

SIDESTREAM OF

A subjective look on Finnish sf/f

Pasi Karppanen

If you ask whether sf/f is written in Finland, the answer is clear. Of course it is. But scratch the topic a little, and you'll encounter considerable problems of definition. This article aims to give a short and openly subjective review of the current Finnish sf/f writing and the trends among the writers. The prior edition of this article was published in Cosmos Pen's English Special in 2006.

Domestic science fiction and fantasy as a genre in Finland is still searching for itself. Now perhaps more than ever. Around 20 - 30 sf/f books authored by Finns are published annually in the Finnish sf/f market. The majority of that number, however, consist of children's and juvenile literature.

At the worst only a few so called "real", serious domestically produced sf/f books for adults are published each year. Compared with the overall market for Finnish fiction, sf/f is just a fraction. In addition, translated sf/f from other countries is more likely to be published than that authored by Finns.

Children's and juvenile literature and on the other hand, science fiction and fantasy seem to be closely related. Seems what is "forbidden" in the Finnish mainstream prose is allowed in children's books. If sf/f is rare in Finnish adult prose, in children's literature the sf/f elements are almost the norm.

During the first decade of the 21st century, a group of writers has emerged in Finland who have been inspired by the current global fantasy boom and decided to exploit that marketing niche by mass producing their own, mostly juvenile fantasy

books. Unfortunately, they are not a good advertisement for fantasy literature.

During the last few years there has been a light at the end of the tunnel, however. Increasingly, domestic sf/f writers manage to get their work published. Many writers, however, seem to actively avoid the stigma of being associated with science fiction and fantasy.

Mainstream Finnish writers and sf/f

Until recently, the main problem with sf/f commercially published in Finland has been that the most part of it is produced by mainstream writers. They use it just to add spice to their books, without knowing its conventions or history. The realist tradition has always been very strong in Finland, and therefore this trick has become quite popular.

Mostly these experiments have been rather primitive, according to the criteria of critics versed in science fiction and fantasy. Mainstream critics have, however, been bowled over with admiration. Because they do not understand how clichéd these

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efforts have been, they see them as daring avant-garde literary experiments.

That sort of attitude was likely behind well-known sf/f short story writer **Johanna Sinisalo** winning the Finlandia Award for her first novel, ***Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi*** (***Not Before Sundown***) (2000). This was unprecedented for Finnish sf/f, just considering its publicity value. The Finlandia is the foremost Finnish literary award, and the situation might well be compared to **Ursula K. Le Guin** unexpectedly winning the Nobel Prize for Literature!

Sinisalo herself has even said that she doesn't consider her book to be science fiction at all. She merely tried to write a mainstream work with speculative elements in the background. This is true, and considered as sf/f, the speculative element in Sinisalo's novel is thin. But for the mainstream public, the idea of trolls as a species of big game was enough to bring it into the spotlight. Because of the award and Sinisalo herself, Finnish sf/f received a huge amount of positive publicity that year.

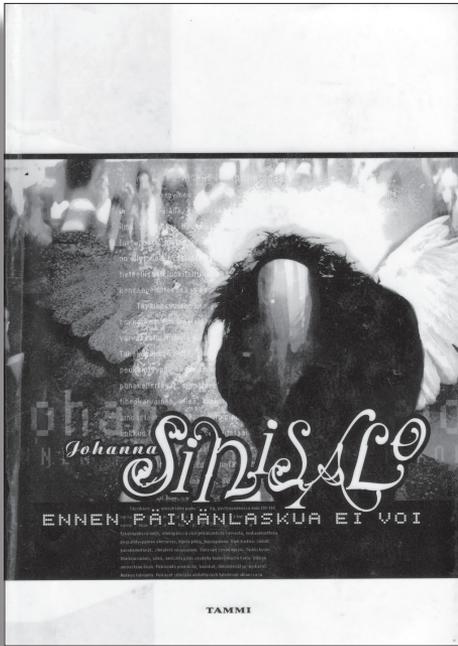
It seems Sinisalo touched on something essential with her book, becoming a real success story for the

Finnish sf/f community, not only inside the country but also internationally.

There are other works published around the same time that can be seen as examples of the use of sf/f effects outside of the genre and the ignorance of the mainstream public, such as the books ***Herääminen*** (***The Awakening***) and ***Sarasvatin hiekkaa*** (***Sands of Sarasvati***) by **Risto Isomäki**. Both are accounts of eco-catastrophes. *The Awakening* is a description of a run-away hothouse effect, while *Sands of Sarasvati* is about mega-tsunamis.

Isomäki himself is no novice in science fiction. Before *The Awakening* he had published a collection of short stories and two novels, all of them showing clear promise. Most of Isomäki's published works, however, are non-fiction and connected to his background as an activist in the environmental movement.

The same aspect is discernible in both *The Awakening* and *Sands of Sarasvati*. *The Awakening* was accused of being a cardboard-like, popularised description of a possible ecocatastrophe. Yet even those sf elements were enough to elevate it to the noti-



ce of the Finnish media, and *Sands of Sarasvati* was short-listed for the Finlandia award.

To some authors, their work being classed with science fiction even seems to be a mark of dishonour. **Ilkka Remes**, the Finnish counterpart to **Tom Clancy** and success story of the late 1990s, clearly got scared about the sf/f reputation of his first book, ***Pääkallokehrääjä*** (*Death's-head hawk moth*).

The novel is a political thriller taking place in an alternative Finland which has become part of the Soviet Union because of different events in the Second World War. Remes himself denied that his book could be anything even remotely approaching sf/f, and since then he has kept his distance from the genre.

A more literary mainstream author averse to being associated with sf/f is **Jyrki Vainonen**, who has also been noted in Finnish fandom for his short story collections and novels. Vainonen calls himself a surrealist, and is uncomfortable that his books are classified as "fantasy". His conception of fantastic literature seems to be limited to *Narnia* or *Lord of the Rings*, though it is of course a much wider field.

It seems that science fiction and fantasy have definite commercial potential that has not yet been properly exploited, at least not by Finnish writers. In fact the most interesting domestic sf/f works produced in Finland today are not commercially published novels, but short-form fiction pieces in genre magazines and fanzines.

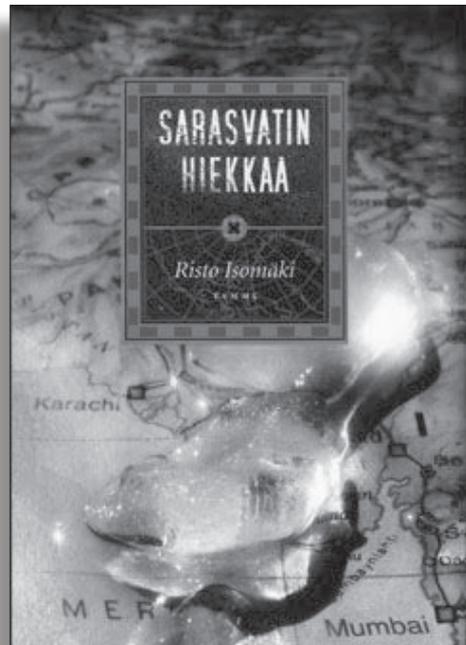
Finnish sf/f magazines

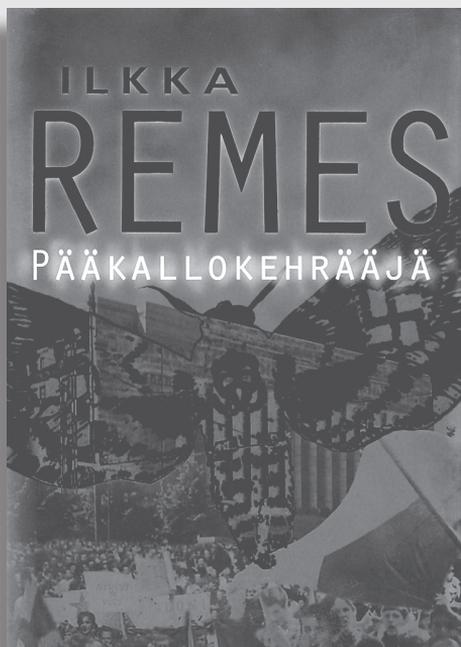
Members of Finnish fandom are accustomed to the large number of sf/f zines in Finland which offer many chances to get published. For a mainstream writer, however, the task of crossing the gaping distance between pursuing writing as an avocation and a vocation is daunting.

However, there are no commercial sf/f magazines in Finnish. There have naturally been several attempts during the last couple of decades to start a such a venture, but they have always failed. Instead, there are around ten regularly published quality fanzines. Truth to tell, fanzine is a somewhat misleading word to use, for the best of them are as polished as prozines (although nobody gets paid) and hold their own against commercial titles.

The most successful, or at least the most widespread Finnish sf/f magazine, is ***Portti*** (*Gateway*), published by the **Tampere Science Fiction Society**. In twenty years it has grown to over a hundred pages and is printed on glossy paper. The magazine is probably the most direct "gateway" to domestic sf/f those unfamiliar with the genre. One could say *Portti* comes closest to filling the market niche of a commercial sf magazine.

Portti acquires the major part of its material from the short story contest its editorial board organizes yearly. Along with the magazine, the contest, has





developed in twenty years. Nowadays its main prize is 2000 euros. Over two hundred short stories are sent to the contest each year and it is by now undoubtedly the most important literary contest in the Finnish sf/f field.

Although *Portti's* quality is undeniable, it also dominates the domestic writing field to such an extent that many fans and writers know of *Portti*, but not the other sf/f fanzines.

What may seem surprising from a foreign viewpoint is that in *Portti's* case, the writers (as noted above) get no other pay for their stories than the prizes given out in the contest (for honorable mentions that is only some tens of euros).

Nova is a more recent short story contest which has been held annually since the year 2000 and is a joint project of the **Finnish Science Fiction Writers' Association** and the **Turku Science Fiction Society**. The prize purses are nowhere near the level of *Portti's*, but in spite of that, the contest has in a few years grown to attract an equal number of submissions.

The goal of the *Nova* contest is to encourage new writers, and above all, to offer writers the chance for feedback they cannot receive in the *Portti* contest due to that magazine's small number of staff. Everybody who sends a story receives feedback from the organizers. The latest addition to *Nova* is a feedback seminar for the finalists which was first held in 2010.

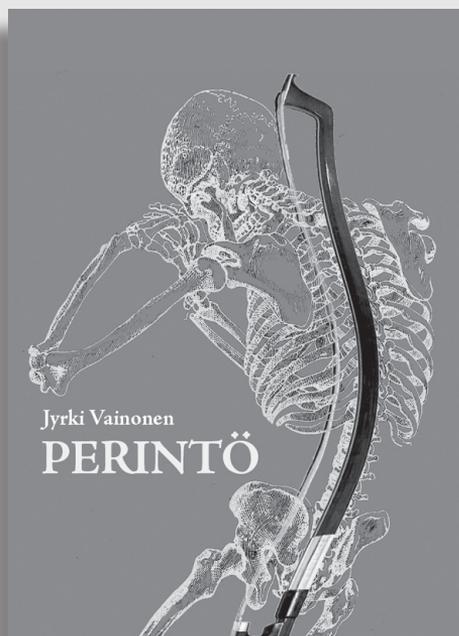
The spectrum of Finnish sf/f short story competitions has broadened significantly during the last half a decade in other respects as well. There have been several one-shot competitions with various themes, such as erotica, space sf, alternate history, and many others. Also *Nova* has gotten a younger sibling of sorts, *Noviisi (Novice)* a short story writing competition aimed at 13-17 year old sf/f authors of the future.

Thematic and stylistic trends in Finnish sf/f

Short-form sf/f has been popular in Finland for several decades now, and acquired its own special character.

One very typical feature of Finnish sf/f is apparent in its relation to the distinction between science fiction and fantasy. Specifically, most current Finnish sf/f is neither science fiction nor fantasy, at least not in the most traditional meaning. Naturally there are cases where one can definitely place the story on one or the other side of the fence, but most texts are better placed in some interstitial region between the 'pure' genres.

This broadmindedness does not always extend beyond members of fandom, though. Young readers of fantasy, it seems, are just as categorical in their opinions as elsewhere in the world. For many of them, the word fantasy equates with post-tolkien quest novels.

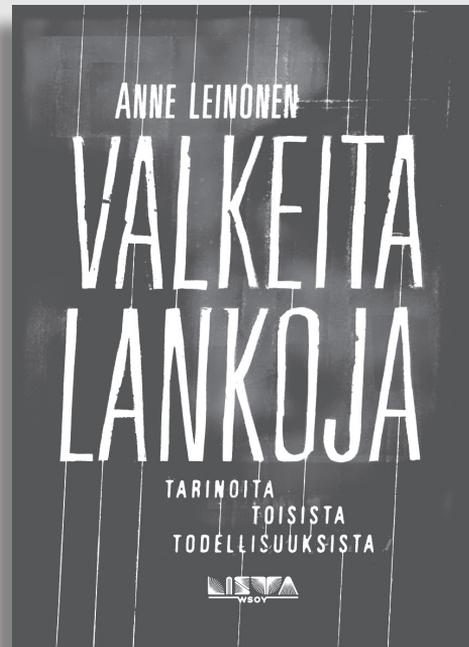


Within fandom, however, the spectrum is much wider and encourages experimentation with genre. There's one especially interesting type of story that has developed in the field of Finnish sf/f. These stories are mostly placed in Finnish everyday reality, where mysterious events and elements start to appear. They are not science fiction, neither are they fantasy or horror.

This type of fiction has very much been in evidence in the *Portti* contest, and it would be interesting to know to what extent that is due to the jury's conscious or unconscious guidance through rewarding a certain type of stories, and how much writing such "fantastic" stories of everyday reality simply fits the present state of the Finnish national character. That said, this interstitial fiction's shares the minor key and melancholy tone that are generally characteristic for Finnish sf/f.

The one feature of domestic sf/f that one certainly can blame the *Portti* contest for is that stories have become longer and longer over the years. The stories currently written in Finland and especially those which place well in the *Portti* contest are actually no longer short stories, but rather novelettes and novellas.

In fact, there are some who say that the *Portti* contest should no longer be called a short story contest at all, but rather a contest of "miniature pro-



se" or of short novels. Most of the longer stories already have a novel-like structure, and, indeed, many see them as substitutes for novels when writers are in a situation when getting sf/f manuscripts accepted by a commercial publisher seems almost impossible.

In recent years, perhaps because of changes in the jury, or critique in the fanzines, the situation has somewhat changed, and also considerably shorter stories have been among the winners. The mammoth disease seems to be receding, at least in the *Portti* contest.

During the last decade there have been several smaller trends in domestic sf/f of which most have been visible through the *Portti* contest. One interesting feature is how the stories reflect the Finnish society. For instance, when Finland experienced a harsh economic depression in the early 1990s, it was later reflected in these stories. In the beginning of the decade, Finland also experienced its own small scale "new wave".

Visions of the future

Today there are a great number of writers in Finnish sf/f who would like to have both the abilities and realistic chances for a wider breakthrough in literature. In a sense, the same development was probably expected by many already in the 1980's, during the "first generation" of the Finnish fandom.



However, broader appearance of the field did not then take place.

In a way that is understandable. *Sf/f* as genre was by that time so new and the general knowledge of the field so thin that it would have been unfair to expect a whole new literary generation from a group of few fan writers. During the last decade, however, within the bosom of fandom, a large group of writers have grown up, and they possess a completely different readiness for a literary breakthrough.

Also the work done by the domestic fandom to increase the general appreciation of the genre has created a completely different situation than two decades earlier. If these writers, however, dare not leave the safe "duck pond" of short story *sf/f*, this generation will encounter the same blind alley as the former. Reasons for why the breakthrough has not happened yet, or why it did not happen during the earlier generation, are various.

One is the lack of commercial *sf/f* magazines already mentioned. Since there are no commercial magazines and the whole field is oriented towards contests, the whole idea of *earning money* by writing is alien to the writers. Thus, the leap from a fan

writer sending one's texts year after year to the *Portti* contest, to a professional writer fighting for grants and publishing contracts remains too big.

In a way, one can well understand the writers' hesitation. As mentioned already, in practice all current writers who publish short stories in Finland are fan writers. There is no one in Finland writing *sf/f* professionally, and the writers have to do their writing somewhere betwixt their ordinary jobs, during their free time and at the cost of their family life.

Reasons can also be sought in the general publishing situation. A foreign name on a genre book cover always sells better than a Finnish one, and the majority of domestic publishing houses concentrate in practice only on translated science fiction and fantasy.

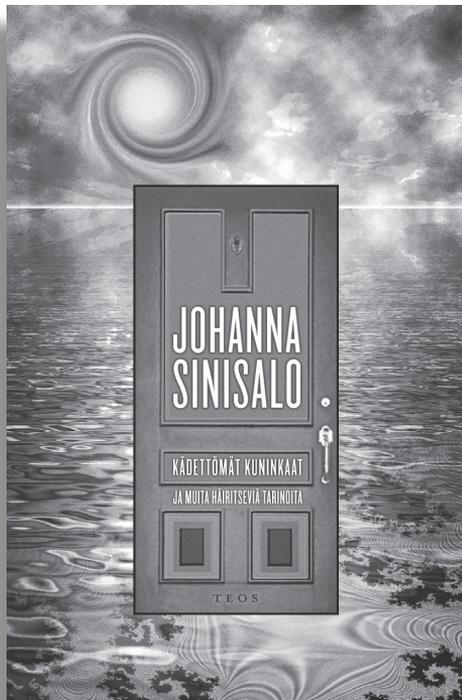
There's also the unfortunate aspect of domestic fanzines that makes it difficult for the writers to become more widely known. The fanzine readers and the wider public of *sf/f* readers are basically two different audiences.

On the other hand, there is the core of domestic fandom that follows actively both translated *sf/f* and the genre at large and also reads the domes-



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Anne Salminen and Tero Niemi receiving the Atorox award in 2005.



tic fanzines and the short stories published in them. The wider buying public, however, reads mostly translated sf/f, mainly because domestic works are not to be found on the book shop and library shelves. These readers have never heard of most of the domestic short story writers.

For this public, the domestic production of the genre is represented by juvenile mass production so it is no wonder that the domestic sf/f does not have a very good reputation among them. The division between the two publics is quite visible and thus far there is no sign of it getting broken.

There is, however, light at the end of tunnel. During the last decade several writers who started as fans have made their debut on the Finnish literary scene, either with a collection of short stories or with a novel. In a few years, more domestic science fiction and fantasy have been seen than during several earlier decades put together. The situation thus looks promising and gives reason for hope.

Battling for respect

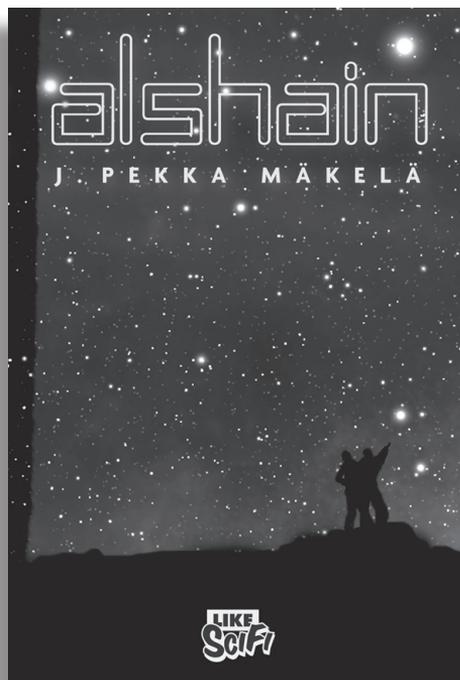
There have been those in fandom who argue that one should not even try to create a special niche for science fiction or fantasy literature, because that only ensures continued misunderstanding by mainstream readers, and instead view fiction as a

continuum where texts may have speculative elements of differing degrees. This might also allow sf/f writers to gain the same sociocultural legitimacy as their realist colleagues.

In fact, this way of thinking seems to be the strongest of current trends, at least among writers themselves. During the first decade of the 21st century, speculative fiction has gained currency as a general term for science fiction, fantasy, and horror, and some people's vocabulary it has replaced the term science fiction altogether. The webzine *Usva* (*The Mist*), founded by **Anne Leinonen**, is an explicit supporter of this term.

In the early 2000s, *Helsingin Sanomat* – the largest Finnish daily newspaper – published a rather controversial article, in which several writers, Johanna Sinisalo included, publicly disclaimed the label of science fiction writer and announced themselves to be writers of speculative fiction. Their reasons are certainly understandable. Many of these writers had fought against prejudice for years, acting as quixotic preachers for the excellence of sf/f, usually in vain.

Johanna Sinisalo herself has stated she's had enough of all that. According to her, when an average mainstream reader hears the words science fiction, ". . . one can actually see how three metre walls fall into place in the persons brain". No argument for a book's excellence can pass through those walls.



Some, however, have been puzzled and even irritated by the popularity of the term speculative fiction, grumbling about its artificiality, inexactness, and altogether limited appropriateness. What is this speculative fiction that everybody is talking about? Is the idea to bury science fiction in exchange for possible literary credibility?

There is a grain of truth there. Realistic fiction has uncommonly strong position in Finland. Why that is would be a subject for an article of its own. However, in light of this, it may indeed be that the only way for sf/f writers to gain access to the mainstream and weaken the stronghold of realism would be to “disguise” their work as mainstream literature.

On the other hand, while the writers are wooing one audience – mainstream readers, able to digest a modest number of speculative elements – they turn their back on another group, readers of science fiction and fantasy. One can see this in the way books are marketed.

Oftentimes it's quite a task to search for sf/f among mainstream books. Johanna Sinisalo's first novel was never marketed as science fiction of fantasy. Neither was her short story collection *Kädetömät kuninkaat (Handless Kings)*, or Anne Leinonen's *Valkeita lankoja (White Threads)* even though most of the stories in them had originally been published in Finnish sf/f zines.

Any references to sf/f were also missing from marketing materials for *Nimbus ja tähdet (Nimbus and the Stars)*, published in 2004. What is interesting here is that its authors, **Tero Niemi** and **Anne Salminen**, among few paid Finnish writers, have stated that they write *science fiction*, not speculative fiction. One is tempted to ask, that while we need not force mainstream literature under the label of science fiction, why can't we even call sf/f by its name? How can we hope others will respect the genre if we're ashamed to call it by its own name ourselves?

Movement after movement

During the last half a decade or so we have even seen a small scale battle of literature movements inside the sf/f scene in Finland.

In 2006 **Pasi Jääskeläinen**, a widely praised and award-winning Finnish author who began his career in Finnish sf/f magazines, and has won both the Portti contest and *Atorox* prize numerous times, rocked the boat quite a bit by founding a movement of writers who called themselves “realifantastikot” (“realism fantasists”). According their manifesto, realism fantasists didn't want to create a new genre, but to write free of any kind of limitations such as

genre boundaries.

What many people inside fandom saw problematic was the part reserved for science fiction and fantasy in that setting, that is to say, the role of light entertainment. Let science fiction be light sabers and space operas, let fantasy be endless post-tolkien-esque sagas in pseudo-medieval setting, they seemed to say. We want to write “real” literature.

It may not come as a big surprise that many people inside fandom had mixed feelings at that point. They felt fandom had worked for decades for sf/f to be accepted as “real” literature. Now it seemed sf/f was being stuffed back into the little box they had been desperately trying to get it out of, by authors who were at the same time trying to get out of that box themselves.

When the previous edition of this article was published in 2006, the whole realism fantasists subject was very much a hot potato. The situation has cooled down, and the writers behind the initial manifesto have continued their careers, with some of their recent works being pure science fiction (novels by **J. Pekka Mäkelä** for example), some harder to place borderline cases.

Even though everybody didn't share the “realifantastikot” credo, one could say the main trend in Finnish science fiction during the last decade or so has been the attempt to break down the barriers between genres and styles, and to write more ambitious, one could even say interstitial, speculative fiction.

In 2010, another group of writers felt Finnish sf/f had become too artsy. They wanted to return to the roots of the genre, and so yet another literature movement was born. The movement was called “uusrahvaanomaisen spekulatiivinen fiktio” (“neo-vulgar speculative fiction”), URS for short.

The URS movement proclaimed the return to writing shamelessly straightforward adventure stories in the footsteps of **Robert E. Howard**, **H.P. Lovecraft**, and **Edgar Rice Burroughs**. At least when it comes to number of publications, the URS movement has been thriving. So far we've seen three anthologies in less than a year, as well as the founding of a semiannual URS zine. URS seems to have filled an unserved niche in the market.

It is very hard to determine what kind of role these two movements will have in the long run. Will they be the next two megatrends, lasting several decades, or will they end up as footnotes in the history of Finnish sf/f? Your guess is as good as mine.

Translated by Liisa Rantalaiho. Copyedited in 2011 by Val Grimm.