

Review — Arto Paasilinna: The Sweet Poison Cook

Original title: *Suloinen myrkyneittäjä* (1988)

Language: Norwegian (*Den elskelige giftblandersken*), translated from the Finnish by Tor Tveite

Not available in English



As I've written [before](#), I fell completely in love with the hilarious 'A Charming Mass Suicide' by Finnish author Arto Paasilinna. 'The Sweet Poison Cook' is the second book I've read of him – and it is written in the same, satirical pen and with the same, slightly absurd streak.

The book's protagonist is 77 year-old Linnea Ravaska, the widow of the late Colonel Ravaska. She lives a quiet life in a little red house in the countryside with only her cat for company. However every month, on the same day as her pension arrives, the silence is shattered when her late husband's young relative Kauko arrives with his friends, who generally terrorize her and drink her out of the house. They are a bunch of petty criminals; in the beginning of the book portrayed as egocentric but fairly innocent, later it is revealed that two of them are convicted murderers.

After a particularly dramatic visit, Linnea manages to escape the countryside and seeks refuge in her old flame Jaakko's city apartment. When she realises that Kauko and his thugs still haven't given up – especially after they manage to force her to sign a will where she leaves everything to Kauko – she needs to take her precautions, and starts mixing poison, just in case.

Paasilinna writes with humour and compassion. He frequently makes detours from the main story and provide absurd side stories. Even though 'The Sweet Poison Cook' is fun to read, it is also more sad than 'A Charming Mass Suicide' (which is a paradox, considering the title). There are characters from the shadows of society which you feel sorry for, even though they are portrayed equally as caricatures as real human beings. Like the young girl Raske-Raija:

-Luckily the rent isn't too high, or I wouldn't be able to afford this place at all, I pay fifteen hundred per month and I have to be with the landlord twice a month. If I didn't, I couldn't make it go round.

Raske-Raija explained that it was hopeless to find a good apartment down-town if you didn't either pay the white out of your eyes, or ... open the crack a little.

(...)

-I was lucky, because my landlord lives in Lahti and only visits twice a month, he smells good, sprays under his arms, doesn't make hickeys and always calls me 'miss'. In fact, I wouldn't mind doing for free, he's such a good guy. (My translation)

Although humourous, stories like these are equally sad, and I feel that the balance between the satire and reality is not as well-balanced in this book as in 'A Charming...'. Furthermore, the storyline seems somewhat unfulfilled, as the plot after a while has nowhere to go. The epilogue, on the other hand, is a treat.

In conclusion, 'The Sweet Poison Cook' is absolutely worth reading, but is a more mixed experience than 'A Charming Mass Suicide'. However, Arto Paasilinna deserves to be read everywhere, and I really hope more of his books are translated to English sooner rather than later.