

CONQUERING THE WORLD AS A FINNISH AUTHOR

Marko Hautala and Emmi Itäranta interviewed

Pasi Karppanen

For the Spin English Special, we have interviewed two Finnish authors of speculative fiction. They differ from each other as authors and in their literary output, but are united by the fact that both have made a break into the international market.

Emmi Itäranta grew up in Finland, but she has lived in the United Kingdom for ten years. She writes her books in two languages, Finnish and English. To date, she has written two speculative fiction novels. The first one, *Memory of Water* (*Teemestarin kirja*, 2012), won several awards in Finland and was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

Her second novel *Kudottujen kujien kaupunki* (2015) won the Tampere City Literary Prize and the Kuvastaja Award for best Finnish fantasy book. It was published in 2016 as *The City of Woven Streets* in the UK and as *The Weaver* in the US.

Marko Hautala writes horror fiction that draws from Finnish urban legends, local history, his personal phobias, and his experiences working as a nurse at a mental institute in the 1990s. He has pub-

lished seven novels, and his work has been translated into English, German, Czech and Italian, including the novel *The Black Tongue* (2015). His short story "The Laughing Doll" was published by Cheeky Frawg in the *It Came from the North* (2013) anthology.

Two Finnish speculative fiction authors with different author images. How do they view writing and being translated and marketed to international audiences?

First of all, do you have an opinion on what is typical for Finnish SF in comparison to SF in general? What do you think about the branding of the Finnish Weird? Is it possible for an author to take advantage of "exotic Finnishness" to gain popularity?



Emmi:

International trends, such as dystopia, steampunk or paranormal romance, tend to reach Finland sooner or later, because we live in a globalised world and the younger generation of writers in particular is aware of them. But Finnish authors put their own spin on these trends, for instance by using Finnish settings, mythology or other cultural elements. Therefore the end result is often highly original. I think this originality works in favour of standing out from the crowd, and that Finnish Weird is a great concept – but internationally it has yet to catch on.

Marko:

I suppose genre fiction is fairly universal in terms of basic themes, storylines and so on, but regional characteristics do add an extra flavor. Sometimes this extra flavor can make a regional subgenre into a phenomenal success as happened with Nordic Noir. I don't see any reason why Finnish Weird could not be a thing as well.

What differences do you see between the Finnish and global literary markets?

Emmi:

It depends on the market. The most obvious difference between publishing in Finland and the English-speaking world is the scale: the former is tiny, the latter huge. But from what I have seen, the challenges look fairly similar everywhere. There is a sore need for diversity and own voices; publishers work with limited resources, so when it comes to promotion, they tend to prioritise authors who already have an established audience.

One difference I have noticed is that in the English-speaking world, male authors often have a better chance of getting media coverage, reviews and awards. In Finland, the situation seems more equal in this respect – in fact, there has been something of a surge in successful young female authors in the past decade.

Marko:

The main difference is, of course, that there are less Finnish-speakers in the world than there are people living in London, so you will be communicating with a much bigger audience almost everywhere else, but the competition is harder as well.

The funny thing is, though, that horror writers seem to be struggling with recognition and book sales regardless of country or language. In that sense, I'm quite lucky to have managed to make it to the mainstream even in a small country like Finland.

What would be the best way for a Finnish writer to approach an international publisher? Do you recommend getting an agent?

Emmi:

I would definitely recommend getting an agent. Finland does not yet have an established system of literary agents, but in most countries publishers will only look at manuscripts that come through agents. So my advice would be: write the best book you possibly can. When – and only when – the manuscript is complete and as brilliant as you can make it, then use a resource like *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, find the contact details of agents who look like they might be a good match for what you write, and then start sending submissions. Do the hard work, and do your homework. Miracles do happen, but it is best not to rely on them.

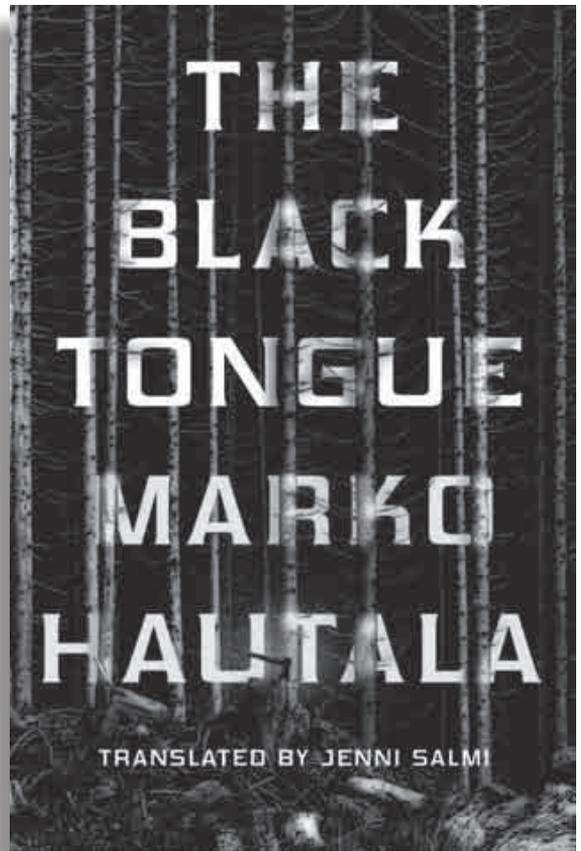
Marko:

My personal experience with novels is that you need an agent, but the world is changing so quickly that it's probably not the whole truth anymore. The first stuff I got published in English was poetry and that happened through getting to know some wonderful people who thought my poems might be worth publishing. That's quite common with poetry, and I can't see why it wouldn't be the case with genre fiction as well.

Do you feel that Finnish literature has something new to offer to the world? Does it offer a different approach than American literature, for instance?

Emmi:

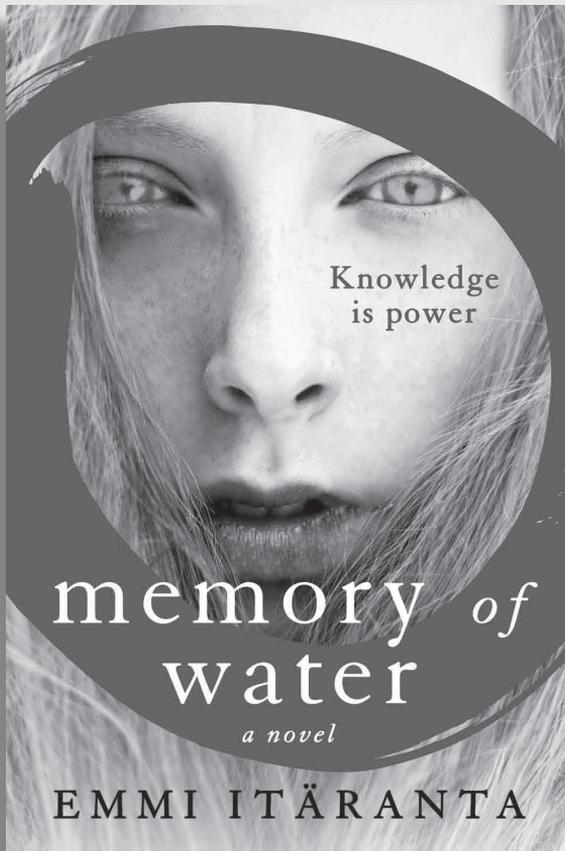
Finnish often bring their own cultural heritage and rich mythology into their writing, and this is especially visible in speculative fiction. Finnish literature has been historically dominated by realistic fiction with a social consciousness, but it has broken this mould in the past twenty years or so. Personally, I find the potential combination of Finnish mythology, settings and social awareness quite exciting.



Marko:

When I read **Johanna Sinisalo**, **Emmi Itäranta** or **Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen**, I do sense a Finnish vibe there, but it's rather difficult to say exactly what it is. Our literary culture is quite unique and hasn't traditionally been all that welcoming to weird fiction. As a result, especially horror writers have either had to publish through small genre publishers or, as is the case with me, somehow sneak into the mainstream and lure people into reading their stuff without realizing that they're reading horror. That does create an extra challenge for the writer, which is not always a bad thing as it forces you to stay clear of the most recognisable and worn-out genre clichés.

As for international audiences, "Finnishness" as such might not mean much to most people, but there always seems to be an advantage in setting your stories in your own culture. When writing the novel *The Black Tongue*, I thought that very few people outside my home town would really be interested in the setting and the local urban legend the sto-



ry is based on. As it turned out, it was my biggest success to date both home and abroad.

When choosing the themes for your books, do you keep in mind the international angle and think about what appeals to audiences outside of Finland? Does the thought of translation affect the decisions you make while writing?

Emmi:

Never. I choose to write about subjects that interest me, that I feel connected to, and tell the stories I believe should be told. Any attempt to follow trends is doomed, because no one knows what the next big thing will be. It is guesswork even for agents, publishers and booksellers. So the best thing anyone can do is to write the book they wish to write, as well as they can write it. Anything else is bonus, and mostly outside the writer's power.

Does the thought of translation affect my decisions? I would say it inevitably does, because I write

in two languages. Throughout my writing process, I think in Finnish and English both, and the awareness of this interaction between the two languages shapes the end result. It influences my word choices, phrasings, the rhythm and flow of the sentences. My books would be different if I wrote them in one language instead of two. That said, I don't consider other translations at all, only my two "originals" – and sometimes I hear back from translators who don't know what to make of my neologisms or other choices.

Marko:

Not really, and as I said concerning *The Black Tongue*, I shouldn't trust my own judgement with these things anyway. Of course you want to communicate with your writing, but in general I think it's better to write for yourself, the gods, the dead or anything other than a calculated "target audience". The odds that your book will ever become so successful that it would compensate for the pain of writing something you're not deeply obsessed with is one to a million. I consider my novels a kind of encrypted diaries. They're fictionalised personal confessions and accounts of some specific phases in my life, but written in such a way that even I don't see it until about a year after the publication.

Emmi, how does it feel like to write in Finnish and English at the same time? Do you work on both versions simultaneously, or do you write first in one language and then translate into the other?

It's a slow process, but I find it rewarding because I enjoy the interaction between the two languages. I usually write the first draft of a chapter in Finnish first, then translate it into English and edit as I translate. I switch back and forth between the two languages, until I have a satisfactory version of the chapter in both. Then I move on to the next chapter and do it all over again.

What is your opinion on translating personal and place names? In translation, have the names in your books been left in their original form or domesticated into the target language?

Emmi:

I think translating the names of characters and places depends on the context. In the case of *Harry Potter* series, for instance, I can see the argument for it.

As far as I know, names have been kept in their original form in the translations of my books apart from one exception: my Swedish translator asked if she could change the name of a minor character, Harmaja, into Harmala, because in Swedish the original would have meant “hare Maja” and given an unintentionally funny impression. So I said yes to that change.

Marko:

Due to my limited language skills, I can really only comment on the English translation of *The Black Tongue*. **Jenni Salmi** did an outstanding job with it, but some things will inevitably be lost in translation. I’ve worked as a translator myself so I do understand how difficult and often downright impossible it is to convey ideas and images into another language.

For example, in *The Black Tongue* there is the urban legend of the Hatchet Grandma. The name is a bit of a compromise as the original Finnish name *Kuokkamummo* just doesn’t travel well from one language to another. *Kuokka* is not “hatchet” but another old tool that could be roughly translated as “hoe”, but that word had to be dropped, for obvious reasons.

To make things worse, the tool “kuokka” has some specific cultural associations for a Finnish reader, and some of those have to do with a classic Finnish novel called *Under the North Star* by **Väinö Linna**, so all this will be missing from the translations, no matter what you do. I really enjoy communicating with translators as it makes me realise that sometimes writing a book might actually be easier than translating one. Translators are the real unsung heroes of literature.

Lastly, we would like to hear your views on marketing and creating an international author image. Marko has sometimes been marketed to the Finnish audience as “The Stephen King of Finland”. How do you feel you are being introduced to the international readership?

The same thing could be asked of Emmi. To what extent do you feel that your Finnishness is part of your international author image? Do you feel you are considered or marketed as a genre writer abroad? Do you believe that your target audience exceeds the genre limits, in the style of Margaret Atwood?

Emmi:

Reviews often seem to mention that I’m Finnish, so it is probably part of what shapes expectations about my work. The genre and age group my books get put into seem to greatly depend on the country and publisher. In Italy, Estonia, Finland and Brazil, *Memory of Water* came out as an adult novel. In Germany, France, Spain and Georgia, it was clearly marketed as YA. In the US and UK it seemed to be positioned as a crossover.

Based on this, I get the feeling that my books do not fall neatly into a clear niche. They may be a bit too adult to be considered purely YA (and I do apologise for this artificial contradiction, because whole dissertations could be written about its problems), are maybe slightly too genre to be considered literary, and a tad too literary to be purely genre.

I personally think of genre loosely, as a potentially helpful writing tool rather than a confining set of rules. I tend naturally towards speculative fiction, but if I ever wanted to write something else, I wouldn’t let marketing concerns stop me. I’m mainly interested in becoming a better writer and widening my scope.

Marko:

Being called the Finnish Stephen King is something I’ve learned to take without blinking an eye, but I think anyone who knows anything about horror will understand that that’s just a way to define a writer to people who are not familiar with the genre.

On the other hand, in Germany my novels are in the category of psychological thrillers so there the horror angle is missing altogether. I don’t really mind any of that because both approaches do say something about my books to possible readers.

When people read my stories, some of the genre expectations will probably be frustrated but also, I hope, exceeded. I always end up writing the same kind of stuff, no matter what. It will always be a mix of psychological realism and the macabre. To me that’s horror fiction, but others might think it’s something else. Labels don’t really matter as long as they fool people into picking up my book.

Partly translated by Suvi Kauppila. Photos by Tammi / Mikko Lehtimäki (Marko Hautala), and Teos / Heini Lehväslaiho (Emmi Itäramta)