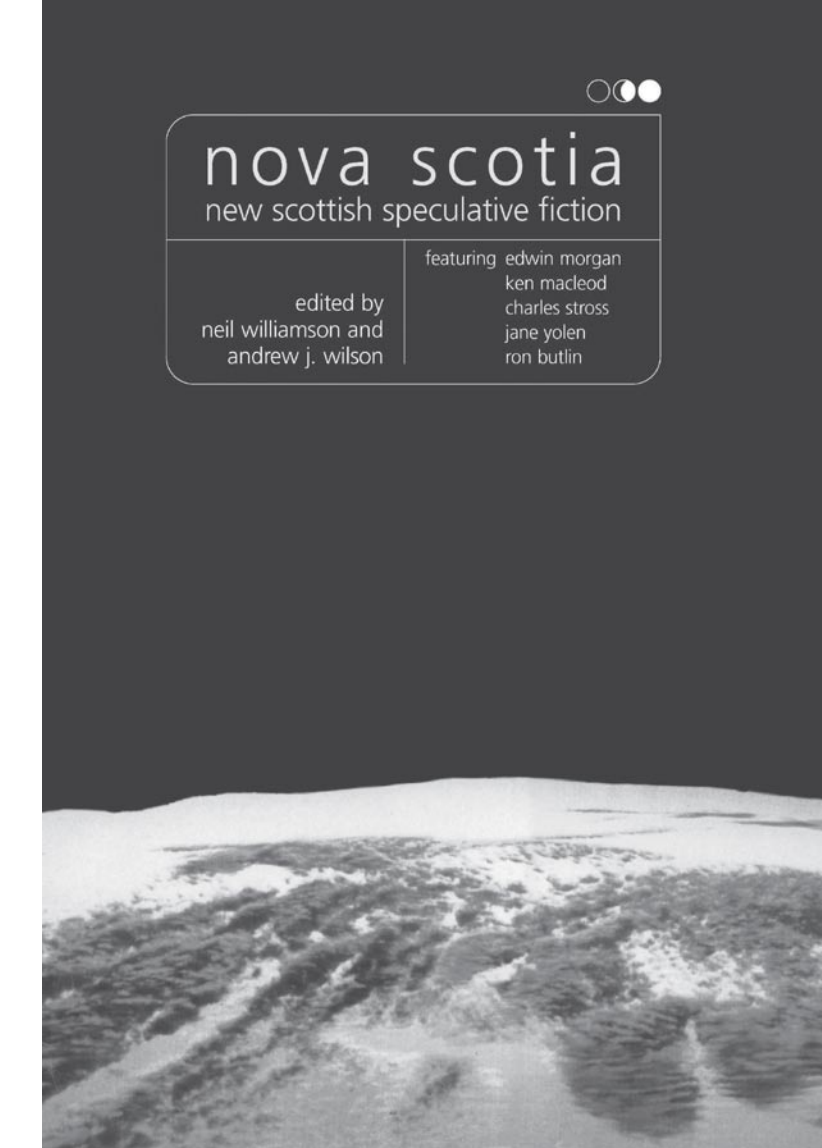
Open Creative Commons licenses may shift marketing more directly to the fen in the near future. Free e-books can't compete with printed versions in terms of reading experience, but serve admirably as appetisers. A typical Creative Commons writer is a gifted amateur who either stays completely outside the traditional publishing system or gathers momentum from the bosom of fandom. *LUEMINUT (Readme)* by *Kimmo Lehtonen* demonstrates that this trend is catching on in Finland as well.

Of course, there are more down-to-earth means of self-promotion. One of the more interesting characters I met at Eastercon this year was *Mark Robson*, who self-published his first four fantasy epics, using a super-human amount of energy and all his savings to market them. Robson is a former pilot who peddled his books in every conceivable venue, from air shows to schools and street corners. He sold almost 40 000 copies before he found a publisher. But natural-born PR machines like Robson are very rare.

The Scottish model

Another way to break the rules is to live in Scotland. The main advantage that the land of kilts and haggis give you is networking: the social circles are smaller, and both Edinburgh and Glasgow have several interconnected groups of writers. Edinburgh is, in fact, something of a worldwide literary hub and a UNESCO World City of Literature. The yearly book festival – part of the massive Fringe every summer – offers opportunities to meet publishers and agents.

On the sf/f front, Scotland has hosted two Worldcons during the last decade. Both events spawned a fresh generation of talented writers. Scotland has several high quality small



press publishers, for example Mercat Press, the publisher of the critically acclaimed **Nova Scotia**, anthology of Scottish speculative fiction. Due to the powerful presences of *Iain M. Banks*, *Ken McLeod* and *Charlie Stross*, the term "Scottish SF" has come to mean idea-rich, high-flying science fiction written with a sophisticated style that can more than compete with most of mainstream.

It is tempting to speculate that at least some elements of the Scottish model might be applicable in Finland as well. The Finnish scale is similar – five million people. Our fandom and writing communities are tightly knit, and several small and mid-sized publishers have recently begun to emerge.

Johanna Sinisalo's Not Before Sundown did not succeed in breaking the iron grip that realism has on the

Finnish literature, but some writers are both experimenting with genre boundaries and offering something to the mainstream audience.

The ecological visions of near future by *Risto Isomäki* and the stories by *Jyrki Vainonen* that come close to magical realism show that speculative fiction is not completely foreign to the average Finnish reader. *Pasi Jääskeläinen's* eagerly awaited first novel has huge expectations to live up to, but promises to be groundbreaking.

To the writer and reader of speculative fiction this wooing of mainstream literature may still come as a slight disappointment. Wouldn't it be great to see home-grown space opera or New Weird fantasies on the shelves? But to make this pipe-dream come true, both the writers and the fen have a lot of hard work ahead.

Reinventing Finnish speculative fiction

Finnish sf/f is characteristically very non-commercial and somewhat non-professional. It is dominated by big short story contests, which – while encouraging new writers to try out their skills – do not teach writers how to handle feedback or how to work with an editor.

Short prose is a somewhat problematic issue in itself. It is characteristic for sf/f and form worth cherishing. In fact, one could argue that sf/f is the last fortress of narrative short prose in Western literature.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to sell to Joe Public: successful exceptions include short story collections dressed up as novels, in the style of **Nimbus ja tähdet** (Nimbus and the Stars) by *Tero Niemi* and *Anne Salminen*. But writers should learn to write novels, too, and this is where our writing communities will be put to the test in the near future.

Writers need more visibility as well, both from the readers' and the publishers' point of view. Finns are famously unlikely to blow their

own horns in the manner of Robsonian aggressive self-promotion, but through the Internet, blogs and Creative Commons formats it is possible to gain at least some free publicity.

But what Finland really seems to lack is a forum where new writers would be able to make contacts with the publishing world. In the Finncons, for instance, publishers have barely any presence except behind the bookstalls in the market area. Contrast this with the Worldcons, where young writers chase editors and agents in the corridors with manuscripts in their arms and an elevator pitch on their lips.

It might be worthwhile to entice the small publishers to participate in the cons more actively, and with more than just book-selling in mind? This is of course first and foremost a challenge to the fandom community organising the cons, but one can only imagine what a Finnish Worldcon might achieve.

In a small country like Finland, social networks are tight and new ideas spread quickly. Finland is full of hungry, eager readers, and if a writer who makes herself or himself heard

really has a chance of making a mark. It is precisely in such environments that new movements, manifests and visionaries are born.

Speculative fiction is the literature of change, and Finland's history is full of change and reinvention. Only time will tell what sort of echo the term "Finnish SF" will come to have in the wider world.

Translated by Liisa Rantalaiho, with additions by Hannu Rajaniemi

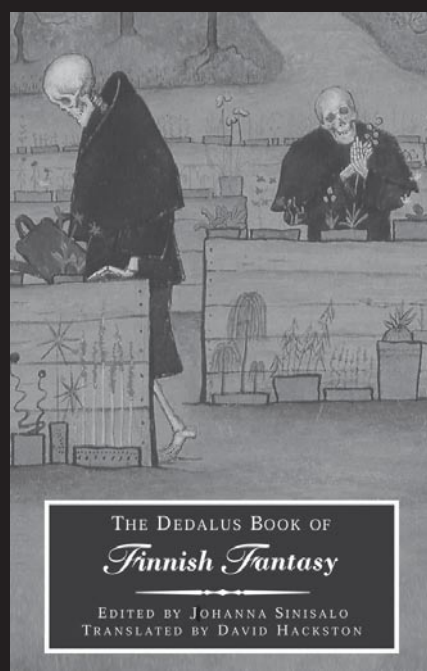
Hannu Rajaniemi writes speculative fiction. He has lived in Scotland for five years and recently completed his PhD in string theory at the University of Edinburgh. Hannu's short story "Deus Ex Homine" was published in the Nova Scotia anthology in 2005, and was chosen both to Year's Best SF 11 edited by David Hartwell and Year's Best Science Fiction 23 edited by Gardner Dozois. Currently Hannu is working on two first novels and hopes to finish one of them sometime. You can read his blog at <http://www.tomorrowelephant.net>.

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RECIPE FOR A BAD SHORT STORY

Anne Leinonen

"Recipe For a Bad Short Story" was originally published in Cosmos Pen's previous English special, in 2003. It contained typical faults in stories submitted to Nova sf/f short story competition. In 2005 the article was updated and published first time in Finnish. So, for the third time, how to spoil a 20 page short story...



© Nimmi Aalto

The crust:

- Double prologue plus epilogue
- Dull protagonist
- Breath-taking changes of viewpoint
- Red thread lost
- Trite atmosphere description

The filling:

- I've done that in role-playing!
- Clichés
- Worn-out theme
- Misses
- Theatricality
- Spam

Spices:

- Extra flavour (violence, porn, swear words)

- Wisecracks
- Name monstrosities
- Trouble with language

Double prologue plus epilogue

Knead the dough with care: to start, write two pages about what happened before the protagonist was born. After that, write another two pages of the prophesies of some witch in the North. There is not too much space for actual business after that, for you still must get in a two-page epilogue of how the story events affected world history.

Compactness is an asset! Start directly from where the events of the plot begin, do not prepare the ground from too far off with essentials. Likewise, cut off the story in time. In movies and novels you

can cool off the plot after the climax, but in short stories that's unnecessary. Do not waste time explaining to the reader what you meant, he can construct the narrative himself.

Dull protagonist

Peel and grate a dull protagonist: "The main character of this here story is one of them kung-fu assassins, he's a real good assassin, and then he takes on one real hard job but he's real good in it and then he gets his own guild."

Why is the protagonist in this situation? What's his goal? What kind of conflict follows from that? If the protagonist remains anonymous, faceless and genderless, without even a name, the reader will find it hard to identify with and care about

what happens to the protagonist. Anonymity should be a considered stylistic device, not a result of the writer's laziness!

A short story is not the place to tell the whole life-story of the protagonist, but the reader needs some kind of background. That can be done with implicit clues, with the manner the protagonist speaks, or with the reactions of other characters.

A first-person narrative gives a chance to throw light on the protagonist's feelings and thoughts during the events. An all-knowing narrator may also tell about the protagonist's feelings and describe her or him in relation to the milieu. Think about what might be the stereotypic solution to construct the character, and try to avoid that.

Breath-taking changes of viewpoint

Mix in plenty of different viewpoints. "Let the reader wonder how the characters C and D are connected to the characters A and B, and who, after all, is the main character. Serves the readers right, they ought to understand what I've meant!"

Who is the protagonist in the story? Whether it's told in first or third person, the structure of the story benefits from strict choices. A skilful writer may play with perspectives and even make a phenomenon or an idea the main character, but if you are the least bit unsure, rather choose one clear protagonist.

One viewpoint character gives a clear basis for the plot structure; there is someone in the story to see or experience the events and that helps to portion out the story to the reader. Several viewpoints may disperse the narrative plot and make the sequence of events obscure. If you are using an all-knowing narrator who can see into the thoughts of all persons and follow each one in turn, keep that line throughout. Changing viewpoints in the middle of a paragraph is a stylistic fault.

Red thread lost

Add as many as possible turns of the plot, new characters in the middle of

the story, changes of style, and hey presto! The dough starts to look nicely cloddy.

The number of available pages proves to be surprisingly small in practice. Once you get the story going, it has to end. Instead of a wide ranged plot, it's better to choose one plot line and to work that into a compact whole.

Consider what is the message of your story, what is the conflict it presents, and through what kind of events the conflict is resolved – or is not resolved, but something related to the conflict has to take place in the story. Complex, multileveled plot structures should be saved for longer stories. Prune off all the extra runners, keep the character set to the minimum, construct no by-plots.

The red thread can be lost by explaining too much or leaving too many loose threads. An alert reader is usually helpful. If he or she can't understand the plot twists of your story, probably no one can.

Trite atmosphere description

Dilute the clods, until all the dough is one watery atmosphere description: "There was a village by the seashore (describe the village, one page) and in the village lived vampires (description of vampires, one page). They may still live there."

A short story is not a lyrical atmosphere description, nor a prattling anecdote. A short story describes a matter, moment or episode that is significant for the protagonist. A short story has a beginning, a climax and a solution. The ending may be open or closed, but usually the story's ending gives some kind of an answer to the conflict presented in the beginning.

The Nova contest has often received several pieces of momentary atmosphere descriptions where in a direct speech, only the milieu or a momentary and static situation were described, but nothing happened.

"There was a village by the seashore and vampires lived in the village" is not enough for a short story; it's only the beginning of one. "A vampire slayer came to the village" would include

some conflict and suspense, where also the reader may start imagining how the story would go on.

The vampires might kill the hunter, the hunter might fall in love with a vampire or all vampires might be transformed into humans when a curse lifts – that kind of choice is what the writer should construct in the text.

It is usually effective to present the high points of the story by episodes, instead of just explaining what happened then and what happened thereafter.

I've done that in role-playing!

"In last week's role-playing session my character had a grand fight, I could write about that."

Novels have been written on the basis of role-playing, but it is a barren starting point for writing. A role-playing story may be about a big team of (anti)heroes wandering about in the woods or in a village in the middle of the woods, hearts beating with enthusiasm and noble mind. Role-playing stories may also be about assassins who proceed from room to room, avoiding traps and deathly accurate ninjas.

Often these stories may present an interesting protagonist with his internal conflicts, but the events seem to imitate some role-playing session too directly, and in the worst case the reader can actually identify the world where the story takes place.

A story based on role-playing sessions may also neglect communication to the reader. The writer knows everything about the characters and therefore does not bother to describe them. The text easily becomes bland, short on events, and only the creator of the characters understands its meaning. The plot twists of role-playing may not respect the tension of drama, instead they become too long, self-repeating, full of inside jokes and literary poor.

There are also problems of demarcation: there are too many characters in the whole, there is a big main plot where it's difficult to cut out a single episode for a short story, there are references to the group's earlier

adventures and tasks in the fantasy world. It may all become an insider thing.

Clichés

Chop in some safe familiar clichés: "There's a threat from space, and the Earth gets destroyed, but one girl and one boy are saved, and they are actually Adam and Eve."

Certainly you can write about clichés, but to make the whole enjoyable you need to find a fresh perspective to them. Some very worn-out clichés are for instance a waiting room after death, noble or fallen elves, a cyborg's human relations, aliens conquering the Earth, destruction of Earth, time travel stories and so on.

Generally you think you've invented something quite by yourself, while actually many others have invented the very same thing ages ago already. You should not get depressed, however. You can learn to go deeper into the theme, in an unexplored direction, for instance by changing the style or combining it with unexpected things. That's difficult even for an experienced writer, but a successful outcome rewards both the reader and the writer.

How can you smell out clichés, then? It's worthwhile to read a lot of the genre literature and to remember that it's too easy to borrow from movies or sci-fi tv-series. You can also hunt for ideas, for instance by reading science magazines or having exciting dreams.

A worn-out theme

Choose a popular theme, one that's been successful in the earlier contests, and choose the most familiar way to handle it.

Ideas have been found many times over and even themes are often the same, but an original perspective into the subject often helps. Make yourself familiar with the subject matter; find out what has been written about it before. Try to avoid copying your model directly. Try to find a new, surprising way to handle the theme.



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Even the story characters may be worn-out: dragons, elves and fairies seem to be the permanent fantasy favourites from year to year. They may be the basic material of fantasy, but this also means it is very difficult to squeeze in anything new out of them.

Even if you are in love with your characters, try to get over it and consider critically whether your characters have anything new to give to the reader.

On the whole, you should look at fantasy literature in a wider scale than just copying the Anglo-American models. If you wish to write fantasy, search for less used ideas from the folklore of your own country or the traditional stories of another culture.

Read *Diana Wynne Jones' book Tough guide to Fantasyland*.

Misses

"A contest, eh. Seems to have some theme, fantasy or science fiction. Here's the human relations drama I sent to the Tombstone short story contest last year that didn't make it there. I'll send it in this one, too."

The subject selection or the treatment of the short story may go amiss. In practice, any subject can offer the basis of a science fiction, fantasy or horror story, but there has to be something specific in it to make it representative of the genre.

That can be some supernatural phenomenon, a fantastic or scifistic milieu, daring dimensions and surprises in the plot, the questions the story awakens – an idea with a sense of wonder. But if there is none of that in the text, the story doesn't belong to the genre.

Ask yourself, could the speculative elements be removed from the text without the story losing something essential?

Theatricality

A tragic love story, absolutely! What a spice to the concoction, when the protagonist throws himself down the cliffs and his beloved suicides with poison, and they only meet in life-after-death.

To end the story tragically with the death or suicide of the protagonist may be tempting for a writer. However, even if the writer considers

that a touching and poetic ending, the reader might feel betrayed.

No one wants to read a story where all the world's injustices are shoved on the shoulders of the protagonist. Death has to be well-founded, as well as the misfortunes.

It's good practice to sometimes write a *happy ending* to a story!

Spam

When there's a skeleton to the story but it's not functioning properly, fill the problematic spaces with spam and hope the reader won't notice.

Spam is indeterminate mashed meat thrown around the story's skeleton. Spam is mushy story telling, often sticky text where the writer goes on for enormous lengths to explain and emphasize things that seem important to him or her. Spam may include some atmosphere description essential to the story, but 80 per cent of spam is waste material.

Give the reader a chance to make her or his own interpretations. Let the reader have her or his own insights. Reserve the verbosity to really important things and remember that laconic writing is usually the most effective.

Wisecracks

Flavour the dish with wisecracks: "This stupid armour bearer would crack a dirty joke to the maiden, and then the knight would hit him with fist..."

Humour may either hit the reader's sense of humour or go badly amiss. Shit-and-piss stories, black humour, knights telling grotesque jokes, or sarcastic comments by the protagonist do not necessarily please everyone.

The more transparent and unnoticeable humour is, the better it usually works. Humour based on action is always more effective than situations where the characters tell jokes to each other.

All elements in the story should make it move forward; wisecracks seldom do. If something seems terribly funny to the writer, it should be removed from the text. Kill your darlings.

Extra flavour (Violence, porn, swear words)

Season with extra flavour: "Since I can't think of anything else here, let's put them into bed! And in that too quiet place some blood and intestines."

Abundant violence may disturb the feeling of the story. Especially so when blind violence comes from the protagonist the reader ought to identify with. If the end result is just the death of the monster, consider how much valuable space you can waste in detailed splatter. Usually that doesn't take the story forward anyway.

Vulgar style expressions do not make a story better, however many swear words and sex scenes you manage to include. A swear word in a right place and at a right moment won't spoil the story, but a constantly swearing protagonist is a pain in the neck.

The protagonist may love and make love, but send actual porn stories into their own genre magazines, please!

Name monstrosities

Glaze the story with name monstrosities. There are lots of special signs on the keyboard, use them to create funny letter combinations. If you cannot find new ones, there are nice ready-made names in the fantasy literature. Crown the story with a name to blow everyone's consciousness: reveal the plot's final surprise to the reader!

With the names of your characters you can either create just the right atmosphere in the story or spoil the whole thing. Deirdre Pancake doesn't sound like an astronaut, and the name of the elf F'alagh'thaul is unpronounceable even to himself. Do not take a random fantasy book off your shelf and pick names for your characters, not even to honour your favourites. The names will be familiar to many readers and sound strange on new heroes or heroines.

It is sometimes hard to invent a name for the story. In many cases the result may be a name everybody else has used. From one year to the next, the names of short stories sent to

the Nova contest for example keep repeating certain words you'd be wise to avoid, such as *life, death, star, light, dark, black, forest, angel, fairy, journey* and *road*. Avoid general concepts and pompous words.

If it feels very hard to find a name for your story, make a list about the thoughts and words in it and test whether any of them might be tempting enough but not too revealing. You might also use for instance song lyrics or poetry for your inspiration. An average name doesn't ruin the story's chances, but a name with a spoiler will irritate the reader.

Trouble with language

"Having gone to his dilapidated home he took from a casket a small almost yellow writing pen and ink and started to write with it a bit aggressively on the other side of the parchment a message to his friend waiting far away on the other side of the wide ocean."

Language is the writer's tool, and should be kept shipshape. It mediates the story to the reader, and if the writer doesn't know his or her grammar properly, it will endanger the favourable reception of the story.

It's better to avoid unnecessary words that depreciate the meaning of sentences. Delete words like "a little", "quite" and "perhaps". Be also careful about letting learned words slip into the text. At times, they may not fit the story's time period, and may also otherwise make heavy reading. Use of adjectives demands skill, too. Adjectives are often dull. Pretty, big, small, huge, dark or light seldom mean anything much, for they are too general as words. Give the reader more precise adjectives. Or even better, use metaphors or demonstrate the milieu with examples.

If it's dark outside, show the protagonist groping for his or her way. Tell whether the protagonist prefers voluptuous figures, elegant bones or a bubbling laugh. A text giving detailed perceptions is literary better than a general bland account.

Translated by Liisa Rantalaiho

COSMOS PEN'S TEN QUESTIONS FOR A WRITER

JOHANNA SINISALO IN PERSPECTIVE

Johanna Sinisalo is a writer who needs no presentations. Her career as a novelist started with a bang when she won the Finlandia award with her first novel, *Not Before Sundown*. In addition to that she has also worked as a screenwriter and written comic scripts. Currently she is probably the most well-known Finnish sf/f author in the world. Therefore it is only fitting that the Ten Questions are directed in this issue to her.

Why do you write?

It has just happened that I have all my life found writing both challenging and satisfying. I have earned my living with different kinds of creative writing since I graduated. It simply is something I feel is the right thing for me to do, and, fortunately, the feedback I have had the honour to get, it seems that the audience agrees to some extent.

Why do you write speculative fiction? What else do you write?

Speculative fiction is just a tool, not a goal in itself. It is a tool to alienate and thus show the modern world from a different, slanted perspective. I have nothing against realism; it just is not my way to write. I also have a second profession in screenwriting, and in addition, I write comic scripts and occasional essays, reviews, articles and such.

Mention a book (several if you want) that has influenced you as a writer. In what way did it influence you?

When I was a child, *Tove Jansson's* Moomin stories had a great influence

on me. They had everything in them: a fairy tale -like world with three-dimensional characters, wild adventures mixed with gentle social satire, and almost in every Moomin book there is a society in grave crisis which brings out the best and the worst of the characters. How can you top that concept? Later, I have greatly enjoyed for example *Michel Tournier's* rework of well-known myths (Friday, for example), and I cannot avoid mentioning *Jane Austen* and her great social comedies.

John Varley's earlier works, in which he played with sex and gender questions, were a great experience, if not an influence in themselves. Once I have admired very much *Ray Bradbury's* baroque writing style, and some of *Connie Willis's* short stories (mainly those published in her short prose collection **Impossible Things**) looked like just how I would want to write - everyday life, seen fondly and three-dimensionally, mixed masterfully with the magical and unexplained.

What are your thoughts about Finnish sf/f? What kind of sf/f do you like to read? Mention a Finnish sf/f short story you have especially liked?

Finnish sf/f has developed in a tremendously fast pace. In especial fondness I have followed writers who just take their own path, not trying to imitate the Anglo-Saxon way of writing. It seems that the national Finnish folklore has had some kind of a renaissance in recent years as a source, and I hail that.

We *do* have such a rich tradition of mythology of our own that we do not have to re-write those post-tolkienist fake-medieval sagas. There are some writers who have such a voice of their own that their originality has to be recognized; *Boris Hurttä, Pasi Jääskeläinen* and *Sari Peltoniemi*, to mention just a few. And of course, there is a very strong young generation just emerging. There are such a lot of good short stories I have recently read I don't want to name any specific ones.

Have you ever come across with a literary brother or sister? Has there been a writer whose prose has felt familiar some way and resembled your own way of writing?

I think that in question 3 I answered that, partly. But, to be frank, I have never come across to a writer I feel to be my literary doppelgänger!

With some writers, I admire and envy their use of the language. In others, the designing of an ingenious plot. In others, the plausibility and logic of the world created. In others, the sf/f ideas that overwhelm the mind. In some, the three dimensional characterisation.

Usually, unfortunately, all these factors do not meet within the works of a single writer. The writer I perhaps admire most is *Vladimir Nabokov*, who is the master in every sense, but has also put his finger to spe-fi concepts, in *Ada*.

What do you consider your strengths as a writer? How about your weaknesses?

You really should ask this my readers, not me. Sorry.

What are you currently writing, or what do you plan to write in the near future?

I'm making my finishing touches to a new novel called *Lasisilmä* (The Glass Eye) which takes place in a writing team producing a TV drama series. It is a kind of a psychological thriller with mystical undertones. This book is launched in September 2006.

In addition of that, I'm trying my wings in movie screenwriting, and there are the usual comic scripts and so on.

What has been the most significant lesson you have had as a writer, or your personal observation on writing?

You have to be true to yourself. Always just write something you should want to read yourself. Never think of the reading audience, or your editor, or your friends, or, goddess forbid, the critics.

When I wrote *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (Not Before Sundown, also known as *Troll - A Love Story* in U.S.) I was convinced it's such a totally Finnish piece, absolutely bound to Finnish tradition, that it should be almost unreadable in other languages.

Perhaps, now that you think about it, that was just its charm - because



now it's translated to ten languages and there's no end in sight.

So: be original, be yourself, please just yourself - in this grisly market it's your only asset. You really can't compete with *King*, *Brown*, *Grisham* or *Jordan* (or *Salvatore*). You are you, you're a Finn, you're exotic, you're different, and that's the single ace in your sleeve.

If you had a chance to travel to whatever time or place imaginable, where would you go? And why?

To Mars, when the terraforming is just taking place, and all the planet is something between *Wild West* and a *Green Planet Saver's* wet dream combined.

If you had a chance to meet any fictional character imaginable, who would it be? And why?

Elizabeth Bennett in *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, of course! It would be nice to swap observations of male-oriented societies on different centuries. She's such a snappy discussor you really could relate with, in whatever century you live in.

Johanna Sinisalo has published over forty short stories in Finnish sf/f magazines. Her first short story, Toinen tie ("Another road") was published in 1984. She has written three novels in Finnish, Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi, Sankarit and Lasisilmä. Her first novel won the Finlandia prize in 2000.

BALTASTICA 2003
SHORT STORY CONTENDER

JAANA WESSMAN

RAPHAEL'S ANGEL



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When I first met Raphael I used to think I was “of the age when one is still joyous like a child and yet free like an adult” – misconceptions both, as children are not always gleeful any more than adults are free to do what they want. Very stupid misconceptions from one like me, for I had never been a joyous child at all, but a sly and scared and neurotic one, haunted by my father’s mental illness and a mother who anxiously tried to make it just a normal disease. At seventeen, though, I would have been very upset if some one had told me I was pretentious.

I met him in a pub, of course. – Where else do you meet fallen angels? He called himself Ash. He went to the same writer’s workshop as a friend of mine, and was introduced to me as a poet. I wasn’t very impressed, as I knew my friend’s so-called skills in

writing all too well. (Ash showed me some of his poems later, and indeed, they weren’t very interesting. By that time he had given up the workshop.)

I learned to like Ash amazingly quickly. I don’t make friends very easily – not because people didn’t generally like me, but because I found, and still find, it too tedious to keep in touch with anyone. I had a social life, maintained mainly in Friday night college parties and the local science fiction club, but no close friends, and I was quite happy with that.

But Ash was different. By the time we were at our third beers that first evening I found myself desperate to know him better. I wanted to meet him somewhere where we could talk to each other, without having to shout over the music and be overheard by a crowd of friends.

I tried some discreet ways to get his email address or phone number, but he evaded them all – in the end I had to ask him straight. He gave me a frustrated look and I almost started to apologize, but he only scribbled something on the back side of a receipt and handed it to me.

“I don’t have a phone. Not an email address, either.”

He had given me the address of his apartment. It was still early nineties, but already almost everybody I knew had an email address, and most people had mobile phones. I didn’t say anything, though, and just took the paper.

“You can drop by any time,” Ash said. “I’m at home most of the evenings.”

I never went to see him for the first time. I just lingered around there

after classes and hoped to see him, inventing ever more peculiar excuses to do so. Then one afternoon I saw Ash coming home, walking down the cobble-stoned street from the direction of the university campus, his long blond hair on a pony-tail and lit up by the sun light.

He smiled when he saw me, moved a file and a book from his right to his left arm and put out his hand. I felt awkward – the young men of my age didn't shake hands much then. After I had managed to briefly squeeze it, he asked me in. I made a strong point of acting "quite natural" when I followed him to his apartment.

He had one small room, from which open doors lead to a tiny kitchen and an even smaller bathroom. A thick double-sized mattress filled almost half of the floor, the bed neatly done. Bookshelves covered most of the walls. Before the window stood a small desk covered with papers, scribbled full with a wavery handwriting.

Ash lowered the books and papers he was carrying on this desk, kicked his shoes under it, and told me to sit on the bed. He pulled out a CD from one of the shelves and fed it to a CD player on another. The room was filled with electronic Bach: weird, but relaxing.

Ash stepped into his miniature kitchen. "Want some tea? I have some toast and butter and tomatoes."

While he was working in the kitchen I sat on the bed feeling more and more awkward, not knowing if I should offer help or not, and trying to figure out something to discuss with him. I had just started to seriously panic, when Ash emerged from the kitchen with two cups in his one hand and balancing a big blue ceramic plate full of toast and tomatoes on the other.

I took a cup from him. I had just found out that I had no idea how to speak to people when alone with them.

Ash was more relaxed. He lounged on the bed, his back to the wall, held a cup in his hands as if to warm them, and asked about some math class project I had talked about when we last met. I answered and asked about his poetry workshop, he said it was terrible and the assignments stupid.

I said yeah, it was like that in most all creative writing classes, and that got us going. For hours we talked about creative arts and learning them, about science and learning it. I thought I knew a lot about these things. When seventeen and doing well in school you think yourself very educated.

The next few months we met almost daily. We went to movies, talked about books, went to theatre, did canoeing on the river. I was a great science fiction fan and Ash was almost ignorant on it. Educating him was a lot of fun.

I think he felt the same about my ignorance on modern theatre. We both liked hiking and canoeing and

I met him
in a pub, of
course. –
Where else
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knew the same good spots on the river and forests close to the city.

I don't remember when I realized I was in love with Ash. It was never a mainly sexual thing, but it was definitely not platonic, and definitely more than a deep friendship. It came with an urge to touch, to hold hands, to look at him and smile stupidly. I often went to his place after school, did my homework there, ate with him, talked with him, sometimes even slept there.

I never told him I loved him. Whenever I started to hint to anything like that he looked pained, frustrated. Once we talked, quite abstractly at first, about men loving men. I said I was pretty sure men could sexually and romantically love men and he

said that he was absolutely sure they could. My heart jumped as I asked why and sank again when he looked at me, winced, and said: "There was somebody, once."

I said nothing, just waited for him to continue.

"His name was... Toby" he said. "He was young. Like you. And me, I suppose. He didn't... get along with his father. Though I don't think the old man ever realized that. He... considered Toby the model son. Which he always was, outward, I suppose..."

He stopped, staring at the wall.

"What happened?" I said.

Ash laughed, short and dry and bitter.

"He never loved me. We only met because of... some business I had with his father. He got married pretty soon after we'd met." He stopped, a look of self-loathing on his face. "I actually introduced him to... Sara, his wife. Of course, I didn't think it'd come to that."

We went on to talk about other people's mischances in love affairs. His attitude to me changed from there on, though. He smiled to me more, touched me more often, asked me to stay the night. Still, the closest we came to talking about our feelings was the occasional "I've never known any one like you".

It was about that time when Ash gave up poetry and started to paint. His first painting in his new arts class was of me, sitting at his open window, resting my cheek on my hand, my face turned slightly up. "My Raphael's Angel" he said, grinning. I hardly resembled a tubby child angel, but he managed to get something heavenly into me nevertheless. Not heavenly as in sweet children in white gowns playing golden harps, but heavenly as in serene, dignified, peaceful.

He was a much better painter than poet. He laughed when I said so.

"It only seems so because you know less about painting than about poetry," he said, but I think he was pleased.

Even when he talked to me about his philosophies and feelings he always avoided telling me about his life. He answered straight questions: yes, he was enrolled at the university,

no, he was not in touch with Toby anymore, yes, his parents lived far away and never called, but the questions made him so obviously uncomfortable that I avoided them. At first I didn't care, but by and by I became first curious, and then obsessed, to know more about him. Since he didn't want to tell me, I tried to find people who knew about him.

This proved more difficult than I had thought. The friend who had introduced us only knew him from the writers' workshop. Ash didn't have many friends at the university and those few didn't want to gossip about him.

I couldn't find out who his parents were or if he had any other relatives. I couldn't even find out how *old* he was. I started to insert more hints and questions about his past to our discussions. He grew frustrated and annoyed and refused to answer. I grew more obsessed. Things started to go bad.

We had just reached the point when we both knew that things were indeed going bad, but still thought it was the other persons fault, when my mother decided to call me home for a few weeks. I had chosen to live in a students' dormitory at the campus, even though my mother lived only an hour's drive away from the city. Every now and then she wanted me to go and stay with her for some time, and I usually obliged.

I was just in the middle of an argument with Ash, at his place, when Mom called. He accused me of being nosy and putting pressure on him, I called him secretive and claimed he did not trust me. "You speak like we were man and wife," Ash just said, when my mobile beeped.

I swallowed the response and barked my name to the phone. Ash stared at me when I said "Yes Mom" and "No Mom" and "Sure Mom" and so on, and suddenly his face turned horrified. "Oh no, oh no no" he said to himself and disappeared to the bathroom. I had to say "Yes Mom, sure Mom, yes Mom" a few times more before I could cut the call.

Ash came out of the bathroom on the exactly same minute when I came to the door. He hugged me, tight, and sat down on his bed. I stared at him, puzzled. He said nothing. I cros-

sed my arms and tapped my foot and waited, opened my mouth to say something and couldn't figure out what. Then Ash seemed to come to his senses.

"I would like to come with you to your Mom's," he said.

I was so confused I didn't realise I hadn't yet told him I was going.

"Sure," I said. My mother had a big house and she had always said my friends would be welcome. I looked at Ash, and he looked at me, fearful.

"Let's not argue," he said, "I'm sorry, I'm being a bore. Just that I don't want to talk about it and questions make me angry."

He sounded so reasonable that I softened immediately and started to feel like it was all my fault.

**"But you
are an angel,
are you not?"
my father
said to my
best friend.**

"I guess it's okay," I said, still a bit defensive, "just that I like you and I'd like to know more about you."

Ash sighed. "I'll tell you some. But it's not nice to hear. I'm not a nice guy."

I smiled. He was the nicest guy I knew, but he was an artist and wanted to see himself as the alien one, I thought. He lay down on the bed, put his hands behind his back.

"It goes down to Toby, I guess," he began. "I wasn't supposed to fall for him, you know. I was just supposed to take care of something for his father, and for... mine. A... family business. But I did fall for him."

"It was okay in the beginning. We were on this trip together. Had fun, got into adventures, stuff like

that. Toby talked a lot about girls. He wanted to find a wife for himself. I was jealous, but I couldn't talk about it to him. He was so... goody-goody. The good son, the fine young man, the... pious Toby. I guess he got it from his father. He was even more so.

"There was this girl I knew in one town, called Sara. She was... peculiar. She had had several... boyfriends already and bad things had happened to all of them. Nothing was proven, ever, of course, but it was said she had driven them to suicide, or something. I thought, maybe, if I get Toby to fall in love with her he will then notice that I would be a better choice and... I don't know what I thought. I knew nothing about love and was angry. Maybe I just wanted revenge.

"It didn't go at all like I planned. Toby fell for Sara all right, but she fell for him also and was... I don't know, kind of cured, and there were no more bad things, and they were happy and all that. I finished my business with his father and left. I guess they lived happily ever after... but I never forgave her that she didn't make him unhappy. And I suppose I never forgave myself that I had hoped she did. And I still wish Toby would have loved me, even though I wasn't supposed to love him, ever."

He stopped talking. I didn't understand all of the story. I didn't ask anything, though; he felt so distant and away in his thoughts that I could not bring myself to break the silence. Ash took my hand, squeezed it once, and I squeezed back. Then he said, in a totally different tone of voice:

"When are you leaving for your Mom's?"

My mother was happy to have Ash around. When I introduced him, as an arts student from the university, something in Ash changed. The artsy, sarcastic Ash vanished and was replaced by someone very polite in a shy but natural way. Only when my mother looked away, or was in a different room, he was back. In two days time Mom was sold. When she asked me to come and see Dad in the institute, he asked Ash to come with us. Ash said yes, he'd be delighted to, but I thought he looked pained and glum behind his politeness.

I asked him if he wanted to stay back, but he said no. He wanted to meet my Dad. He was not afraid of mental illness, if that was what I was afraid. I was to stop worrying about him and relax. I tried to, but I still wished I could have made him stay behind without hurting his feelings.

The point is, I was a ashamed of my father. When he was well, he was a great guy, but most of the time he was in his own world, and he said the most embarrassing things to people. I don't mean threats or any stereotypical madman raving, just things that were possibly true but not something to discuss in polite company, or things that were in a way nice but so weird that people got alarmed.

He was on that mood that day. I saw it from the way he came towards us in the garden of the institute. He smiled a big sunny smile but didn't look straight at us, and his eyes were dreamy. His big brown beard was dishevelled, he had been running his fingers through and through it. He looked at us when my mother greeted him, and when I did, and when mother introduced Ash, but his eyes didn't focus. Then he suddenly paid attention to Ash. His eyes widened and a broad, awed expression spread on his face.

"But you are an angel, are you not?" my father said to my best friend. Father took Ash's hand, shook it fervently and positively beamed and shone.

"This is such an honour, sir, such an honour, you must sit down with me and tell me what you do..."

I was terribly embarrassed, and Mom blushed too, but Ash didn't seem to notice anything peculiar.

My mother and I looked helplessly to each other and followed father and Ash to sit by a small pond. Ash talked about his studies at the university, the painting, and the poetry which was not a success. My father listened with interest. Sometimes he asked something which sounded very normal, and sometimes startled me and Mom with something like "Ah, as an angel it would be very difficult to portray fear of death, wouldn't it?"

I got a few words in every now and then, like "Yes, that was one of your best poems, Ash," or "No, I don't think

she said she liked it only to be polite," and my mother got none. In the end of the visit my father shook hands with Ash and asked him to come again. He didn't pay any attention to me. Ash looked pained and gave my mother an apologetic glance. We were all very quiet on the way home.

Ash visited my father several times. Sometimes I went with him, but usually not. My mother started to visit Dad more often too. She no more went only for quick, painful, polite visits as she had used to, but stayed to talk and had long walks with him. I thought it was good, but didn't dare to really hope.

Then once, three months after Ash's initial visit to my father, Mom and Dad met me and Ash at the gate of the institution. They were walking hand in hand.

My mother saw my amazement and tried to pull his hand away, but my father held it tight, and soon she gave in and laughed.

"Haven't you noticed, son, that I'm getting better?" my father said. I could only stare. It was the sanest thing he had said to me in over ten years. He had called me his son, and he had admitted he was sick. He was obviously concerned about how I felt, and treated me with kind and tolerant fatherly humour. I could not help it, I cried.

What followed was a nauseating, sugary family scene, the kind of which I'd find revolting in any movie or book. Ash didn't take part but stood a few steps away, his back turned to us. I must admit that I didn't pay any real attention whatsoever to him, not during the scene, or after it, or on the way home. I could only think of having my father back.

The next weeks I saw my father daily. Ash still paid him visits, but less often, and we seldom went together. I had so much to talk about with Dad. Now that he was better he was a kind-hearted, benevolent and wise man, with a sense of humour very close to my own. He was really interested in my life and studies and world views and everything, and was amazingly in touch with the world, considering that he had been in a mental institute for almost a decade.

Time since I had last seen Ash stretched to days, then to weeks.

When I finally went to see him he was no longer there. His window was dark and his name removed from the door. I felt betrayed and annoyed and lonely, but somehow I was also relieved, and ashamed of that relief.

I tried to track him down, but I had only the name to go with and couldn't find any information. The neighbours, the University, the friends – no one knew where he had gone. Desperate to find something, I even tried feeding the names of people he had mentioned into search engines on the Internet. The only thing I got was The Book of Tobias, and for some reason I began to read it.

It's a short one compared to most of the books which made it to the official Bible, and so it was easy to read, especially when I skipped all the prayer parts. I had only skimmed it for a few minutes, when I felt the hair in my neck raising.

In the story, an angel called Raphael, supposedly the arch-angel by the same name in other stories, comes to a young man called Tobias, is introduced to his father, leads the young man through adventures to a girl called Sara who is possessed by demons and has killed all her previous husbands. Tobias and Sara marry, she is cured, and later Tobias's sick father is cured too. The angel goes away, and everybody else lives happily ever after.

Of course, there is absolutely no concrete evidence that Ash was the arch-angel Raphael. Except that everything fits. Not only the facts, but also the feelings; how his love was at the same time so powerful and and so without the devouring kind of passion.

If Ash was an angel, there might also be a God. Some people are likely to be offended when they think of the arch-angel Raphael loving men.

For them, I have one consolation: because of Ash, I am now cured from the "sin" of homosexual acts. After the pure, noble, exalting love for him I have been unable to let a mere man so close to me. Maybe those offended by our love can see this as a part of God's plan, and consider it good.

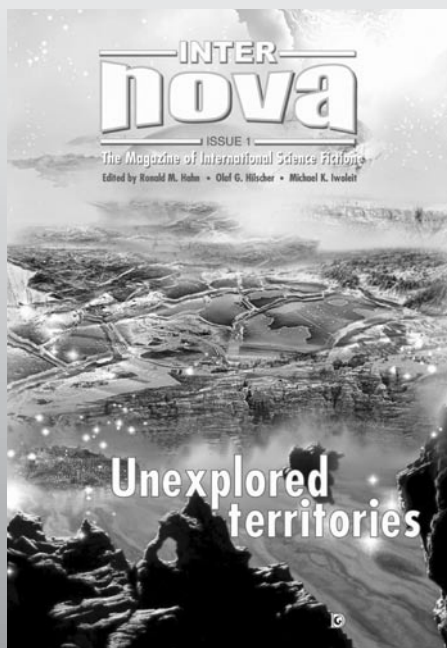
I know I can't.

INTER nova

The Magazine of International Science Fiction

Edited by Olaf G. Hilscher & Michael K. Iwoleit

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