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Life Writing Genres on the Move

The Year in Finland

Maarit Leskelä-Kärki

In the years since I began writing these reviews, Finnish life writing has flourished, and it is now moving into a range of hybrid genres. Biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, correspondences, biofiction, and autofiction are being published by all the major publishing houses, and in growing numbers.

In autumn 2019 three journalists asked me why biographies are so popular at the moment. Although the development has been quite visible for many years, there is something new in the air now. Finland seems to follow international trends in life writing that gained momentum during the 2010s following, for example, the success and visibility of Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgaard's autobiographical book series *My Struggle*. Biographies have always had a strong hold in Finnish literary fields, but now the traditional genre of historical biography is on the move as various genres overlap in current biographical writing. One important factor for the growing number of lifewriting publications is certainly the impact of social media and the various forms of digital life writing and selfie-culture that make it possible to present one's life to others in a constant flow. Perhaps this also extends the interest in reading autobiographical literature and biographies.

Silent Sportsmen and Masculine Sexuality

From August 2018 to December 2018 the best-selling nonfiction book in Finland was the biography of a Finnish Formula 1 driver, Kimi Räikkönen, probably the most internationally recognized Finnish person. It became a huge success, since the "silent Kimi Räikkönen" had opened his mouth and told about his life to one of the most popular and beloved Finnish novelists, Kari Hotakainen. *Tuntematon Kimi Räikkönen* has been one of the biggest literary successes in Finland over the past few years; the rights of the book have been sold to twelve countries and the rights for the English version were sold to Simon & Schuster for a record price. It has been compared to the international success of the autobiography of the Swedish footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Anderson).

The biography of Kimi Räikkönen falls into the genre of “as-told-to” celebrity biographies, which very often deal with successful and popular men, including high-profile athletes. Yet this biography has some unusual characteristics, the most important being the author of the book, Kari Hotakainen. Hotakainen has been one of the most read and successful male novelists of the past twenty years in Finland, and many of his books have been made into films. A melancholy, laconic, and satirical tone is characteristic of his writing style; in this respect, Hotakainen shares the aesthetic sensibility of the Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki. This style is especially effective in conveying Räikkönen’s personality, as the driver is famously reluctant to speak in public, in part because of his poor command of English, and often gives one-word responses to questions from journalists.

Spurred by the success of Räikkönen’s biography, publishing houses in Finland have started asking famous novelists to write biographies of other famous people. Several of them are still in development, but another book of this kind appeared in September 2019. It was written by the prominent novelist and public figure Jari Tervo, and the subject of the biography is one of Finland’s most beloved actors, the comedian and singer Vesa-Matti Loiri, born in 1945. The book called *Loiri* was one of the most discussed books in autumn 2019, since both the writer and the subject were such well-known people. Loiri is seen as a kind of national treasure, particularly in the field of Finnish comedy of the 1970s and 1980s; as a singer, he is the fifth best-selling male solo artist in Finland. Since the 1960s, the Finnish public has avidly followed Loiri’s career, his alcoholism, illnesses, and the other ups and downs of his life. His several marriages and relationships have also kept him in the headlines. A biography of Loiri was certainly something that people had been waiting for, particularly since it was advertised as telling “the truth” about all parts of his life. In a publicity interview, Loiri confirmed that he could reveal so much only to a writer like Tervo. Long articles about the writing process appeared in the media and celebrated the mutual, affectionate friendship these men developed during the project.

It is noteworthy that for Finnish readers of biography, sexuality still seems to be a somewhat sensational topic. This was particularly visible in the case of *Loiri*, since it was sexuality that aroused the liveliest discussions around the biography. Media published fragments of the book’s open and explicit sex scenes, in which Loiri recalls in detail sexual acts with his partners. For a week, the headlines of evening newspapers were filled with Loiri’s sexual exploits, and discussions of whether it was appropriate to write about these, in particular if it was ethical toward his former partners, continued for weeks. It seemed that the most open, daring, and honest truth of his life was hidden in the events that were connected to sexuality, not with other events, emotions, and relations in his life. The book was on top of reading lists and best-seller lists for several weeks.

Around the same time another book was published by a male artist, singer, and writer, and it aroused similar headlines to Loiri regarding sexuality. The autobiographical work of Finnish musician Kauko Röyhkä (whose real name is

Jukka-Pekka Välimaa) depicts his childhood and youth in Northern Finland as a son of a single mother, his slowly growing yearning to become an artist, a guitar player, and singer, and his aspirations to stardom. The book's title, *Marjatan poika*—the son of Marjatta—reveals the core of the book, Röyhkä's relationship with his mother, and his pain and shame of being a boy without a father. However, the media did not cover this aspect of the book in their headlines, but rather the parts of the book that dealt with the young boy's sexuality.

There are reasons for this, of course. Röyhkä has been known as a provocative pop/rock-artist in the Finnish popular music scene since the early 1980s. Open sexuality has been part of his image, his novels, and song lyrics, and he is notorious for his relationships with women. However, in the memoir, sexuality is only one part of the life of a boy, and the book depicts in a very realistic way teenage crushes and the mysteries of sexuality. This did not stop journalists and critics from writing mostly about Röyhkä's depiction of women, reducing the memoir to only an old man's yearning for his youth and virility. The literary merits of the book have been undervalued.

The Hybridity of Autobiographical Writing

One notable feature in life writing genres overall, both in Finland as well as internationally, is the use of various hybrid forms, where the autobiographical "I" moves in different directions—toward fiction, memoir, and epistolary or diary-like forms. It seems that the Finnish literary scene has become more open and courageous in taking inspiration from various directions. In 2019 several books appeared that move between various auto/biographical genres and open new spaces to write about the self and the other, both in fiction and documentary modes.

Claes Andersson (1937–2019), psychiatrist, writer, poet, former MP of the Leftist party, and jazz pianist, published the last part of this autobiographical trilogy on the life of "Otto" in 2019 under the name *Busholmen nästa*. Andersson passed away at the end of July, and his new book came out just weeks after. In these books (the previous ones are titled *Ottos liv* and *Stilla dagar i Mejlans*), Andersson depicts the life of his alter ego, old man called Otto, who plays jazz, is a former MP, a writer, and who observes his surroundings, political life, and culture. He writes about his loves, friendships, and fatherhood, and comments on the changes he notices around him. Andersson can be regarded as one of the most important male authors in life writing, who has also openly written about ageing and illness. In his literary work, as well as in his public statements, he has spoken about memory, remembrance, and the meaning of writing in processing identity and remembrance.

Märta Tikkanen (born in 1935) belongs to the same generation as Claes Andersson. They are also both from the Swedish speaking minority of writers in Finland and have been pioneers in writing in hybrid autobiographical genres since the 1970s. In Spring 2019 Tikkanen published her *brevbiografi* (epistolary biography) *Måste försöka skri*, which consists of her letters to two of her longtime female

friends from Sweden, Åsa Moberg and Birgitta Stenberg.

Tikkanen has been at the forefront of feminist autobiographical writing since her debut *Århundradets kärlekssaga* in 1978, which documented her difficult marriage to one of the foremost writers and journalists of that time, Henrik Tikkanen. That book consists of prose poems that very openly revealed the hardships of being the wife of a genius and an alcoholic, and of competing for space for creativity in a home where both parents wanted to write. The new book, *Måste försöka skri*, deals with many of the same topics—a woman writer's position in literary life, and family life, motherhood, creativity, and feminism.

One of Tikkanen's important contemporaries in the Finnish-speaking literary field is ninety-one-year-old Eeva Kilpi, who in 2019 published two collections of her diaries covering the last twenty years. These books, *Sininen muistikirja* and *Punainen muistikirja*, are a logical continuation for her authorial style, which particularly in the 1970s turned more towards an autobiographical style.

Kilpi's works in the 1970s, like *Naisen päiväkirja* in 1978, were as pioneering as Tikkanen's *Århundradets kärlekssaga* from the same year. During the past year I have been particularly interested in this feminist pioneering tradition, since I have been writing an article on Kilpi's *Naisen päiväkirja* for an anthology dealing with diaries and historical research. From the perspective of the history of Finnish autobiographical feminist writing it is notable that both Kilpi and Tikkanen are still active in publishing. Their present-day writings deal with many of the issues that were already important in the 1970s and remain so today: women's friendships, ageing, love, sexuality, creativity, nature, and ecology. The contemporary growing interest in autobiographical writing has perhaps had an influence on how publishing houses treat older generations of writers. It seems that the variety of age groups publishing in this genre is quite varied.

The epistolary format is also used in an autobiographical book by performance artist Meiju Niskala, who in 2019 published a book about her mother and the years she suffered from Alzheimer's disease. *Sata kirjettä kuolleelle äidilleni* is a personal and intimate journey into the life of a mother and daughter as the mother starts to lose her memory. Niskala took care of her mother for many years and spent the last two years of her mother's life very close to her. The book also takes a critical perspective on our attitudes about illness, fragility, and death, and it speaks to our ability to encounter the death of our loved ones with honesty.

Biofiction as Literary Art: The Story of Sylvi Kekkonen

One of the most talked-about books among the great variety of life writing published in Finland this year has been a work of biofiction by Johanna Venho. Venho is a poet who has also written children's literature and a few novels, but she has not been well-known to the larger reading audience before this year. Venho's biofictional book about Sylvi Kekkonen, *Ensimmäinen nainen*, was nominated for the Finlandia Prize for the best novel in 2019, and it won the public vote for the prize.

Sylvi Kekkonen (1900–1974) was the wife of Urho Kaleva Kekkonen (1900–1986), the longest-serving president (1956–1982) in the history of independent Finland, leading the country in the decades after the Second World War, when Finland had to maintain stable relations with its powerful neighbor the Soviet Union. Kekkonen's style was authoritarian, yet he was respected and loved. His public image projected masculine, athletic power, as he was a sportsman, a skier, and a womanizer. Particularly after his presidential years, he became notorious for his long-term extramarital relationships. As a public figure, his wife Sylvi was just the opposite: a petite woman dressed in the controlled, ladylike fashion of her times. She was also a writer and used her public position to organize literary events and to keep in contact with other Finnish writers. As she suffered from a rheumatic disorder and died more than ten years before her husband, she has been remembered as the old, disabled woman beside the mighty giant Urho Kekkonen.

In her book *Ensimmäinen nainen*, Johanna Venho opens up an intimate new perspective on Sylvi Kekkonen, relying on her diaries and letters, as well as her literary production. Venho does not try to cover Sylvi's whole life, but rather takes an imaginative dive into her thoughts and emotions, concentrating on a few days in 1966 when Sylvi is in her late sixties, has suddenly lost her close literary friend, the writer Marja-Liisa Vartio, and struggles in her public role as the wife of the president. Sylvi is portrayed as an older woman who seeks her own voice in the midst of her various obligations. She is a devoted mother to her two already adult boys, and she plans yet another book that would fulfill her ambitions as a writer. The tone of *Ensimmäinen nainen* is melancholic, as Sylvi mourns the fascinating yet contradictory Marja-Liisa, but it also captures moments of joy and stability in life. Sylvi drives her own small car in order to stay in the family's modest summer cottage in the countryside, away from the official presidential house of Tamminiemi, where Kekkonen's presence is so dominant.

Venho complicates her narrative of Sylvi's life by introducing the voice of sculptor Essi Renvall, who tries to make a portrait of Sylvi during the course of the book. The chapters with Sylvi's voice are interrupted by chapters with Essi's characteristic voice, cursing the difficulties of sculpting somebody as vague and distant as Sylvi. In real life, Renvall never finished this sculpture, but she completed portraits of other Finnish writers and artists, and she was one of the leading women artists of her time. However, the two women were friends, and Renvall's charcoal drawing of Sylvi Kekkonen, sketched in the 1940s, is reproduced on the cover of Venho's book.

With Essi Renvall's voice, very much based on Renvall's own memoir *Nyrkit savessa*, Venho succeeds in reflecting the difficulties of doing biographical work, of making a portrait of somebody who is a living historical person. By doing so, she points out the problems of understanding people of the past and the relational side of doing biography; she shows her readers that her own portrait of Sylvi is only one possible interpretation of her life, written from Venho's particular perspective. In this biofictional portrait, Sylvi becomes a close companion whose moods and emotions become understandable, and her official, public image develops layers.

Although her life as the first lady of Finland in the decades after the war is a unique one, Venho's biofictional depiction makes it easy to relate to her. *Ensimmäinen nainen* does not offer an "official portrait," but rather the story of a living, breathing woman.

The popularity of Venho's book may suggest that biofiction is the most inspiring way of making past lives understandable to our times. But what are the ethical pitfalls of writing fiction on past lives, and what are the limits of truthfulness within this genre? Every writer and every book must answer these questions for themselves, but when biographical material and fictional writing are combined as deftly and ethically as they are in *Ensimmäinen nainen*, it seems that biofiction is a valid way of presenting the lives of historical figures. It requires skill not only from the writer but also from the reader, who must be able to understand the limits of fiction, as well as the limits of historical documents and truth seeking.

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