

# WIDENING THE AVAILABLE COASTS

## OR SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM IN FINLAND

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**This article is a much revised and updated version of the texts published in fanzines *Feast of Friends* (1987) and *Kosmoskynä* 2/90 (1990).**

### Before Fandom - the Early Years

Science fiction came to Finland over a hundred years ago. Sf-fandom came somewhat later, about seventeen years ago, for the first fan-organization Turku Science Fiction Society was founded in 27th of January 1976. That, at least, is what most fans even here in Finland think, but some kind of "prefandom" had already been in existence quite sometime earlier, and to understand it better we must first go back to the roots, to the beginnings of Finnish-language science fiction.

Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* was translated in 1879 and it was the first sf-novel published in Finnish. Since 1890 new sf-books started to appear quite regularly, among them many of the classics of Verne and Wells, various utopian novels, and a whole lot of borderline works. There were also a number of popular fiction magazines and most of them featured an occasional sf-story now and then. Most of the published material was translated from foreign languages but there was also some original Finnish fiction. In fact the first known sf-story in Finnish was published in 1887 and was reprinted in *Aikakone* magazine in 1983.

American pulp-sf came to Finland in the 1930's when the first

Finnish pulp-magazines were started. They did not specialize in any particular genre although detective and western stories filled most of their pages but sometimes they also printed science fiction, fantasy and horror stories. Most of the fiction was reprinted from various american pulps as were also many of the covers and interior illustrations, and most, if not all of these, were simply pirated. Among the sf and fantasy authors published in these magazines were Edmund Hamilton, Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, Emil Petaja and Seabury Quinn. There appeared also many more regular pulpsters like Arthur J. Burks, Paul Ernst and Frederick C. Davis. Many of the stories were published anonymously and sometimes new Finnish stories were written to American illustrations. There were also cases of American stories rewritten by Finnish authors with characters' names changed. One quite well known story which went through this treatment was Robert Bloch's "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton", which was published here in 1947. Last of these pulps survived until the early sixties.

I think that earliest roots of Finnish fandom go down to these pulp years, for it was probably then that the existence of sf as a separate genre was first recognized in Finland. In 1935 well known author Mika Waltari published a guide book to beginning writers, where he also took some notice of science fiction. He wrote:

*Imaginative fiction means usually a definite escape from the limits of reality and possible. It deals with*

*adventures in other planets, where we travel by spaceships or through rebirth, or with inventions which revolutionize the evolution of the world. Sometimes it jumps thousand years to the future or tells about the end of the world or about the mysterious inventions of the ancient egyptians. The invention of horrifying death rays or destructive gases or new kinds of military aeroplanes is also a common theme. (Free translation by the author of this article.)*

Yes, he really knew what pulp science fiction was all about.

First Finnish sf-fans were probably collectors. First mentions of sf-collectors have been found in the 1940's, and it seems that some of them were quite knowledgeable. A magazine article from those years even mentions Olaf Stapledon, none of whose works was yet translated into Finnish. After the war came the invasion (at least to Helsinki) of English and American paperbacks and sf seems to have sold fairly well, at least if frequent turning up of early Ballantine, Signet and Ace paperbacks in second hand book shops proves anything.

Early fifties saw the first real science fiction boom in Finland. Various book publishers started science fiction lines, which all folded after a few publications. Many popular magazines published articles about sf and there were also the first signs of academic interest, for in 1954 there was a long discussion about sf in the columns of Finland's foremost student



magazine *Ylioppilaslehti*. Among the participants was well known poet and leading literary critic Tuomas Anhava.

This boom of fifties was very short lived. It started in 1952 and already in 1955 everything was peaceful again. Only really notable incident in the rest of the decade was the short appearance of the first Finnish sf-magazine *Aikamme Tieteislukemisto* in 1958. It was a Finnish edition of *Galaxy* and it folded after five monthly issues in December of that year. Its sales seem to have been very poor and all issues are now highly prized collectors' items.

### Start of the Tradition

The real beginnings of Finnish fandom are in the sixties, because that's where continuous tradition starts. There is very little continuity from the early collectors of the forties to the modern fandom. In fact those collectors were probably not even aware of such thing as fandom although I will be very happy if someone comes and proves that I am wrong.

The sixties were time of rekindling interest in science fiction. The atmosphere seemed to be right at last for the emergence of real fandom. Lone sf readers here and there were slowly getting to know each other. Book publishers were also starting to reinterest themselves in genre sf by publishing Bradbury and Clarke, although one more enterprising house even brought out **Walter Miller's** *A Canticle for Leibowitz* in an edition which didn't even remotely resemble an sf novel.

At the end of the decade came an event which has sometimes been called the first sf convention in Finland. It was so called Science Fiction Week held in Turku 23rd - 28th of March 1969. There were lectures and talks on various aspects of science fiction and daily movie shows. Among the organizers were some still active fans, most notably Jyrki Ijäs of Helsinki who has also taken active part in most of the developments since then. Ijäs was also the author in August 1972 of a very important article on sf published in Finland's largest newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. That long article was probably instrumental in making general public aware of sf as literature. At least (according to legend) the second hand sf books, which had been very cheap, turned to collector's items overnight.

Next stage came in 1975

with the first issues of the Finnish edition of *Perry Rhodan*. It certainly wasn't a literary event, on the contrary probably, but it was important for the development of fandom, because the magazine had regular letter columns and also book reviews and short articles on sf. Finnish *Perry Rhodan*, even if it lasted only sixteen biweekly issues, did much to introduce young people into science fiction. It was edited by Markku Haapio who soon went on to even greater things.

### The Birth of Finnish Fandom

Now we have at last reached the "official" starting point of Finnish fandom, the 27th of January 1976, when 24 fans came together in Turku and founded the Turku Science Fiction Society. Next year they started a clubzine called *Spin*, which is still going strong (or at least surviving) after seventeen years and many editors. *Spin* was the first fanzine in Finland and it was originally edited by above mentioned Markku Haapio. Among its contributors were Jyrki Ijäs and also Raimo Nikkonen, who is currently the editor of Tampere SF Society's semiprozine *Portti* (Gateway).

During the first few years of its existence the Turku society was very little known outside its hometown. There were fans all over Finland, who knew that fandom existed in other countries but had never heard about fandom in Finland. Among them was also the author of this article, who joined British Science Fiction Association in 1979 and even planned to publish the first Finnish fanzine without knowing that it had already been done.

However, things started to change very soon. In December of 1979 new sf society was founded in Tampere and organized fandom at last began to extend its tentacles to Helsinki, when astronomical society Ursa started an sf column in its magazine *Tähdet ja avaruus* (Stars and Space). At about the same time Ursa started a series of sf paperbacks and announced its plans for a quarterly sf magazine to be called *Aikakone* (Time Machine, the name was actually chosen by competition and many of the suggestions were somewhat horrifying, like "Scifist" for example...)

The First issue came out late in 1981 and it was a combination of sercon and semiprozine, for it printed both serious articles on sf, translated professional fiction and

local fanfiction. Its first editor was Jari Koponen, who continued with a short pause in 1984 (when Jyrki Ijäs edited two issues) until the spring of 1986, when he left to the real science and yours truly was asked to step on his shoes. Among the magazine's regular columnists were Jyrki Ijäs and Tom Ölander. Tom was then the best known Finnish fan internationally, especially in Sweden, and has since been primus motor behind many Finnish conventions. My editorship lasted two years and since 1988 *Aikakone* has been edited by Leena Peltonen. Magazine was bought from Ursa by its editors in 1989 and from the beginning of 1990 it has been published by Aikakone Association, an organization founded specifically for the purpose.

### The Mad Years

The early eighties were really the mad years in Finnish fandom. New fanzines started to appear from all quarters, first cons were held and fans all over the country got to know each other. Of the new publications the first was Tampere SF Society's *Portti*, which started in 1982. Its editor was and still is Raimo Nikkonen, who since has lost most of his original helpers and contributors to other magazines, most notably to *Aikakone*. It was a similar combinationzine as *Aikakone*, but more oriented to soft sf and fantasy.

Most notable of the few personalzines was the *Time and Space* from the small town of Heinola. First issues were extremely crude but after only a few years it metamorphosed into *Tähtivaeltaja* (Star Rover), now a semiprozine published by Helsinki SF Society. This magazine's early history is already a legend and too long to be recounted here. Sufficient only to say, that in the late eighties it was the most exciting and controversial semiprozine published here, and its editor Toni Jerrman the most colorful personality in Finnish fandom (even if he always dresses in black). Some readers of this article may even have seen its English special issue published as early as 1983 called *The Universal Mind*. Controversial and interesting it still is after ten years and Toni does not show too many signs of tiredness, so it will probably be around for many years to come.

As I have already mentioned, most of our fanzines were (and still are) full of fiction and that's one of the peculiarities of



Finnish fandom. Chief reason for that was, that there were almost no markets at all for professional sf short stories in Finland, because most of the once numerous popular fiction magazines died in the sixties leaving only a few love story magazines and some literary magazines with low circulations. They were not interested in sf and situation was similar in book publishing until late eighties when at first some smaller publishers and later also big trade publishers started to show interest in sf-writers working in the semiprozines.

Anyway, only a few years ago young sf-writer's only chance to get published at all was to submit his or her work to fanzines and semiprozines who couldn't afford to pay. Most of this fiction was of course only fanfiction which wouldn't get professional publication anywhere, but there were also writers good enough to develop into professionals and that's what's been happening during the last three or four years.

During the mid-eighties the writers proved themselves quite an important moving force in Finnish fandom. In 1984 a group of them joined together and founded the Finnish SF Writer's Association, which has since grown up to about sixty members. They are not all fiction writers. Anyone interested may join in and share the fun, and most of the active fans are members. The main reason for that has been their clubzine *Kosmoskynä*, especially during the years 1986-1988 when it was edited by Juha Salminen. It had everything that a good fanzine should have, furious arguments in lively letter columns, biting articles and reports of everything that happened in fandom. When Juha resigned it was continued by Jyrki J.J. Kasvi, a well-known computer expert. He did a good job but regrettably had difficulties in finding enough time for the magazine, which started to appear irregularly and lost much of its biting edge.

There was also an attempt to publish high-quality all-fiction semiprozine. This was *Ikaros* edited by Finnish fandom's grand old man Jyrki Ijäs, with the first issue coming out early in 1986. It didn't last. First few issues came regularly in a quarterly schedule but soon it started missing issues with #2/1988 appearing in the August of 1989. Last issues were very sensibly undated.

Our semiprozines *Aika-kone*, *Portti*, *Tähtivaeltaja* and, for

the short time, *Ikaros* were until the late eighties the main source of foreign sf short stories in Finland, chiefly because book publishers translated mostly novels and because our only recent professional sf magazine, the Finnish edition of *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* folded after nine issues in 1983. They still print high quality foreign material in addition to original Finnish stories and articles but there have also been a real boom of anthologies from professional publishers and we've really been flooded with translated short stories.

### Personal Experiences about the Early SF-Conventions

I think that time has come to talk about conventions. The first Finnish sf-convention was a joint Swedish-Finnish operation called *King-Con* in 1982. It started in Stockholm aboard Silja Line ferry en route to Finland in the evening of 28th of May and continued in Helsinki and ended in Sunday the 30th. Guests of honor were Harry Harrison and Dutch artist Karel Thole and present was also Sam J. Lundwall, whose idea the whole thing originally was. Organizer in Finland was Tom Ölander. Most of the Finnish fandom came to Helsinki although only a few had joined the convention in Stockholm and the whole Finnish attendance may have been somewhere around one hundred.

King-Con was my first con and first meeting with foreign authors, and so my impressions may be somewhat confused. I remember telling Sam Lundwall that I understood Swedish well and then completely misunderstanding everything he tried to say. I also saw a young Finnish fan demanding Harrison's autograph to a book by Joe Haldeman. At last he signed the book but with whose autograph, that I didn't see. In a panel discussion well known Swedish fan Åhrvid Engholm was momentarily at a loss for words. "I can't remember what I intended to say," said he. Then Harrison at his side grabbed the mic, shouted that he certainly remembered and yes, he really seemed to.

Next con was held in Tampere by local sf society three years later in July of 1985. Guest of honor in *Tamcon* was Tom Ölander and Åhrvid Engholm came from Sweden. Again almost the whole of fandom was present and the con certainly left pleasant memories for everyone, but there were even better

things to come.

Plans for *Finncon 86* were started immediately after *Tamcon*. Chairman of the committee was Tom Ölander and among other members were Jyrki Ijäs, Toni Jerrman and myself. Con was held in Helsinki in the weekend from the 23rd to the 25th of May in 1986. Guest of honor was Brian W. Aldiss and Sam J. Lundwall paid also an unannounced visit although he had just declared to be leaving fandom. Also present was another Swedish writer Börje Crona.

As a committee member I spent most of time by running around and trying to divert various catastrophes which seemed to attack from every quarter. At last I decided to slip quietly to listen the speech of Aldiss, but immediately stepping in I was given a slideprojector of a make I had never used before and was told to put it in working order. I generally learn fast and got it running quite speedily under Brian's impatient eyes. He had loaded his transparencies into the projector himself and when he started his speech I noticed that every one of them was upside down. He didn't care too much. He just asked people to stand on their heads but I started furiously to turn them over and was almost finished when the bloody machine got jammed. I got it working again mainly by brute force but after that I was too fatigued to continue and sat the next few hours in the quiet darkness of the movie theater. All in all *Finncon* was a popular success though not exactly a financial one and its greatest importance was as a beginning of continuing tradition of cons.

### SF-Conventions Today

Since then there have been two *Finncons*, in 1989 and 1991 and they are now considered a regular tradition under the auspices of Helsinki University Science Fiction Society, which means that they get free use of The Old Student House in the middle of Helsinki for the convention site. The next *Finncon* will be at the August of 1993. They have been extremely well organized and very popular because they are free. Everyone interested can just walk in straight from the street. Among the guests of Honor have been John Brunner and Iain Banks and *Finncon'93* will feature Terry Pratchett.

In the summer of 1991 long-established cultural festival, *The Jyväskylä Summer* decided to add



science fiction to their programme and result was a convention in everything but the name. They sensibly contacted a very active local sf society who did most of the actual organizing. Guest of honor was Ian Watson, who was put through sauna and various other local rituals for the great amusement of everyone involved. So great was the success that Jyväskylä people decided to repeat the experiment in 1992, this time with Robert Holdstock, and this new tradition will continue in the summer of 1993 with Lisa Tuttle and Suzy McKee Charnas as guests of honor.

Not all conventions have been so successful. In the summer of 1992 there was an attempt in Tampere to held a small local con with Philip José Farmer as GoH. It was to be organised by Tampere Science Fiction Society, which nowadays is very much a one-man-operation of the editor of Portti Raimo Nikkonen, but because Farmer was unable to attend the whole convention was cancelled. Much more promising project is *Aikacon'94*, to be held in Tampere in the January of 1994. It will be organised by Aikakone-association, the real center of local fandom in Tampere and the current publisher of Aikakone-magazine.

### Other Activities

In addition to cons there had also been many smaller meetings in Finland. Some of them might even be called minicons and the best known of them is The Roadside Picnic held every July in Tampere since 1983. These picnics are wholly informal and pleasant meetings without any set programs whatsoever (if beer drinking is discounted) and attendance has varied from 20 to 50.

Even more informal are the biweekly meetings of local fandom in Helsinki. They started in the January of 1987 and have been regular since then though the venues have been changed a few times. Attendance varies from 30 to 50 and all well known local fans and semipros are regular attendees. The group's chief occupation is the consuming of enormous amounts of alcoholic beverages and endless talking (sometimes even about science fiction). Current venue is restaurant called Horror Club (Ruoholahdenkatu 4) and time is every second thursday beginning about 6 pm. Similar meetings are nowadays held in most of the bigger

cities in Finland including Tampere, Turku, Oulu, Jyväskylä and Lahti.

There are also many annual awards given by fandom every year. The oldest and most prestigious of these is Turku SF Society's Atorox-award named after the robot-character in the popular adventure series of the 1940's. It is given for the best Finnish sf short story of the year and winner is decided by experts from all the sf societies in Finland. Helsinki SF Society's Tähtivaeltaja-award is given to the best sf or fantasy book of the year. All the winners to date have been translated English or American works but it is to be hoped that someday soon one of our own writes makes the grade. The winner is chosen by council of five judges from all the genre-books published during the year. Portti-awards are voted by readers of Portti-magazine and given to best books, articles and short stories published during the previous year. Naturally voters tend to favor material published in Portti and result can not be fairly compared with Atorox-awards. There are also various other awards and more to come. It seems in fact that in the future it will be exceedingly difficult to write anything to sf-magazines and avoid being awarded. It looks like a bad case of inflation.

### Fanzines Today

Four old-established magazines, *Aikakone*, *Tähtivaeltaja*, *Portti* and *Spin* are all still in business although *Spin*, which turned to a newzine, has been in continuous troubles for many years now. Helsinki University SF Club publishes *Marvin the Lehti* (Marvin the Zine) which was the best and almost only really fannish fanzine in the late 1980's but has since lost much of the original drive that made it essential for anyone "in" the fandom-scene. Of the other fannish zines the most notable was *Mundane Totuus* (Mundane Truth) published biweekly during the 1990 in the meetings of Helsinki fandom.

New sf societies have also appeared in many towns around the country, most notably in Jyväskylä where local fandom publishes *Alienisti* (The Alienist), the fanzine which might grow up to challenge the old-established big three. Lahti SF Society publishes *Jäkäl'aarre* (name cannot be translated) and latest newcomer is *Polaris* from Oulu in the far north.

There are also many fanzines for roleplayers and Finnish

Star Trek Society is planning a fanzine but real success story has been Finnish Tolkien Society with their clubzine *Legolas*, which has almost inherited the place of *Kosmoskynä* as a forum for fierce arguments and discussions. Also notable is *Finnzine*, which specializes in news and does it very well after somewhat shaky start a few years ago.

### From Amateurs to Pros

As in other countries, many Finnish fans have in the last few years been turning professional, even if only on a part-time basis. In a small country like Finland no one can earn a living solely by writing or editing sf, but many do it as a sideline to other writing jobs, such as writing advertising copy or journalism. I am myself currently an sf-editor at a paperback publisher Book Studio and have edited a sword & sorcery anthology, a reference book on sf and various collections to other publishers. Toni Jerro, editor of *Tähtivaeltaja* has reviewed sf & comics for the prestigious newspaper *Uusi Suomi* and makes radio programmes now and then. The editor of *Aikakone*, Leena Peltonen is one of the best sf-translators in Finland and some of the erstwhile fanfiction writers, like Pekka Virtanen, Boris Hurta and Maarit Verronen, have sold books to professional publishers, and a lot of short stories from semiprozines and fanzines have been anthologized. Among the best of these writers are Johanna Sinisalo, who has received the Atorox award for the best Finnish sf-short story thrice, Ari Tervonen, our best hardcore writer and also a professional physicist, Eeva-Liisa Tenhunen, author of only few but uniformly excellent novelettes, and Olav Tirkkonen with serious leaning to cyberpunk. Also worth a mention is Kari Nenonen, an established writer in various genres, who only recently has been making a name for himself as an excellent horror and sf writer, but real hope of Finnish science fiction today is Risto Isomäki, who appeared from nowhere in 1991 with an excellent short story collection and whose forthcoming first novel, which I have read in manuscript, will certainly be one of the best Finnish sf-novels ever. It seems that future is bright for the Finnish science fiction and fandom.



## Further Reading in English

Jyrki Ijäs: The History of Finnish Science Fiction Books (1990)

This is quite a good overview of Finnish science fiction, actually a special issue of Ikaros-magazine. Jyrki has since written an article on Finnish sf for the (hopefully) forthcoming new edition of Peter Nicholls' SF Encyclopedia.

Feast of Friends: Finnish Science Fiction and Fantasy World (1987)

An overview of Finnish sf and fandom published for the Conspiracy. Short stories by Johanna Sinisalo and Pekka Virtanen are also included. Marred by great number of typos.

Kosmoskynä 2/90 English Confiction-issue of the Kosmoskynä. Somewhat similar to Feast of Friends but with better proofreading. Includes an excellent short story by Johanna Sinisalo. This is probably the best Finnish fanzine in English to date.

Marvin the Lehti 1/89, 2/90 & 1/91

These are English issues of Helsinki University SF Society's fanzine. Regretfully they do not reach the usual very high Finnish standards of the Finnish issues, but still include much that is interesting and amusing.

Universal Mind (Time and Space #7, 1983)

This is nowadays really a curiosity and very dated though artwork and some of the articles are quite good. If you have a copy, don't lose it! It is a collector's item.

Most of these have been available in larger European conventions during the last six years and all are probably out of print by now.