

# The call of the wild

Maya Jaggi is impressed with *The Howling Miller* by Arto Paasilinna, a fable of freedom and the Finnish backwoods



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## **The Howling Miller**

by Arto Paasilinna, translated by Will Hobson from the French of Anne Colin du Terrail  
284pp, Canongate, £7.99

Arto Paasilinna has a cult following in his native Finland, where the twin yearnings of his fictional heroes for individual freedom and inviolate nature strike a chord. The two may well be linked in a country where the freedom to pick berries and mushrooms is all but enshrined as a constitutional right. Since the early 1970s, Paasilinna has written a novel a year, in which outsiders and misfits often make a break for the pristine forests, casting off their urban chains in favour of idyllic self-sufficiency. Yet what some Finns see as rebellious light humour has been hailed, not least in France and Italy, as profound fable, enhancing the author's reputation as a wry eco-philosopher.

In *The Howling Miller* a tall, hardworking loner with a mysterious past, Gunnar Huttunen, arrives in a northern canton to renovate a water mill, in disrepair since the recent wars of 1939-45 with the Soviet Union and then the retreating Nazis. The new miller has a gift for imitating forest animals, ebulliently entertaining local children with his impressions of elks, cranes and bears. He also charms Sanelma, a woman with the job of encouraging the populace to grow their own vegetables. But Huttunen is prone to bouts of depression, and the locals are troubled by his sporadic need to howl nocturnally like a wolf, spurring a sympathetic chorus of dogs, and keeping the village awake.

When he is certified as a manic depressive and hauled off to a psychiatric hospital, he escapes to the woods, living off game, trout and berries. On a perfect evening, he "ate half a black grouse with cranberries for his supper. Then he threw himself on his bed of fir needles, his rifle within reach." Yet each time Huttunen hopes to be left in peace, to be visited only by Sanelma, another chapter opens with his persecution and pursuit by the authorities. As he resorts to increasingly violent acts of survival or revenge - including slicing the village telephone wires and holding up the bank - his howling becomes a desperate cry of thwarted freedom.

With the exception of Huttunen's allies, an amiable police constable and a drunken postman, the villagers are roundly satirised for corruption, ostentation, pettiness and malingering. But Paasilinna directs most ire at the local dignitaries who are the miller's "persecutors, his hunters and his jailers" - from the bank manager who freezes his account and the police chief who calls in the light infantry, to the doctor who certifies the miller for taking a naturalist's interest in animal behaviour, yet who noisily re-enacts on all fours his own hunting exploits.

Set in the early 1950s, the novel alludes to the Korean war, which is sending timber prices soaring, with Finnish farmers "getting rich on Korean blood". There is also a daring swipe - for a novel written in 1981 - at Finland's adversaries in the Winter war of 1939: Huttunen thinks the Soviets entering the 1952 Helsinki Olympics will be good hammer throwers, "judging by how far they could throw grenades on the Svir".

While at times this miller's tale recalls Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* in its protagonist's perverse eccentricity, it combines the deadpan subversiveness of, say, *M\*A\*S\*H* with a comic-book heroism. Though outnumbered and outgunned as he fights the state and its abuses of power, the troubled Huttunen finds affirmation from a talking statue of Christ in the church he plans to burn down. He may even, it is hinted, reach a mythic apotheosis as an avenging wolf.

This is a translation from a French translation - a compromise that may account for its inferiority to Herbert Lomas's direct translation of Paasilinna's 1975 novel *The Year of the Hare* (Peter Owen, 1995). Yet even a glimpse of Paasilinna's singular vision of freedom and persecution proves beguiling.