

A Skewed and Skewering Look at Finland

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Around the world, the Finns, a nation of five million, are hardly known as funny folk -- or so conventional thinking goes. They live in semidarkness during the winter months, beat each other with birch sticks in their saunas and have one of the world's highest suicide rates.

Meet Arto Paasilinna, a novelist of the picaresque who has been amusing Finns for 30 years and, later, other readers in the 25 languages into which his works have been translated. In 1995, more than 20 years after it came out in Finland, a translation of "Year of the Hare" was published in London by Peter Owen. Three more editions followed. It was also made into a feature film.

The protagonist, Kaarlo Vatanen, a jaded journalist, takes pity on a young hare after his photographer-colleague runs over it while driving back from an assignment. He finds the frightened animal and makes a splint for its broken left hind leg. For the remaining 125 pages of the story, he and the hare keep close company.

Vatanen quits his job at a weekly, leaves his wife, sells his boat and ventures forth across Finland with the hare peeking out of a basket or his knapsack. They encounter and win over policemen, volunteers fighting a huge forest fire, a moonshiner, a buxom milkmaid, a preacher and a ski instructor who steals the hare for a pagan sacrifice and almost gets away with it.

He later meets a party of military attachés attending war games in the forest and nearly loses the hare to a diplomat's wife who fancies it and gives it up only after the animal leaves droppings in her soup. During a drunken spree, Vatanen gets engaged to a beautiful lawyer, but returns to the forest to vanquish a huge greedy raven and finally a killer bear that he has chased on skis across the Soviet frontier to the frozen White Sea. The Russians are splendid hosts. But when the Finnish government claims he has committed 22 separate offenses, they hand him and the hare back.

The two are incarcerated. They escape. The beautiful lawyer also vanishes. The tale concludes: "One cannot mess around casually with Vatanen."

The "Hare" remains the author's favorite out of 29 novels. His best seller is "The Herb Garden of the Unhanged Scoundrels" (1998), with 168,000 copies.

Much of Paasilinna's writing is set in rural Finland -- 76 percent of the country is covered with forests or woodlands -- with stories of reindeer thieves, lumberjacks, firefighters and the Sami people of Lapland. The author was born in 1942 in the Lapland town of Kittila, 90 miles north of the Arctic Circle, one of eight children of a policeman. Prof. George C. Schoolfield, a Finnish literature specialist at Yale, points out that Mr. Paasilinna's "irreverent outsider" stance is part of a grand Finnish comic novel tradition.

His protagonists, who include women, are, like Vatanen, strong -- some very strong -- eccentric and often loners. He makes sardonic fun of Finnish bureaucrats, German tourists, the Finnish military and selfish young people.

His villains, too, are colorful -- for instance, the "extremely coldblooded" serial murderer Hemmo Siira, who "carries more bitterness in his heart than a thousand feminists."

The author concocts situational comedy highlighted by deadpan, sometimes black humor, the kind familiar in the American Middle West, as in the opening lines of "The Forest of the Hanged Foxes," from 1983: "Only wealthy people lived in the old, respectable stone house in Humlegaard in Stockholm, for example, the Finn Oiva Juntunen. By profession he was a crook."

"The Son of the Thunder God" (1984) is a romp through many levels of Finnish society on the heels of Rutja, whom Ukko, the Finns' thunder god in pagan times, has sent back to earth to convert the nation back to its original faith. Exchanging bodies with Sampso Ronkainen, a modest antiquities dealer who is one of the few remaining old believers, Rutja becomes, literally, a roaring success, mostly in urban settings.

With the aid of some thunderbolts, he gathers converts from all walks of Finnish life, including a Lutheran pastor and the entire population of the country's mental asylums. By the time Rutja returns to Finnish heaven the majority of the population has changed back to the pagan faith and the Finns remain "the only people on earth without a single madman."

Paasilinna's chief female protagonist is "The Sweet Poison Cook," Linnea Raskava, a 78-year-old widow living alone in a village on the southern coast of Finland. In this 1988 novel, her nephew, Kauko Nyssonen, a hoodlum, comes to take her pension money. He arrives with two hoodlum pals in a stolen car and messes up her house. They get drunk and kill her cat, driving her to tears and "hatred."

She prepares for battle by bathing in a pond and putting on makeup because "a woman must have a feeling for style." She moves in with her family physician. Fearing her hideous nephew and his pals, she decides her best defensive weapon is poison, a concoction of digitoxin, phosphorus, cyanide, oxalic acid, strychnine, morphine, a jar of pickled mushrooms, insecticide and antifreeze. She does not poison anyone but, turning the tables, manages to best her tormenters and later wins the heart of a naval hero, "an old embittered drinker" who has long dreamed of rescuing a mermaid. Linnea becomes that mermaid.

She ends in hell, "where every member of the people of Finnish origin is sent, always and in every case." But she is protected there from the three hoodlums by the devil himself because, "a lady remains a lady, even in hell."

His latest novel, "Ten Shrews," tells of a Finn who receives so many flowers on his 60th birthday that he decides to distribute them among his 10 former lovers. It has sold 126,000 copies since publication last autumn. He was asked in a telephone interview how much of the book is autobiographical. "Some features," he allowed, "but not the 10 women."