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OLD TRADITIONS AND NEW EXPERIMENTS

THE YEAR IN FINLAND

MAARIT LESKELÄ-KÄRKI

In 2015, the nonfiction bestseller in Finland was the autobiography of the football player Jari Litmanen entitled *Litmanen 10*, and third on the list was the biography of ice hockey player Jarkko Ruutu. In September 2016, the bestseller was journalist Maarit Tyrkkö's autobiographical memoir *Presidentti ja toimittaja*, a book about her close relationship with President Kekkonen during the 1970s and early 80s. The first volume of this memoir, *Tyttö ja nauhuri*, was published two years earlier. In September 2016, three books in the field of life writing were among the country's six bestsellers.

Biography seems to be a genre that consistently interests readers, and these texts are often the most discussed books within Finnish literary discourse. The genres of life writing are, however, varied: for example, the autobiography on Litmanen, and the books by Tyrkkö represent very different genres and literary audiences. Litmanen is named as the author of his autobiography, but it came into being as a result of a documentary project as is told in an article by Jouni Kemppainen. Litmanen told his life story on tape, after which a group of assistants (who remain unnamed) transcribed the recordings into a coherent story, in a mutually agreed order. Maarit Tyrkkö's book is based on hundreds of tapes she made with the president, as well as other research and memoir materials from the 1970s and 80s. Despite their differences, these books do reveal the everlasting love that the Finnish reading audience has for the field of life writing: not a year goes by without books about athletes (particularly football and ice hockey players) or statesmen, particularly former presidents.

In this essay, I shall give a fairly short and focused overview on what has been written in Finland in the area of life writing. I mostly concentrate on books written by Finnish authors, but I also make some connections with the other Nordic countries. I have gone through the catalogues of the biggest and

most important publishing houses in Finland, some reviews, particularly in the open websites of *Agricola*, and another literary forum, *Kiiltomato*, which publishes reviews on fiction and nonfiction literature. My review covers the publications roughly from spring 2015 through autumn 2016. It is by no means comprehensive, but attempts to provide an overview of the apparent trends in Finland. I am interested in the gender of life writing, particularly when investigating who writes their memoirs and about whom they write. I am also interested in the genres of life writing and whether these books reveal something new about life writing genres in Finland or whether they are merely repeating the established conventions of biography and memoir.

Finland is a small country and language area, and as it is a bilingual country; books are published both in Finnish and in Swedish. For the Swedish-speaking Finns, and those who regard the Nordic connection as important, many discussions and publications from Sweden are important as well. Since we are discussing life writing in the context of the Nordic countries, we cannot overlook the huge impact of the Norwegian autofictional book series by Karl-Ove Knausgård, titled *Min Kamp 1–6*, which was translated into Finnish as *Taisteluni*. Part six came out in Finnish in summer 2016, and during the past year, Knausgård has been on the lips of almost every literary enthusiast. So far, his book series has already changed the way we think about autobiographical writing and the concepts of authenticity, biofiction, and remembrance. As Finnish writer and psychiatrist Claes Andersson recently stated in an essay for *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper, Knausgård's book "represents self-confession in a way that extends all the boundaries of autobiography as it turns into an infinite manifest of the power of the Word in an almost biblical sense." He compares Knausgård to writers such as Proust, Musil, or Sebald.

BIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS OF AUTHORS

Memoirs and autobiographies, as well as biographies of authors, are important and enduring genres in the field of Finnish life writing. In 2015 and 2016, several of these texts were published. One of the most traditional, in terms of author biography, was Helena Ruuska's biography of Eeva Joenpelto, a prolific author whose works were read widely from the 1960s until the 1990s. Despite how well her texts depicted the history of the Finnish countryside and, particularly, the history of women, there had not been a biography on her before this publication.

A couple of writers who published their own memoirs or autobiographies are worth mentioning here. Hannu Mäkelä, who has worked both as an editor in the Finnish publishing house Otava and, after that, as an independent writer for two decades, has written his multipart memoir titled *Muistan*. After

writing about his childhood and youth, he published in 2015 *Muistan: Otavan aika*, which depicts his years as a publishing editor behind the scenes of Otava from the 1960s until the 1980s. The last part, *Muistan: Vapaus*, published in 2016, reflects on the years after Otava and his work as a freelance writer.

It is necessary to say a few words about a book that was published at the end of 2014, since Anita Konkka's literary memoirs, or an autobiography of a woman writer, truly add something new to the genre. *Unennäkijän muistelmat* is an immensely rich and enjoyable publication that is conscious of its literary tradition. Konkka reflects on her difficulties as a young girl and a woman, tackles her low self-esteem in an almost ironic way, and sharply depicts the gendered literary scenes and work of a female author in the Finland of the 1950s up until the early 2000s. Literary critic and autobiography scholar Päivi Kosonen has pointed out how Anita Konkka can be viewed as "the Simone de Beauvoir of Finland in one volume."

An important Finnish-Swedish author and scholar in the field of life writing from the 1970s onward has been Merete Mazzarella. She has worked as a professor of literary studies, but has also published autobiographical novels, essay collections, and memoirs. She has explored the genre, taught autobiographical writing, and made an important contribution to the field, also from a scholarly point of view. In 2016, she published a memoir, *Aurinkokissan vuosi* that describes one year of her life now that she is retired and living a new kind of life with her new partner. In this book, she writes about love in old age and the challenges of leaving a husband after a long marriage. She mixes her own very intimate thoughts and feelings with a vast literary tradition and cultural and historical context.

FOLLOWING THE TRADITION OF THE GREAT MEN

When discussing the category of "great men" in the context of Finland, two rise above all others: President Urho Kekkonen, who was the eighth and longest-serving president in Finland from 1956 until 1981, and Baron Carl Gustav Emil Mannerheim, who was commander-in-chief of Finland's defense forces during World War II, the Marshal of Finland, and the sixth president of Finland from 1944 until 1946.

Maarit Tyrkkö's aforementioned memoirs are highly interesting as they offer another kind of narrative of a great man, both in the form of an autobiographical memoir and a biographical account that lends new perspective to President Urho Kekkonen's later years. Tyrkkö's two books on Kekkonen have been of tremendous impact, and I think they will, in the future, be analyzed with regard to how they changed views on Kekkonen, on power, and

on the Finnish way of carrying out politics in the 1970s and early 80s. They are highly interesting from the point of view of life writing studies, since their source material and narrative strategies represent something new in the Finnish tradition.

Tyrkkö's books reveal a previously unknown close relationship, a love story between an elderly statesman and a very young journalist who penetrated the intimate circle surrounding Kekkonen. Tyrkkö's books also, however, depict Kekkonen's later years, and the dramatic year of 1981 when the old and already quite ill president was forced to resign. Tyrkkö and Kekkonen had agreed already in the early seventies that Tyrkkö would write about Kekkonen's life, and he wanted her to write about him as a private person, about his free time and personality. The source material in the book is diverse: the intimate correspondence between the two, notes, journal articles, speeches, Tyrkkö's diaries, and interviews. As cultural historian Helena Pilke points out in her critiques, the most interesting source materials are Tyrkkö's phone diaries ("Uusia"). At a time when landlines were the most important way to get information and keep in touch, Tyrkkö, like many other journalists of her time, kept a diary during phone conversations. She also logged hundreds of hours of interviews with different people close to Kekkonen. When the first part of the memoirs was published in August 2014, Unto Hämäläinen, a political journalist for *Helsingin Sanomat*, pointed out that, although the book is not about sensational details or scandals, the whole book is a sensation—there had never been another book of this kind published in Finnish.

The life of Mannerheim also gained new interpretations. The most interesting one, and possibly one that would change our views of this "great man," is the biography describing the childhood and youth of Mannerheim, as written by historian Teemu Keskisarja. Keskisarja is focused on nonfiction writing and popularizing, in particular, the history of war and violence, as well as biographies. In the book *Hulttio*, Keskisarja depicts Mannerheim as a young rebel who had a tragic childhood and did not fit in the roles that were meant for him. He revolted and behaved badly, particularly in the military academy. Keskisarja provides a rebellious interpretation of one of our most important national heroes.

The tradition of great men seems to continue in many ways in the memoirs, diaries, and biofiction published by men with high public profiles. There are, however, also interesting deviations, especially concerning the life writing of older men. Among this genre, we might include the memoirs of Finnish filmmaker, writer, intellectual, and politician Jörn Donner, who has been a controversial and very public figure from the early 1960s onward. He seems to want to change the genre of memoir, as his first memoir, *Mammutti*, describes

his experiences in the third person. The second volume, *Pikku mammutti*, is told in first person. He deconstructs masculinity by reflecting on how vulnerable he was during his experience with lung cancer, including the ongoing treatments, pain, coughing, sleeplessness, and depression he endured. In the foreword, he mentions that his diaries are only half-authentic, and that he has, for the most part, avoided talking about his private life.

Other interesting books depicting a man of old age are the autofictional novels *Otto* (2011) and *Hiljaiseloa Meilahdessa* (2016) by Claes Andersson. The latter continues the rather autobiographical narrative of an elderly man, Otto, reflecting on his life, his loved ones, his bodily experiences and sexuality, as well as the society and politics surrounding him.

Another quite self-conscious and genre-conscious life writer is the retired professor of Scandinavian history Matti Klinge. He has represented the elegant, civilized, international, and well-mannered Finnish-Swedish gentleman in the Finnish public eye for many decades. In the early 2000s, he began to publish his diaries, which have already grown into a sixteen-part series, and new volumes are forthcoming. During the past years, he has also published his memoirs, with the last volume depicting the 1970s. Klinge seems to represent a somewhat different kind of masculinity than Donner and Andersson, who are, perhaps, more willing to show their vulnerability as well.

The nature book *Karhu: Voimaeläin*, by documentarist and photographer Kimmo Ohtonen, is an interesting and experimental autobiographical book written from the perspective of a boy and a man. It has also been shortlisted for the Tietokirjallisuuden Finlandia prize for nonfiction in 2016. At first glance, it seems to fall under the category of beautiful photography books on Finnish nature and wild animals. However, the narrative of the book is deeply autobiographical, as Ohtonen depicts not only his encounters with bears, but also his traumatic experiences as a boy living with a violent father and his ongoing, difficult relationship with his parents. The book grows into an autobiography that can be seen as being parallel to both Knausgårdian autobiography and to the concept behind the international bestseller *H Is for Hawk* by Helen McDonald, in which the autobiographical narrative and trauma of the author overlaps with the story of hawks and their history, thereby portraying McDonald's intimate relationship with nature.

HISTORY IN LIFE WRITING

Biographies and works of life writing are often very important in terms of opening up new perspectives on historical eras, depicting something that has been hidden, unspoken, or kept in the periphery. One very important and much-discussed book in this genre has been the biographical work of the

Finnish journalist Katarina Baer, *He olivat natsseja*. She tells the story of her German-born grandparents, who were active in the Nazi party. Her book grows into a microhistorical study of individuals, families, and political history during the decades between the wars in Europe. One level of the book is constructed around the story of Katarina Baer, who travels across the Baltic countries and Germany rediscovering the history of her grandparents and reflecting on the ever-engaging question of how ordinary, middle-class German families could be so fascinated with Nazism and not realize what was happening until it was too late.

Another important contribution to this genre of life writing, in terms of changing our perspective on historical circumstances, has been the documentary film and biographical book by Ville Suhonen entitled *Ompelijatar* (2015 and 2016). Suhonen received the State Award for Public Information for his documentary in September 2016. *Ompelijatar* tells the story of Martta Koskinen, a working-class woman and political activist who was deeply involved with communist activities in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and, in the end, was convicted of treason and executed in September 1948. The story of Martta Koskinen is told for the first time to a greater audience and, through her story, Suhonen depicts the long history of the first twenty-five years of independent Finland from the point of view of communists in a deeply affective way.

GENDERED LIFE WRITING

Although gender is by no means the only difference that matters in the life writing publishing industry, it still determines to a large extent whose stories are told. Women politicians were not present in many publications during the past year. There are contemporary Finnish politicians who have published their diaries and memoirs, but the only woman politician who is visible in biographical literature is Social Democrat Miina Sillanpää, who became the first Finnish woman minister in 1926–1927. Historian Aura Korppi-Tommola published a new biography depicting the political legacy of Sillanpää in modern-day Finland in September 2016, when the country is preparing to celebrate its hundredth year of independence.

Biographical writing in Finland is still predominantly the domain of men, so it is worth investigating which women have broken into this field. There is a lot of work to be done, and this is evident from the biographical online project *Naisten ääni*, which aims at compiling an online database containing hundreds of life stories of Finnish women who are both well known and not. This kind of gendered biographical compilation has never before been done in Finland, even though it has in many other Nordic countries.¹ *Naisten ääni*

was an initiative presented by women's organizations to celebrate women's influence in Finnish society during the past hundred years. It also incorporates a collaboration with academic scholars and teaching.

An important biographical compilation called *Naisten aika* was published by women historians Marja Engman and Riitta Mäkinen in 2015, but the text has not drawn much attention. This is despite the fact that it depicts the histories of women who had active professional lives in academia and other organizations and also highlights the first female students and university students at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It depicts their life stories from the perspective of networks and interaction between women.

* * *

Finland is, at the moment, on the brink of celebrating one hundred years of independence in 2017. Next year will show whose lives will be written into biographies and who will reveal their memories, diaries, and autobiographies. It seems that the field of life writing is alive and well in Finland, and my personal hope is that it will expand its limits and reveal new ways of depicting the past, present, and future of Finland.

NOTE

1. Finland has a large database of *National Biography*, in which women make up approximately a third of the subjects (see Biografiakeskus). In Denmark a national biography on women was put together in the 1990s (see Dansk Kvindebiografisk Leksikon). In Sweden there is also an ongoing state-funded project that Gothenburgh University is coordinating, titled Swedish Women On-line (SWO), from the Middle Ages to the Present: A Biographical Dictionary of Swedish Women.

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