



Journey into imagination – a glimpse of the history of Finnish children’s literature

Children’s literature – fiction for age 9 and under

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Abstract:

*It all began with an ABC-book. The first ever printed book in Finnish was children’s literature, **Michael Agricola’s** ABC-kirja in 1543. Back then, we were a part of Sweden and all literature came out in Swedish. The few children’s books printed in the 16th century were religious and educational.*

The impact of the children’s literature of the rest of the Europe can be seen in our literature throughout centuries. Especially, when speaking of the early years of Finnish children’s literature, it’s not possible to leave some great European influences without a mention.

*In the 17th century, **Charles Perrault** laid foundations for the new literary genre and published his collection of European folk tales. Then, the Age of Enlightenment saw the sensible Robinson as a good role model. The novel, Robinson Crusoe by **Daniel Defoe** was published in France in 1719. Robinson used of pure intellect to*

survive, tame and educate nature. Another new genre, the *Robinsonades*, was born.

Children's literature in the Age of Enlightenment sought to advise, educate and warn. **Heinrich Hoffmann's** "*Der Struwwelpeter*", 1845 was published also in Finland in 1869. In 1795, the Finnish archbishop **Jakob Tengström** published a collection of educational children's stories, "*Läseöfning för mina barn*". Obey your parents or die, is the message of the stories, to put it shortly.

The yearning for childhood

The Romantic era by the beginning of the nineteenth century gave childhood a new, central position in literature. Childhood and the untamed nature were seen as things to long for. Fairy tales were valued more than ever and were no longer perceived as just a pass time for adults, but as children's culture, worthy of high regard.

In **Rousseau's** theory of natural human, the children are inherently good and capable of honesty, curiosity, spontaneity and understanding. All of these capabilities corrupt when growing up.

The romantic era elevated folk art and the history of nations. Folktales were held in high esteem and seen as true holders of national identity. The German **brothers Grimm** went around the country, collecting old tales and afterwards, adapting them more suitable for children, printed as collections *Kinder –und Hausmärchen*, Children's and Household Tales in 1812-1822. These tales soon found their way to Finland, too. The original oral stories were intended for the entertainment of adults and quite a bit more violent and sexual than the ones rewritten for children. For example, the wolf is known to ask *Little Red Riding Hood* to take her clothes off in the original folk tales.

Pioneers of the literary fairy tale, "Kunstmärchen"

Folk tales gave form and were followed by the literary fairy tales, first by German romantics in the nineteenth century. Children's literature, the world of fairy tales and fantasy, began to divide to two main streams. **Hans Christian Andersen** had a Finnish contemporary, **Zachris Topelius**, who published in Swedish.

The influence of Hans Christian Andersen can be read in the Anglo-Saxon fairy tales and fantasy. Andersen himself was influenced by folk tales and the stories of *Arabian Nights*. In Andersen's tales, animals, plants and toys get a soul. The element of the fantastic is much present.

Topelius, on the other hand, was very popular in the Nordic countries and is often seen as the paragon of Nordic children's literature. His works are more humoristic and realistic than Andersen's. Topelius was influenced by the *Bible*, *Kalevala* and romantic tales of villains. When the child is often the sad bystander in Andersen's tales, the children in the stories by Topelius are energetic and overcome enormous difficulties.

The nineteenth century also saw the rise of the literary nonsense, tales playing with words and logic, like *Alice in Wonderland* by **Lewis Carroll**. It was published in Finnish already in 1906, but the first influences in Finnish children's literature can only be read in 1950's. It took many decades for the great works of English juvenile fantasy, books like *The Wind in the Willows* by **Kenneth Grahame** and *Peter the Rabbit* by **Beatrix Potter** to find their way to Finland.

Finnish juvenile fantasy didn't exist until 1950's.

Suomalainen kuvakirja, written by **Juhani Aho** and illustrated by his wife, **Jenny Soldan-Brofelt**, is the first "completely" Finnish children's book, published in 1894.

Finnish children's poetry was also blossoming in the nineteenth century, inspired by the oral tradition, lullabys and rhymes. First notable book of children's poems was published in 1869, *Pienokaiset* by **Julius Krohn**. His animal rhymes were warm and humorous and lacked morality and sentimentality. Authors like **Immi Hellen** and **Arvid Lydecken** were laborious writers of children's poems, too.

The spirit of Topelius and his legacy can be very much seen in Finnish children's literature of the late nineteenth and long to the twentieth century.

The next remarkable figure is **Anni Swan**. She first published a collection of fairy tales in 1901 and translated for example the tales collected by Brothers Grimm and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Her soul-mate and contemporary was **Aili Somersalo**, who published works like *Päivikin satu* (1918) and *Mestaritontun seikkailut* (1919). The nature, especially the forest and myths involving the forest were important for both Swan and Somersalo.

Kiljusen herrasväki –series by **Jalmari Finne**, first published in 1914, has lived through decades, as well. Finne was the first Finnish author to make a carnival of adult authority. *Kiljusen herrasväli* –series and the fairy tales of Swan are being read even today. *Mestaritontun seikkailut* by Aili Somersalo is read aloud to almost all Finnish six year olds. Today, Swan and Finne are considered the founders of Finnish juvenile literature.

Post war era

Between the World War I and II, our best-known children's author was **Raul Roine** together with his illustrator **Rudolf Koivu**. Another author worth mentioning was **Arvid Lydecken**, who wrote fairy tales, founded *the Boys' Adventure Library* and submitted together with Anni Swan two children's magazines.

World-wide revolution in children's literature took place after World War II. It also left its mark on the Finnish children's literature, which rose to a new boom in the 1950s. Conventional and instructive style was very much abandoned.

The first important factor in post-war Finnish children's literature is **Yrjö Kokko** and his fairy tale novel, *Pessi ja Illusia*. It's an anti-war, beautiful love story of a fairy and a troll, an optimist and a pessimist.

In 1950's, the children's literature canon divided into two: the artistically revered, modernist literature and the more traditional literature. *Pikku-Marjan eläinkirja* (Little Mary's Animal book) by **Laura Latvala** presents the more traditional style, and is still the best-selling children's book in Finland. Appreciation of children's literature grew as soon as the modernist lyric poets like **Kirsi Kunnas** began to write for

children. Her largely popular collection of children's poems, *Tiitiäisen satupuu*, was published in 1956. The poet and the novelist **Oiva Paloheimo** also wrote for children, *Tirlittan* was published in 1953 and became a symbol of the generation recovering from the war. Tirlittan is a little girl whose whole family and home are all of a sudden destroyed by thunder, Tirlittan is alone the world in her pyjamas.

Translation activity was brisk. For example *Pippi Longstocking* was translated into Finnish in 1946, *Wind in the willows* in 1949, *Little Prince* in 1951. The American picture book series *Little Golden Books* stranded in Finland in 1952 and brought a whole new style of illustrating with them. The series is still among the most popular children's picture books. The first issue of *Aku Ankka* (Finnish for Donald Duck), a weekly Disney comics magazine was published in 1951.

The author's self-esteem was raised by a new author and expert organization *Nuorten kirja ry*, established in 1946, and the *Topelius Literature Award*, established in 1947, which is still being nominated yearly. In 1957 an association for international cooperation was formed and started making Finnish children's literature known abroad. The association is known today as **IBBY Finland**, www.ibbyfinland.fi

The global transition in children's fiction, which began immediately after World War II, can be viewed through three major phenomena:

- 1) **The second golden age of Fantasy** in the children's literature in Anglo-Saxon countries
- 2) **Astrid Lindgren**
- 3) **Tove Jansson**

The notable authors of the second golden age of fantasy in England are well known, **Tolkien** with his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and **C.S. Lewis** with *the Chronicles of Narnia*. *The Chronicles of Prydain* by **Lloyd Alexander** were inspired by Celtic traditions. Finnish readers and writers were inspired by fantasy as a genre for the first time and the works of the authors of the first golden age of fantasy, Carroll, Milne and Grahame were also being translated into Finnish together with the contemporary ones, Lewis and Tolkien. New, experimental expression was seen also in the works of Finnish writers.

Astrid Lindgren shook the world in general and the literary field of her own country Sweden in particular, with her anarchist novel *Pippi Longstocking* in 1945. Pippi was published in Finnish as soon as in 1946. All Lindgren's books were very popular in Finland and translated very quickly. The 1950's wiped the dust from the face of children's literature and new, fresh wind began to blow.

Tove Jansson, the Swedish-speaking Finnish author brought fantasy to Finnish children's literature with her *Moomin* books. Moomins have been endlessly analyzed from different perspectives including zenbuddhism and Taoist thinking. The Moomin family continues to appeal to children – is it the strong family connections and the free space to grow? The Japanese animated films created the huge Moomin boom in the 1990s.

Another author and also a Swedish speaking Finn, **Irmelin Sandman Lilius**, was also greatly influenced by the British fantasy writers.

A very laborous fairy tale writer **Marjatta Kurenniemi** brought nature back to Finnish fairy tales. *Oli ennen Onnimanni* (1953) is an early representative of literature promoting peace and environmental issues.

The 1960s and the 1970s: the changing perception of the child and the social change

In the 1960s and 1970s, children's literature took part in the sharp, political, often left-wing public debate of peace education and environmental issues. Problems were raised for discussions and many former taboos broken.

The cruelty and the fantasy worlds of classic fairy tales were seen as harmful to children's development in the 1960s. Diluted, rewritten versions of the classics were published. Fairy tales were still being written, but in a new ways such as Marjatta Kurenniemi in *Onnelin ja Annelin talo* (*Onneli's and Anneli's house*, 1966), The novel represents low fantasy, a genre still popular today. Non rational happenings occur in the rational world.

Realistic children's literature with an emphasis on every day problem-solving was favoured instead of fairy tales. A good example is *Leena menee kouluun* (*Going to school, Leena*) by **Anna Tauriala** (1973).

Camilla Mickwitz told a story of the little boy Jason and his single-parent mother in the picture book *Jasonin kesä* (*Jason's summer*, 1976) in a warm and realistic manner. Jason-books are still popular and have been recently reprinted. In 1970, the first Finnish picture book about nature conservation, *Vihreä vallankumous* (*The Green Revolution*) was written and illustrated by the sisters **Irina** and **Leena Krohn**. That was years before the official founding of the Green movement. The book is not quite as revolutionary as the title suggests. Kids, cats and dogs decide to rebel against adults and go to the park instead of doing what adults tell them to do.

In Finland, children's literature has always been quick to react and stick to social issues, much quicker than adult literature.

Children's radio shows, tv-programs and theater were growing in the end of 1960s. Many writers created their tales and stories for the television or the radio first, and later these were converted to books. For example, *Piilomaan pikku aasi* by **Lea Pennanen** (1968) was a radio play first, later converted to both a tv show and a book.

The fairy tale began to conquer back its position in mid-1970s when the value of fairy tales was newly understood. There was also the great fairy tale discussion: may a story be scary and should old tales like the **Brothers Grimms'** tales be cleaned up? 21st century has again seen the same discussion. The renaissance of fairy tales gave new wings to the fantasy and fairy-tale novel.

Kaarina Helakisa was one of the notable children's writers of 1970s and 1980s. One of her early works, *Elli-Velli Karamelli* (1973) is a statement against pollution and greedy adults. Prior to that, the topic had only been published in Inari and Leena Krohn's picture book, *The Green Revolution*.

Already Helakisa's early work reformed the ways of storytelling. She combined the traditional fairy tale themes in everyday life. Fantasy and realism discussed and merged into a multilayered narrative. She started in 1960s by writing parodies of traditional fairy tales and later, wrote notable fairy-tale novels: *Ainakin miljoona sinistä kissaa* (*At least a million blue cats*, 1978), *Annan seitsemän elämää* (*Anna's seven lives*, 1987). Helakisa also published regenerative and insightful children's poetry, for example the collection *Annan ja Matiaksen laulut* (*Anna and Matthias' songs*).

Major reformer was also **Oili Tanninen**, author and illustrator of several picture books and fairy tales as well as a graphic artist. She worked already in the 1960s. One of her works, *Nappi ja Neppari* (*Button and press buttons*, 1964), discussed housing problem using fairy tale ideals and elf figures. Later, she used collage techniques and her *Nunnu* is a known figure even today.

Several significant fairy tale novels were published in the 1970s. **Leena Krohn's** *Ihmisen vaatteissa* (*Pelican man*, 1976) tells a philosophical story of the friendship of a boy and a pelican. The pelican dresses up like a human and wants to learn to read, seeking to comprehend man and the strange things men do. The book was filmed in 2004. *Amalia, karhu* (*Amalia, a bear*, 1977) and *Anni Manninen* (1977) by **Marja-Leena Mikkola** share the same spirit.

Jukka Parkkinen is one of the noteworthy ones. His early work, the *Korppi-series*, published in 1978, are animal tales about a raven and its friend. The nature conservation theme is very much present: Kalevi the Raven's peaceful life is shattered when a man sprays poison into their habitat from a plane and lets wild, vicious minks free. In the 1980s, Parkkinen started writing for young adults and has remained a long-standing favourite.

Hannu Mäkelä and his books about the little ghost, *Mr. Huu*, also deserve a mention. Mr Huu is an anti-hero with a bad drinking problem. Mäkelä's message is that even difficult issues like alcoholism should be addressed and spoken of.

Yet another distinguished writer is **Elina Karjalainen**. She continued the tradition of toy stories with *Uppo-Nalle*. In her work, you can see the influences of the British nonsense and especially the bears *Paddington* and *Winnie the Pooh*. The Finnish bear, Uppo-Nalle, "the sunken teddy", drifts to the shore, is found by a little girl Reetta and adopted into her family. Uppo-Nalle has a passion for poetry and a tendency to melancholism, and sees greatness in common, every day phenomenon like the garbage van.

The 1980s: the golden decade of fairy tales

The 1980s was again a golden age for fairy tales. We had new writers like **Leena Laulajainen**, **Maria Vuorio** and **Hannele Huovi**, all of whom have influenced Finnish fairy-tale literature greatly. A major event was also the publishing of *The Uses of Enchantment* by the child psychologist **Bruno Bettelheim**, translated into Finnish 1984. Bettelheim discussed the importance of traditional fairy tales, often considered too dark, to the child development. This inspired Finnish authors to create new fairy tales based on old mythologies.

Hannele Huovi is perhaps internationally the most prestigious of our children's writers. She has published stories with strong undertones of philosophy and life skills, like *Taikaruukku (Magic Pot, 1984)*. Her series with the two touching, wild and inventing little toy bears *Urpo* and *Turpo* has been an inspiration to many. *Urpo* and *Turpo* aren't the only noteworthy toys in newer Finnish literature, there's *Histamiini the Horse* by **Raili Mikkanen** and a tiny, but noisy little bear in **Tuula Kallioniemi's** books.

Hannele Huovi is a poet too, writing to all ages from babies to young adults. She has also written amazingly witty easy readers and youth novels.

Feminism also arose in the fairy tales of the 1980s. The princess in *Kuninkaantytären siivet (King's daughter's wings)* by Kaarina Helakisa has been a role model for the modern, liberated princesses in the Finnish world of fairy tales. The king and the queen try to hide fact that their daughter has wings. The princess, nevertheless, decides to use her wings to fly away and is, in the end, loved and admired by her parents and all nations.

National values increased in importance in the Finnish culture and society in the 1980s, as the Soviet Union was shattering and the politicization of the society decreased. Traditional Finnish folktales were reprinted, for example.

The 1990s: the rising popularity of serial books and the rise of easy readers

First book of *Heinähattu ja Vilttitossu (Hayhat and Quiltshoe)* -series by sisters **Sinikka** and **Tiina Nopola** was published in 1989 and gained popularity through the decade. The book has links to **Roald Dahl's** works and on the other hand, to the Finnish literary figures Onneli and Anneli. Family relationships are in focus trough out the whole series. The mum is not a monster or absent, but often completely at loss what to do next, and the cinnamon rolls never turn out properly.

The Nopola sisters have written another series too, *Risto Räppääjä*. Risto is a boy who lives with his aunt as his work-oriented mother is too busy to stay at home. Friendship, loneliness, humour and sharp notions of the irony of adult life are the central elements of the series. Of *Risto Räppääjä*, two movies have been filmed (2008 and 2010).

Lastenkirja (Children's Book, 1990) by **Kari Hotakainen** makes a parody of adulthood. In his later works, Hotakainen plays with language and unbelievable stories.

The 1990s was characterized by the great economic transition and the recession time. These themes can be seen in children's fiction. The most important thing was nevertheless the rise of serial literature. In 1990-1992 alone, over 50 Finnish serial books were published. There were series for horse girls, series about school life, and series for boys. Several series about sporting boys were published to get those boys that were only into sports, interested in reading, too. Rowdy and hilarious series for smaller children were born, for example the *Ella*-series by **Timo Parvela**.

In the 1990s, several new easy to read book series by Finnish authors were published. Before that, most of the easy readers were translated into Finnish. At the moment there's more than half a dozen series for learners written by Finnish authors, and many individual writers have their own heroes and heroines for beginning readers, too, for example Tuula Kallioniemi's *Karoliina* or *Konsta*-series.

Sisters **Merja** and **Marvi Jalo** were the first Finns to start writing a horse book series in the 1990s. They are still popular, nowadays there's a much read dog series by Merja Jalo, too.

In the 1990s, short fairy tales changed their shape into fairy tale picture books or easy to read books. Fairy-tale novels were numerous.

The latest Finnish children's literature is characterized by anarchic tendencies, playing with language, fantasy and sci-fi. Rural settings are often seen, despite or because of the strong urbanization. Nature has always had its place in the foundations of Finnish children's literature. We are a nation of forests and lakes and it's much seen in our children's fiction, too.

The 2000s: The rise of baby poetry and intermediality in children's fiction

Turn of the century brought children's poetry into focus, inspired by two older poets, Huovi and Laulajainen. There were several new, laborious poets, for example **Tittamari Marttinen**, **Eppu Nuotio**, **Jukka Itkonen** and **Tuula Korolainen**. *Kuono kohti tähteä* (I raise my muzzle to the stars, 2005) by Tuula Korolainen won the prestigious Finlandia Junior –literature prize.

You can say we had a boom of baby poetry in the 2000s. Hannele Huovi published a classic in 1995, *Vauvan vaaka*. Ten years later, several collections of children's poems had been published that were solely targeted to families with small babies. Nursery rhyme times were arranged by the new professional instructors of creative writing and libraries, "Baby Poetry Spa's" they are often

called in Finnish. Some books aimed especially for these kinds of groups were published, like *Silkkipaperitaivas* by Eppu Nuotio (2006). Collections by **Johanna Venho** and **Pia Perkiö** are noteworthy, as well. We also saw many new editions of old collections nursery rhymes and children's poetry.

Seeing and addressing issues from the child's point of view is characteristic to the children's literature of the turn of the century. Respect for others and the search for identity are also central themes. Nature and the fable tradition are still going strong.

Intermediality is again very much present. *Karhukirjeitä*-series by **Jukka Parkkinen** was a radio play, first, as was *Pyryhattu ja Viimapää* by **Mari Mörö**, too. *Katti Matikainen* by **Silja Sillanpää** is a cat with a children's tv-show first, later the cat writes a book series. A detective series, *Etsiväkerho Hurrikaani* by **Jari Mäkipää** was seen in television and as a book at the same time.

Several writers have taken the worlds of their stories online, using blogs, websites and even Facebook. Interactivity has become a part of children's literature for good.

Finnish children's literature lives on the cutting edge of time. Especially youth fiction touches on the social pain points sharply and accurately. Issues are often raised in children's literature much earlier than in adult fiction. For example, there were stories about immigrants in children's fiction five years earlier than in adult fiction. Family troubles, poor or missing parenting skills, children with no boundaries, loneliness, gaming, media and internet are amongst the strongest themes of 21st century children's literature, but both traditional and modern tales of nature and animals are still very much there, too.

What will the future hold? New technologies, e-books, for sure. E-publishing of Finnish children's fiction is still strikingly small. As new themes, recent historical events will be there. It also seems the things from fifty years past are often reissued in children's fiction, so we expect to see a couple of books about the World War II, soon.

When reading children's literature, we read at the same time our society and about its state. Children's literature has a major impact on society, it has often been the interpreter and the spokesman. Children's book has always been and will continue to be the mirror of the surrounding community.

Read children's books and you'll know what kind of a world you live in. Wings of imagination will come along as a freebie.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge", said Albert Einstein.