

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.

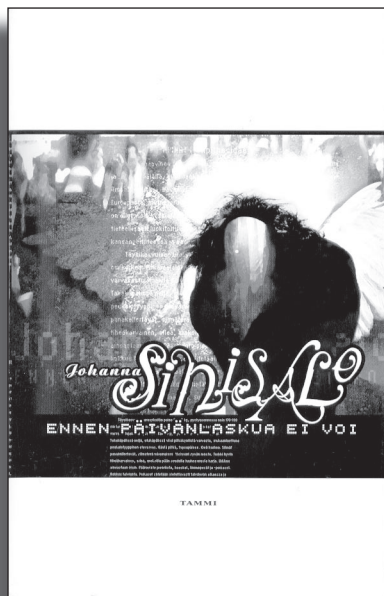
Mainstream and sf/f

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

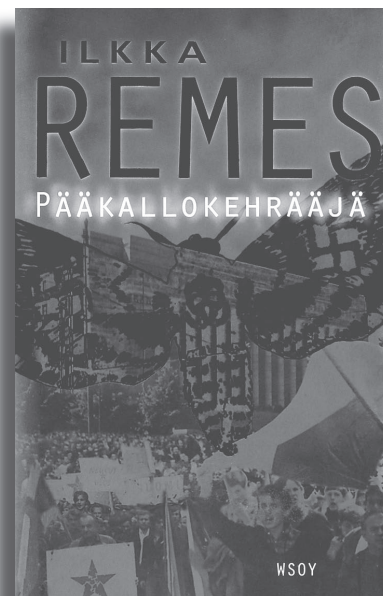
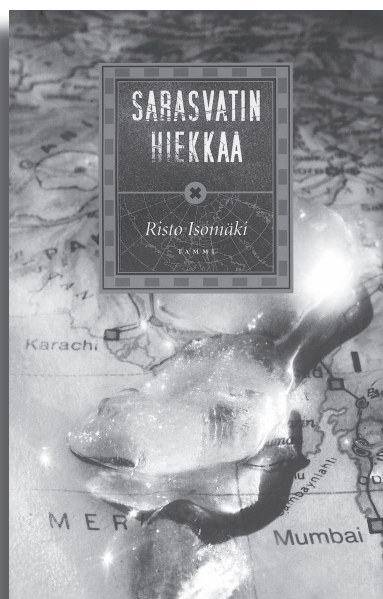
of them showing clear promise. The major part of Isomäki's published works, however, is non-fiction and connected to his background as an activist in the environmental movement.

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



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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 *novettes* 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.

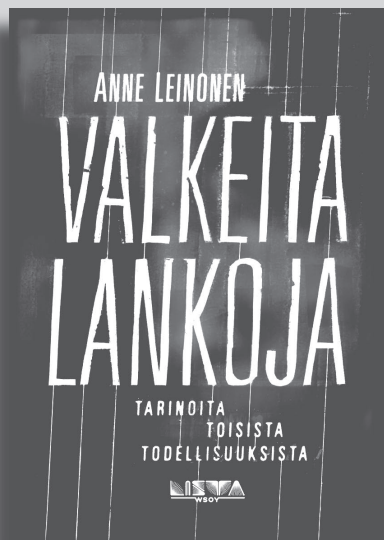
In a way, one can well understand the writers' hesitation. As mentioned already, in practice all current writers who publish short stories in Finland are fan writers. There is no one in Finland writing *sf/f* professionally, and the writers have to do their writing somewhere betwixt their ordinary jobs,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

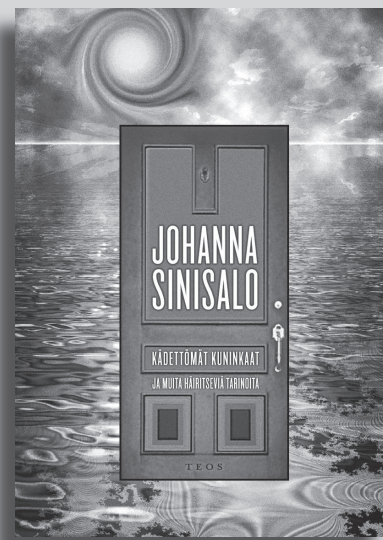
A few years ago Helsingin Sanomat – the largest Finnish daily newspaper – published a rather controversial article, where several writers, Johanna Sinisalo included, publicly disclaimed the label of a science fiction writer and announced themselves to be writers of speculative fiction. The reasons are 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 **Kädetönät 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.