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Past Issues

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'Recognising the Fantasy Literature Genre'

Particip@tions Volume 3, Issue 2 **Special Edition** (November 2006)

Recognising the Fantasy Literature Genre

Abstract

In this study, 15–17-year-old students were given a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin to read anonymously. The theoretical background of the study and of this essay is a combination of concepts related to reception. The questions addressed are twofold: how is the text read by the students in the countries involved, and what can be read off from these responses in relation to the on going changes in our societies (in relation to globalization and nationality, media, values, cultural transition, and individualization)? This essay focuses on questioning whether avid readers of fantasy are necessarily conscious readers of fantasy. On the other hand the essay does reveal that a few avid readers of SF seem to be an exceptional group when it comes to understanding this given short story.

Key words: fantasy; science fiction; literature; reception

Background of the Study

With the first story a child hears, he or she takes a step toward perceiving a new environment, one that is filled with quests and questers, fated heroes and fetid monsters, intrepid heroines and trepidant helpers, even incompetent oafs who achieve competence and wholeness by going and trying. As the child hears more stories and tales that are linked in both obvious and subtle ways, that landscape is broadened and deepened, and becomes more fully populated with memorable characters. These are the same folk that the child will meet again and again, threading the archetypal ways throughout the cultural history of planet. (Yolen, 1981, 15)

In this essay^[1] I present some results of a Finnish study of the reception of fantasy literature which was carried out in five Baltic Sea countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden. The title of the project was 'Young people reading fantasy – a study of literary reception'. The field work was carried out in schools in all the above-mentioned countries. The Finnish part of the study, to which this essay is limited, was conducted at the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture in Jyväskylä University, Finland, which was responsible for the overall project. In this study, 15–17-years-old students were given a short story to read. They were asked what the story was about, in their opinion, what kinds of feelings the story aroused, and if they liked/disliked it. The theoretical background of the study and the essay is drawn from a combination of theories and concepts related to reception. In this case the focus is on fantasy, which seems to be the most fruitful genre what comes to the responses of the young readers. Fantasy literature seems to more easily open "the richest ways of knowledge" about children's worlds, and it seems to produce excellent responses to the researcher. The questions addressed in this research project in general are twofold: how is the fantasy literature read by the students in the countries involved, and what can be read off from these responses in relation to the on going changes in our societies (questions of globalization and nationality, media, values, sex and gender, cultural transition, and individualization)? In this essay my focus is restricted to questions of understanding the ways in which young adults described and interpreted the story.

The reason why we wanted to find answers to these questions was the recent interest in the readers and reading of fantasy in the Baltic Sea area. It can be connected to the increase in fantasy literature published during the last decades, including the 'Harry Potter' novels which have been a phenomenal success in all these countries. Especially in Finland the popularity of fantasy has become huge, even succeeding in bringing boys into bookshops and libraries. In Finland, as in other European countries, the roots of fantastic literature can be traced back to European and world literature. Fantastic stories were written in Finnish starting from the late 19th century, while translations of popular literature also made Anglo-American fantasy available to a much wider audience in the first decades of the 20th century. This contributed to the later wave of science fiction for young boys, in the mid-1950s. The popularity of science fiction in Finland grew steadily until the mid 1980s, but the rapid rise in the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien and his followers subsequently had an impact, and since 1985 more fantasy than science fiction was being published in Finland. Since then the situation has not changed much, though the popularity gap between those two – in many ways closely related – genres seems to be shrinking again.

This popularity of fantasy is strongly related to Anglo–American popular culture, including the success of fantasy in cinema, as well as the fast rising interest in Japanese manga and anime. Also there has been an increase in fan activities connected with these cultural phenomena, not to mention the number of people participating in these via the Internet. Thus, fantasy can perhaps be seen as a

response to some deeper needs of young readers in a way that reflects the changes of society and the individually experienced but collectively shared processes. Fantasy, especially in the form of folk tales, has been seen as a carrier of shared archetypes, values and utopian impulses. During the last centuries folk tales and their modifications have purposely been used to mediate ideologies and in contemporary literature to reverse taboos and against oppression, too (Zipes 1988, 9, 181-183). We chose young adults as our target group, since social and cultural issues are also being processed by the youth culture they relate to. Attitudes to fantasy in popular culture become more conscious and discriminating at that age, too, along with development in taste, social skills and more general abilities in media use.

In our study, we wanted to get responses to some crucial issues in contemporary culture and in particular to the question of community and the relationship of individual desires to the idea of community. The rapid changes in today's culture and society have made these relations unstable and consequently the questions related to the conscious selection of elements of one's identity as well as the coherence/fragmentation of societies have become urgent issues in our time. The theoretical background of this essay lies in reception studies in the context of cultural studies, and the broader change from the idea of a passive audience to one of active, productive readers (see for example Fiske (1992, 37) which took place in late 20th century, and the parallel shift from a behaviourist paradigm towards a spectacle/performance paradigm (Abercombe & Longhurst 1998, 3-4). These changes shifted the focus from texts and their impacts towards the codes of communication, and from there to the readers and the meanings they produced in relation to those texts. Henry Jenkins (1992) has gone further. Referring to the work of de Certeau, Jenkins sees readers as *textual poachers*, who not only use mass media for their own purposes, but inhabit the texts like empty houses, furnishing them with their own new meanings and creating new uses for the texts, like anarchist illegal occupants of the empty buildings, to use the words of Urpo Kovala (2003, 198).

Jenkins's study of SF fans still remains the most exact description of the multifaceted SF fandom and its activities, as well as of the complex relation of the texts to their readers. In this essay that relation informs both the general perspective and the specific idea of testing whether avid fantasy and SF readers might approach the text in different ways compared those who are not familiar to either of those genres. Even though we did not consciously seek SF or fantasy fans in this study, among our students were some whose literary tastes and media profiles reminded us a lot of those of Finnish SF fans. That suggested to us that there might be a similar genre awareness between SF fans and our young adults. However, this essay is not about fan research, nor about the networks, activities and productivity of a certain fandom.^[2] Nor do I describe those students that appear to be avid readers of science fiction in my study as science fiction fans because it is not likely they are members of the active SF fandom for their young age. This particularly article focuses on some parts of the wider scheme of the larger only: the young readers' understanding, explaining and interpretation of the given short story as fiction and as a representative of a specific genre: fantasy.

The project was launched in 2003, as part of the Baltic Ring project, a more general non-academic project whose aim was to enhance the co-operation of literary actors, especially literary centres of the Baltic area, namely Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Thus this particular reception study of fantasy literature is a special contribution within the larger scheme, and its aim is to account for the phenomenal popularity of the genre in these countries. It ties in more broadly with cultural studies, and especially with previous research carried out at the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, where reception research is a major focus. (Eskola & Vainikkala, 1988, Vainikkala & Eskola, 1989, Kovala 1992, Vainikkala 1993, Eskola & Jokinen & Vainikkala, 1992, Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000). A collection of articles is to be published in English under the title *Young People Reading Fantasy* (work title) covering the wider research questions of this study.

In each country two fantasy stories were selected for the study. It was decided that one of the short stories would be the same for all countries, to be a piece by an international best-selling fantasy author writing in English. For that we chose Ursula Le Guin's story 'The Kerastion'. This is found in Le Guin's collection of science fiction short stories *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (1994). The other story was chosen separately in each country and was meant to represent the local literature and language. In one sense the choice of 'The Kerastion' was easy, in that we wanted a short story by a well-known contemporary writer, well-established among the writers of this particular genre, with international recognition. However, it also involved careful consideration of the nature of fantasy in general and as a genre. Fantasy was seen in the project in a larger domain which includes also magical realism, speculative fiction and science fantasy. Of the many available definitions of fantasy, three are helpful in framing the way fantasy was understood in selecting the story. First, Kathryn Hume (1984, 102) defines 'fantasy' as "any departure from the consensus reality". Second, J R R Tolkien (1947, 194) understands it as "the most nearly pure form" of art, characterized by "arresting strangeness" and freedom from the domination of observed 'fact' – in other word, a form of creation combined with "strangeness and wonder" (Wolfe 1986, 38-40). In the third, Maria Nikolajeva, who had analyzed a range of fantasy definitions, proposed that it be understood as a narrative in which two worlds, a real one and a magic one, are described, and where magical elements are used as literary devices to connect the two worlds (Nikolajeva 1988, Abstract).

In making our choice, we considered the range of contemporary fantasy short stories since the 1970s which had been translated into Finnish. However, we tried to pick up less known works of these writers in order to avoid recognition of the writer. We wanted to minimize paratextual influence on the story's reception, so Le Guin's text was given to the students anonymously, with no clues as to the writer or the genre. It is important to remember this when considering the responses. Finally, the length of the story was also important: it had to be short enough (no longer than 1000 words) so that it could be read, analyzed and reported on by the students during a one and a half hour session. All these clearly limited the amount of the candidates. Ultimately many elements and themes of 'The Kerastion' turned out

to be fruitful: its society, its guild system, its religion and norms, and the tragedy of a brother and a sister. The story was not a simple “quest-story”, but a rather complex narrative. Clearly it would not give simple answers, and it was expected that some philosophical themes would arise in the students’ answers. This made it particularly suitable for the research questions we were asking, along with the themes we wanted to scrutinize more closely through the students’ answers.

The texts were read by the students, both boys and girls, at school as part of their literature curriculum. The average age of our 81 Finnish respondents in three school classes was 15-17 years. The informants had two hours to answer these questions:

- What is the story about, in your opinion?
- What kinds of feeling did the story arouse in you?
- Did you like the story? Why? / Why not?

The story and the research questions

In Le Guin’s story a sister and her brother, two talented young people separated by the guild divisions, face the limits of social tolerance of this peasant or pre-technology society. The brother Kwatewa is a sculptor who creates art in a way that manifests greed, according to the religious norms of the society, a sin that leads to his death.

The story is told through the eyes of his sister, Chumo, the story’s protagonist. It opens with a short scene where Chumo remembers her own life, recalling growing up from a child to become a respected member of the guild of barkers. She stands by the cemetery, waiting for the burial escort of her brother to arrive. In her memories she looks back to Kwatewa’s life as an artist and his first triumphant exhibition of sandstone sculptures that ended, as it was bound to end, with the wind returning the pictures to sand, back to mother earth. That is the meaning of art in this society; to create solid, unbreakable art was a sin that one could not wash away. So when shepherds find the cave where Kwatewa had hidden his sculptures, he too is found guilty of a sin without the possibility of atonement. He commits suicide.

The burial escort arrives, and in front of it the musician plays the mute flute. Chumo had made the flute out of the skin of her own mother as a diploma work of her studies in the guild two years earlier. The music is only heard by the dead, and Kwatewa alone could tell if the music was about shame, sorrow or homecoming. The story ends in this sad mood.

Even though the mood of the story is deeply sad, its style is calm and unassuming which is typical of Le Guin’s work. The characters speak simply by their acts; their inner thoughts are seldom if at all described through dialogue. The description of the community creates the strong feeling that the society belongs to the writer’s wider world of Hainian tales, set around the universe.

Despite its rather realistic tone, the story clearly belongs to the genre of fantasy literature by creating an imaginary world different from ours in so many ways; in its religious rituals, values and habits. In this way it fulfils the broad definition of fantasy; the majority of the events do not exist in our known world (Hume 1984, 21) There is no door or other entrance between Le Guin’s world and ours, as there is for example in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia Chronicles. In this sense Le Guin’s story ‘Kerastion’ may be described as a ‘closed secondary world’, within a system in which our known world is ‘the primary world’ (Nikolajeva 1988, 13). But although the story was chosen primarily for its because of its carefully built, divergent world, it must be noted that it was also chosen for its literary merits. Le Guin herself has said that the story is important in itself – it is not just a carrier of ideas, as a box can carry candies (Le Guin 2005).

The story proved an interpretative challenge to our readers, as their answers demonstrated. Our approach was to explore the ways in which readers negotiated between contrasting discourses in their readings – one of which is fictionally supported (and probably accepted by many within the genre’s confines), while the other stems from the readers’ actuality in which the values of individualism may be strong. The overall research questions guiding how we analyzed the responses to Le Guin’s story were as follows.

A) Individuality, family and society in the story

- What kinds of moral code did they find in the story?
- How is cultural ‘otherness’ handled in their readings of the story?
- Do informants take a personal moral stand in their accounts of the story?

B) Narrative: construction of stories from the text

- How do the readers describe the story in terms of events, characters and action (i.e. what happens in the story)?
- Are there variations in their story constructions depending on their different thematic interpretations of the text?
- Are there explicit discussions of the means of narration, such as the handling of plot, the ways the characters are built up, and style? Do such considerations affect the construction of the story and its interpretation?

C) Expression of emotions in the responses

- To what extent, and in what ways, do emotions arise from the events and characters of the story? Are there patterns of identification, repudiation, or ambivalence vis-à-vis the characters?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do emotions arise from the handling (plot and style) of the story?

D) The identification of genre, and the effect of previous reading on the reception

- Are there explicit references to 'fantasy' as a genre? If not, to what extent is there any implicit understanding of it?
- What kinds of correspondence (in terms of interpretation or identifying the genre) may be found between responses, and respondents' having / not having read fantasy?
- Similarly, what correspondences may be found with regard to reading / not reading a wide range of literature?
- Are there similar correspondences with regard to science fiction readers?

E) Locating the story

- Do readers locate the story in a 'real' geographical place or in some identifiable cultural space? (This question is also interesting in relation to the identification/non-identification of the genre, and the issues brought up under A.)

F) Notions of 'good literature' in the responses

- Are there direct expressions on this matter, or perhaps indirect suggestions (e.g., different kinds of disappointment)?
- To what extent, and in what ways, are such notions related to considerations of the means of expression (handling of plot, build-up of characters, style?)

G) The effects of gender on the responses

In this essay, as I have said, I focus particularly on questions **D) The identification of the genre**, and **E) Locating the story**, analyzing the texts that Finnish students produced to the three questions given above.

The Study of Young People Reading Fantasy

The theoretical background to this essay lies in the thoughts on the problematic nature of the reading process suggested by the French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, every individual reads a text in an ambiguous way. Reading is seen as a process in which the text is seen as an authorless subject. However, in practice the reader tries to explain the text as an object in terms of its internal relations, but also as something connected with his/her own experiences, everyday communication combined with narrative suspense (Ricoeur 1981, 152). Thus a dialectic of attitudes is formed in the reading process, making it complex and unpredictable. This was shown in the way the young adults of our study tried to place the narrative elements somewhere in their own reality, drawing on their world view, their previous experiences in literature, and their common knowledge.

Here I draw upon some ideas from Kathryn Hume's work, and particularly from her book *Fantasy and Mimesis, Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984), to describe the nature of fantasy literature as compared to other genres, and the reception of fantasy genre particularly. Hume rejects the claims that fantasy should be seen as marginal compared to the traditionally mimetic role of literature. She points out that the fantastic element exists in almost all literature, so that fantasy can be seen as 'the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal' (Hume 1984, xii). In her book she goes through the numerous uses of and attitudes towards fantasy, from selective Platonic rejection to Todorovian hesitation, Christian and utopian thought, from Rosemary Jackson's Marxist and Freudian desire to Tolkienian joy and to W. R. Irwin's idea of fantasy as a game (Hume 1984, 5-17). Hume points out how mimesis and fantasy are neither separate, opposite dimensions of literature, nor opposite impulses in a text's creator. Hume sees fantasy not as an isolated genre^[3] of escapist nature, but as an active element of literature in general: '[a] literary work can offer readers four basic approaches to reality, namely, what I am calling illusion, vision, revision, and disillusion. Further it can attempt to disturb the reader's own assumptions, or reaffirm those assumptions and comfort the reader. It can also invite emotional engagement or disengagement' (Hume 1984, 55).

The way in which the text generates certain themes in readers' minds can reveal a lot about the role of the text in the reading process. Hume points out how many stories share more than one of the four elements of her categorization (1984, 55-58), thus addressing the difficulties and the demands the text poses to the reader. Hume's 'Illusion' refers to texts where the dominant elements could be described as comfort and disengagement, whereas 'Vision' invites the reader to experience a new sense of reality using the disturbing elements, such as passionate protests or strong engagement with the ideas expressed in the text. 'Revision' expressively shapes the futures with notable didactic elements but its aim is not necessarily to confront the reader. 'Disillusion' demands that readers abandon their fundamental world view, the possibility of objectively observing and codifying reality, but this sometimes rather negative view may still open the possibility of ambivalent pleasure to its readers, despite the disturbing and disengaging nature of the narrative elements (Hume 1984, 59-143).

Le Guin's short story could be classified as 'Disillusion' in Hume's sense because of its realistic descriptions of the crisis of the protagonist and his community, and especially because of the way it demands that the reader reflect on the events of the story. In our study young readers struggled with the text drawing upon their knowledge and experience, and also their imagination, in their effort to enter its unknown culture and to understand the writer's well recognized but scarcely understood intentions. In general, fantasy is used more and more specifically and intentionally in literature, advertising and in all cultural products. In this context the identification of the genre of fantasy appearing in literature, cinema and generally in visual culture containing commercials, music videos and fan products of contemporary culture is an interesting question.

Planning this study, we expected to find differences between avid fantasy readers and those not familiar with the genre, especially in their ability to recognize the story's fantasy narrative elements. In practice, during my career as a teacher of creative writing to adults I have learned rather soon to tell those who were fans of fantasy or science fiction from others, by their ability to identify the structures, plots and references of these genres. I have also been surveying the Finnish fantasy fans on www.risingshadow.org homepage so I had a rough idea of how young Finnish readers slowly across the years, have become better versed with the basic narrative elements of the genre and with the traditions and value systems of fandom and the discourse of the fantasy literary canon.^[4]

As a long-time SF-fan I was also interested in the possible variations of the attitudes towards literature between SF-readers and fantasy-readers, and those who did not read either of those. I expected that avid fantasy readers and SF readers would have some kind of a shared narrative toolkit with which to analyze Le Guin's story in an advanced manner, while those who were not familiar with fantasy would perhaps find the text more difficult to approach. I expected that there would probably be some evident differences between the two groups' attitudes towards the fantastic elements of the story. In addition, I expected some emotional expressions from the avid fantasy readers, perhaps losing themselves in the events and in the fatal destiny of the protagonist, a young artist destroyed by his desire. Meanwhile, from the avid readers of SF I expected perhaps a relatively analytic attitude towards the society described in Le Guin's text and also perhaps some comparisons to other fictive or known cultures. Thus the central questions in this essay are: in which ways do students describe the text in their analyses, in what ways do they interpret the narrative elements, and considering these two, is there a relation between the ways these are to be seen in the analyses and their reading habits? In other words: is there a special genre awareness among those who are heavy users of fantasy and SF?

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The question schedule

These particular expectations concerning the readers of SF literature were derived from the results of my ongoing PhD research, for which I carried out interviews in Spring 2003. In those interviews of (23–70 year-old) members of the Finnish SF-fandom I discovered that people took up their habit of reading SF at a surprisingly early age. What I was especially keen to know was if the evidence of avid reading of fantasy in general and SF in particular could be seen in the responses, as well as their possible influence on the ways of

reading fantasy literature. Based on all this, I organized the responses into four categories according to their habits of reading, and studied the answers through this categorization. These four categories were formed through the background questions, which were:

1. How many books have you read during the last month? What else other than books have you read (the instructions were given to teachers to say that everything should be mentioned here: cartoons, leaflets, advertisements etc)?
2. What kind of literature (fiction and nonfiction) do you prefer to read? Mention both books and writers.
3. In the event that you read fantasy literature, please mention the titles of the works you have read, or the names of writers whose works you have read.
4. Name cinema and television shows that you like.
5. Sex
6. Age
7. Residence
8. What are your hobbies?

Our primary interest was in the responses displayed within the students' written reports. However, these background questions were used as additional information. After going carefully through the background questions, especially the responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 which asked about their reading, the following categories of readers could be formed:

1. Does not read fantasy literature at all
2. Has read some fantasy
3. Is an avid reader of fantasy
4. Is an avid reader of SF

For our readers of fantasy and SF, the term 'avid' was carefully chosen instead of 'fan'. The reason was, that the background questions did not include enquiries about the special relation towards a special genre or certain authors – we only asked them "Do you *read* fantasy?" The term "fan" implies a special personal involvement with a media phenomenon, person, style or period, appearing as activity and networking, and we did not collect information on this in our study. However, as was mentioned before in this article, interesting similarities were found between the descriptions of avid SF readers in this study and previous studies of Finnish SF fans (Suoninen 2003, Hirsjärvi 2005).

By interviewing the students it might have been possible to find and distinguish fantasy and science fiction fans among our 81 students. According to my ongoing PhD study of Finnish SF fandom, there are only a couple of hundred active members of Finnish SF fandom in entire country so it would have been very unlikely that we would find actual members of Finnish SF fandom among these young people. And yet, at the same time, according to other studies, being a fantasy fan or media fan (fan of SF TV-series or cinema) is quite common among young. The genre has become hugely popular in Finland and among the 'avid fantasy readers' were some who could possibly have been defined as fantasy fans.

Previously it was mentioned that all those who were categorized to a certain category by their reading habits usually used all kinds of literature and were interested in TV-series and cinema, too. I want to enlighten the nature of the media usage of the students, so I shall point out the variety of the texts they use during the presentation of the for categories.

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The categories

The first group ("Do not read fantasy literature at all") simply comprises those students who answered 'No' to our question "Do you read fantasy?". Many of these also said that they had not read a single book during the last month. However, others in this group had read at least two books during the last month, and in other answers reading of newspapers, cartoon and magazines were mentioned. Books the people in this group read were selected mostly through friends' recommendations. This is quite a typical answer: "I read very little, so it's very hard to name any favorites. I read a lot of different kinds of books, usually books my friends praise." In this group several told us that they seldom follow TV programs but the rest liked Reality TV, USA TV-series and movies, comedy, daily soap and animations, usually mentioned by their general title.

The second group ("Have read some fantasy") comprises those students who mentioned only one or two fantasy titles when asked "What kind of literature you prefer to read?", or who brought up their general indifference to fantasy.

The following is a typical answer from this group: "I read adventures. My favorite writers are Jack Higgins and Tom Clancy. I also find detective books rather interesting, like Agatha Christie and Carter Dickson [John Dickinson Carr]. I do not read fantasy books -- However, I have read *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Murder in Elrond* or something like that".

Often the students in this category were not avid readers in general. However in this group there were avid media users who carefully mentioned names of the series, many times using the original (usually English) original title. In several occasions students also told some background information on the programmes (e.g., "*Gladiator* that is based on the history of Rome"). Many students also ranked the programs in different ways (e.g., "Frankly, TV-series are mostly miserable and stupid. However, there was one brilliant TV-series, *Six Feet Under*."). One student says: "Equally liked are *24* and *Alias*, but they possess a *higher entertainment value*". Students in this group brought up many films, for instance *A Clockwork Orange*, *Spirited Away* and Finnish *Lunastus*. As the directors acted Stanley Kubrick, Hayako Miyazaki and Finnish director Olli Saarela. Along with these, Japanese, and also German and French movies were mentioned. So it could be said the despite these students were not experts in literature, many of them could be described as aware media users.

The third group ("Avid readers of fantasy") mentioned several fantasy authors and titles in their reading list and/or fantasy as their main interest. The students in this group usually mention fantasy titles and authors in all first three background questions. They consume fantasy in all its forms, as novels, short stories, cartoons, nonfiction books and TV series. Some of them also mentioned some SF titles, too.

Here is a quite typical answer from a student in this category: "I truly like to read fantasy and crime fiction. For example J.R. R. Tolkien, Harry Potters, Ilkka Remes, Henning Mankell, Jack Higgins, Arto Paasilinna^[5], from J. R. R. Tolkien I have read *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* & other stories, every published work of J. K. Rowling, the *Dragon Lance* series, Terry Pratchett."

Many students mentioned also fantasy cinema in their answers. In general they were very genre-aware, and most of them were read a lot all kinds of literature. In this group the variety of TV-series and cinema was wide. Fantasy movies, TV-series like *Frazier* and *Friends* were mentioned as well as comedies in general and war literature as an special interest. One of the students said: "There is a lot of movies I like, *Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Gladiator*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Pet Cemetery*, animations". Pure entertainment was mentioned, too: "I watch a lot of so called trash from TV". However, daily soap operas were not mentioned.

The fourth category ("avid readers of SF") consist the people, whose main interest in what they read was in science fiction. Avid readers of SF did read fantasy, too, and were active readers in general. Again, here is an example of a quite typical answer: "SF is something I've read a lot, but I like every kind of literature. *Not before Sundown* [by Johanna Sinisalo] was marvelous; the books of Neil Gaiman are good as well as the works of Umberto Eco, Hermann Hesse from whom I have read some books. I haven't read much nonfiction, but I found the books of Stephen Hawking extremely interesting. J. R. R. Tolkien, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman – I haven't read so much fantasy, though – and *Narnia* and *Alice in the Wonderland*, too".

One of the respondents reported that "everything despite daily soap-operas is ok" while another liked SF TV-series, comedy and action. One girl mentioned her favorite movies: *Fight Club*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *A Clockwork Orange*. She says: "In general [I like] even rough movies about reality, or not so much about this world. And intelligence is a good feature in cinema, too." One of the students mentions movies with quite complex narratives: *Memento*, *Cube*, *Children of the Corn* and *2 Days Later* and finally brings up *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* as her favorite. The other feminine respondent juts writes a list: "David Lynch: *Mulholland Drive*, Coen Brothers: *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, Hayako Miyazaki: *Spirited Away* and *Totoro*, movies of Almodovar and Ingmar Bergman". If one wants to make any generalizations, one could say the media profiles in this group remind the media profile of the members of the Finnish SF fans (Suoninen 2003) and the members of Finnish fandom.

Due to the small number of responses it is not possible to draw quantitative conclusions from our data. However, as was mentioned earlier, our results do generally match wider studies of reading of Finnish schoolchildren. In general, the results also provide us with a very typical profile of Finnish young adults in a country that heavily supports literature and reading.

Is there fantasy in this text?

Some definite and patterned differences did show between the four groups.

Avid fantasy readers

My expectations that avid fantasy readers would turn out to be at least relatively experienced readers of fantasy as a genre, were poorly met. By 'experienced fantasy reader' I meant a person with the capacity to deal with fantastical elements in the text, with the means to avoid being irritated by unexplained or weird narrative elements, and with some skills in understanding deeper meanings in the texts. As an opposite case, an 'inexperienced reader' probably would therefore find the fantastical nature of the text difficult or hard to understand. As this essay shows, I was wrong in two ways: the avid fantasy readers did not turn out to be more experienced or aware fantasy readers. Rather, they seemed to analyze the text at a surprisingly superficial level, whereas, as is shown later in the essay, many of those who read very little or no fantasy at all were found to be able to approach the short story in a positive manner, and many of them even derived intelligent pleasure from it.

Actually, avid fantasy readers appeared to struggle desperately in trying to interpret Le Guin's elegant story. The word 'fuzzy' was used repeatedly by avid fantasy readers when they described their struggle to understand the text, and most of the answers displayed strong emotions towards the text. The words 'disgusting', 'crazy', 'gruesome' and 'irritating' came up repeatedly. The following quotation, sounding almost like a cry of help, tells a lot: '-- too difficult -- could not find the idea of it --'. These readers seemed to be really lost.

The constant efforts to find a meaning in the text were particularly striking. The description 'Rather realistic story--' perhaps refers to the author's lively and careful style. However, the struggle to understand this story about a society so unlike our own present was shown too: '-- people in the story differ too much from us today --'. The more abstract narrative levels were perhaps noticed, but were not experienced as familiar elements: 'It was fuzzy -- Well, I've never understood abstract art --'.

Those who have read some fantasy only

There seems to be little difference between avid fantasy readers, and those who have read only some fantasy. In both categories, whether readers were familiar with current fantasy or not, their conception of fantasy seems quite limited. In both cases, students had read the works of Tolkien and some other fantasy novels (mostly Harry Potters), but a lot of other kinds of literature, too. In general, in the group of those who read only some fantasy the story was seen to be simultaneously strange and confusing but also tempting, as in this quotation from one student: 'I was totally confused. -- The end of the story was interesting and fine, because you can complete the end by yourself.'

As with many answers in the other categories there was a deep need to understand the story more clearly: 'The story wasn't logical and clear, as good ones are. I'm lost.' The society in the story was described as remote for the students, as one that could not be made sense of with the resources of a young adult. Even when the text itself was found to be quite an ordinary one, it was nevertheless seen as a strange one: 'Rather average literature -- quite strange terminology'.

Not familiar with fantasy

The strongest expressions such as 'pure disgust', 'the most difficult story I have ever read' and 'I am completely frustrated' were to be found in the answers of the pupils who were not familiar with fantasy at all. They were mostly those who told they had read very little of any kind of literature during the last year, or generally, too. However, ten out of those twenty-three readers who had not read fantasy found the story to be demanding in a positive or interesting manner, even to be a delightful or skillful text that would make you think through its ambiguous demanding narrative elements. One student described the reading experience like this: 'One of the best short stories I've ever read'. On the other hand, such expressions from other students as 'I found the story a little bit fuzzy, first, but after reading it I started to understand it' testified to a surprisingly open attitude towards the text. What was interesting is that, by contrast, only three out of twelve avid fantasy readers used similar, clearly positive expressions.

A considerable confusion concerning the meaning of the story, and the expression of repulsion and disgust, climaxed particularly at the moment of the skinning of the dead mother's arm. But this particular reaction was to be seen in the other groups, too. In general the flute scene created a true Todorovian feeling of the 'merveilleux' – the feeling of the strange and unexplained – and in this group the readers did not even try allegorical and poetic interpretations (Todorov 1993, 25-33). At the same time they did seem to be involved in rather realistic readings.

Avid readers of SF

A common and surprising factor for an absolute majority of the answers in this whole study was the use of powerfully emotional expressions. There were some very interesting exceptions, however. I had already expected that avid readers of science fiction would be able to sustain an analytical attitude towards Le Guin's story as a piece of fantasy using the metaphorical alien culture. In the same way, I expected the avid SF readers to find some deeper structures in the story, and to evaluate it and speculate about it. Surprisingly, this

was shown in a rather special manner in this small group of avid SF readers'. Firstly: the responses lacked strong emotions compared to the answers of the other groups, where the story seemed to arouse disgust, frustration, aggressions (but moments of delight, too). The overall tone of the answers was exceptionally neutral and the answers lacked the strong emotional negative expressions of the other groups – but not emotions themselves.

Naturally, rather neutral analytic answers could be found in the other groups, as well. For example a 16-year-old boy from the non-fantasy-readers group who reads “preferably historical literature, as realistic as possible” asks in his text: “*The idea of the story remains unexplained, though. Do willow, sand, water stream and blood symbolize life/death?*”, and finds the story and its soft tone pleasant. However, the avid SF readers seemed to show their emotions *as part of* their analysis, and with them even sadness and sorrow were not just negative reactions towards the story. Rather, they set the story into a context of historical time, as in this example: “*The story made me think about the perishing of the world and the theme of time made me grieve -- but all my feelings were not sad --*”. Another student analyzed the melancholic aftertaste of the story: “*The story left a little bit of a melancholic after taste, but not sadness. It was somewhat comforting and gave hope even though death and loss were strong elements in the story.*” In a third answer, again, the story had aroused in the reader simultaneous feelings of sadness and happiness “*I felt sadness and partly happiness -- it was quite touching*”.

In this sense it is understandable that four out of five answers could be regarded as a meta-level analyzes of the story. All five students used some sort of philosophical or sociological notions to interpret the society presented in the story. This kind of analytic reflection was quite naturally found in other groups, too, in some form of another, except, much to my surprise, among the avid fantasy readers who seemed mostly to lack it.

However, the young SF readers appeared to read the story metaphorically, i.e., to see it as a speculative mind-game about a fictional society, without trying to find connections to real life. Instead of scrutinizing the story, plot and characters, they seemed to approach it as a philosophical, scientific or sociological dilemma. I was rather amused with this finding, for it could partially explain why flat plots, lousy characters and dizzy narratives have not necessarily been seen as an obstacle to a good SF story among its readers. It was in this group that the deeper analyses, going beyond simple description of the story's events, were found: ‘*The story tells how people have different skills and how this separates people into castes and by respect.*’ One boy pondered the beliefs in Le Guin's description of the society: ‘*Most of all the story was about stability and on the other hand perishing nature of the things, it was about how in the life everything along the duties, believes and ageing [sic] finally vanish like the sand statue in the story.*’ Two girls in this group also looked at the story through religious eyes, trying to use the citizens' angle of view: ‘*I do not believe that death was so great a sorrow to these people. It was seen as a natural thing, as it should be.*’ ‘*Kwatewa made statues in the cave, hiding from the rest of the world. Perhaps he wanted to create for himself a more concrete belief in some way.*’

Then I made a striking discovery. Only avid SF readers stated that the story was ‘easy to read’. This comment did not appear in any of the other groups. The following quotation from one reader is telling, indeed: ‘*It was a touching, fluent text*’. Another reader struggled with the exceptional nature of the text, not because of its difficulty. He says: ‘*The first impression of the story was that the story is quite strange, but the story was surprisingly easy to access.*’ One student told that ‘*[t]he text was good (in some parts) and reasonably easy to read.*’ and another one even claimed the story was too easy, a cliché and its plot easily anticipated: ‘*When Chumo points to the childhood of Kwatewa I actually started to count in my head the stories that had been built this way, and the cliché frustrated me. – You could guess what would happen next.*” One of the students in this group was also rather critical towards the text, and made no comments of simple nature of the short story: ‘*I did not like the story so much, but I did not hate it, either. – There has to be sound and picture before I am able to put my soul into the story.*’. However, even he did not mention any difficulties in reading and understanding the text. I have no simple explanation for this and the number of the informants is not large enough to draw any general conclusions. [\[6\]](#)

Where the young adults place the events of the story

The second task of this essay is to analyze where the young adults place the events of the story in their mind. The idea of situating the ‘fantasy’ always describes our view of the world in some way, too. Throughout history, maps have shown fantastic phenomena, such as monsters, unknown civilizations, heaven and hell, as situated outside the known world: in a deep sea, underground, in the shadows or in the sky. This applies to both Western and Eastern societies, in which chaos, i.e. things outside our organized society or cosmos, has been placed outside the borders of the known civilization (Korhonen, 2005). In general, this can be related to the well known and worldwide political phenomenon of situating the unknown (often the enemy) outside of the borders of one's world.

As mentioned earlier, reading a text involves combining the reader's existing knowledge and previous experiences to produce a reading. In our mediated world, every mention of a place, time and nation is filled with significance, meanings and ideologies. Thus, naming a nation, a specific country or a place means naming one's own imagined social systems and values, or at least imposing on it (Bhabha, 1990, 4). These values and social systems are reflections of our everyday experiences, knowledge, fears and hopes – even of the borderline between loathing and acceptance. Therefore, the act of naming the society in this context must mirror our picture of normality in our everyday life.

In our study, Finnish young adults situated Le Guin's story in North American Indian societies (13), ancient Africa (8), the Far East (6) or India (4), and mainly in the past. Those who read fantasy are more eager to name a location or time for the events. The majority of those who had read some fantasy came up with such places as North-America, Africa, China, Europe and Asia, as well as different possible historical times for the events. These pointed mostly to cultures that were described as 'barbaric', ancient, or underdeveloped. In all groups half of the students did not mention the time or place of the story. However, as can be seen in the next Table, the differences were small.

1. Do not read fantasy literature

- American Indians, Indian tribes, Africa, Asia, India, North America

2. Have read some fantasy

- North American Indians, opposition to Finland, Religions in Africa or Asia, Hinduism, Middle Asia

3. Avid fantasy readers

- African minorities, American Indians, South Africa, Eastern Europe, China, Ice-Age, America before 1492, Mongolia, Africa, far-East

4. Avid SF readers

- East, Japan, Ancient great and civilized cultures of South America or Africa, American Indians

Examples of the typical answers

Clearly the differences between the answers in those four categories give us an insight into the world picture of the readers only at some level. Dividing the readers into four groups according to their habits of reading did not necessary reveal anything of the reading processes or the readers themselves, except for the obvious fact that those who read a lot could utilize their knowledge and imagination in their reading. However, looking more closely at the societies and the locations where pupils situated the story, one can conclude that they suggest an idea about 'the others'; strangers, living in a strange land with odd manners and values, just like the fantastic creatures in ancient maps. Firstly, the places that are mentioned are far away, on the farthest possible side of our own continent or, mostly, on other continents. Secondly, and quite expectedly, the events are situated in lower, even barbaric cultures - except for only one instance, when the SF reader set the events into the 'ancient great and civilized cultures' of South America or Africa (my emphasis). Thirdly, terms such as 'primitive', 'uncivilized', 'isolated', 'barbaric' and 'ancient' were used repeatedly, reinforcing the impression of otherness.

Understanding the results

To understand the nature of the answers it is vital to remember that the pupils were not given any information about either the writer or the genre. Even an experienced reader could be confused in this kind of situation, especially if s/he was expected to produce some sort of analysis knowing that it would be studied by researchers. Thus it is possible that part of the strong emotional responses is actually a reaction towards the experiment, not the text itself. However, all the students filled in the question form and there were very only few answers where the student did not seem to do her/his best.

In one particular situation a group of students raised their voices in the classroom after the task was completed, criticising the story as 'fuzzy' and 'impossible'. Surprisingly, opposition to these protestors very soon emerged, and several students clearly announced that they would read the text carefully and without prejudice. Deeper analysis could tell us more about this, as well as about other differences between the classes and other groups.

In general, the results question the idea of avid readers of fantasy as aware readers of the fantasy genre with special skills to interpret fantastic narration. It actually suggests that those young adults in our study who are categorized as avid fantasy readers perhaps seek the familiar narrative elements of contemporary media fantasy: unicorns, elves, dragons, warriors or heroes on their Tolkienian journeys from fantasy. However, the reason for this remains unexplained. In any case I would still want to argue that in general reading fantasy in

general enhances our abilities to understand cultural differences and other people, and that fantasy literature is an essential tool in supporting individual growth^[7]. The quotation from Jane Yolen in the beginning of this essay refers to the important role of the knowledge of myth and folk literature as a key to our culture. Knowing the archetypes of our ancient tales contributes to a 'broadened and deepened landscape' of our culture. According to Yolen, Albert Lavin also describes myth as a way of organizing the human response to reality, too. However, for Yolen, the most important function of myth and fantasy is its function as a symbolic language, something which child uses naturally (when a child calls a white dog "Snowball", for example), but which opens the door to the shared belief system, a key to the reader's own self (Yolen 1981, 15-18).

The participants in this study are young adults, and it may be pointed out that the ability to open the deeper meanings of a narrative as well as more general knowledge of literature is still only developing at their age. Following the conversations of young people on the most active Internet-site for readers of fantasy and SF, www.risingshadow.net, shows how becoming acquainted with fantasy in its widest sense gives them wider knowledge, thus affecting people's attitudes towards 'difficult' texts. Nevertheless, parallel to the results of this research, the problems faced by avid fantasy readers have been confirmed by the Latvian studies within this same project. However, as was mentioned earlier in this essay, the remaining studies will prove crucial for our final conclusions about the young people's reception of fantasy. This essay concerns only one small part of the questions, and the Finnish corpus only. Still, perhaps even these modest results may shed some light on the reading event described by Ricoeur, and on the process whereby a reader, a text and the world encounter each other in an interesting, even fantastical way.

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[1] I owe a deep debt of gratitude to assistant professor Dr. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak from the Institute of English Studies, Center for Children's and Young Adult Fiction, University of Wrocław and researcher Urpo Kovala from The Department of Art and Culture Studies, Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, University of Jyväskylä for their many valuable comments. Any faults, however, belong to this author.

[2] Still, some questions arise when comparing the answers of the avid readers of SF to the results of my PhD about Finnish SF fandom, as I point out in my chapter "Is there fantasy in this text?".

[3] In the fields of fantastic literature in general and science fiction particularly this has been brought forth in all media, but in a special, delightful manner in the editor David Langford's 'How others see us' column in Ansible magazine (<http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Ansible/>). In those comments of journalists, researchers or sometimes even writers who write science fiction themselves, like Doris Lessing in many of her statements, science fiction is seen simply as space opera, stories of aliens and ray guns.

[4] Rising Shadow (RS) presents introductions to hundreds of authors and thousands of publications, and its 1800 registered users between 6-63 years old (but with an average age 18) write up to 4500 messages per month on 20 different topic areas covering

hundreds of titles. They are typical examples of fandom, experts in the genre. Even though none of avid fantasy readers we interviewed were asked if they would have visited in the homepages of RS, it is likely that many of them do, considering school children's active Internet usage at schools and libraries. In any case, those websites reflect the tastes of young readers, and the critical comments of 'good fantasy' were used as background material when choosing the texts for this study.

[5] Only Henning Mankell and Jack Higgins of all these are not considered fantasy writers. Arto Paasilinna also writes SF, Ilkka Remes writes dystopic SF.

[6] However, there are also some Finnish studies that already have brought up the interesting connections between science fiction literature and its reading, and I will be examining them closely in my PhD about Finnish Fandom. Already in 1962 and again in 1972 Lehtovaara & Saarinen (1976) made a survey of school children's habit of reading. The only strong correlation in the whole study was found between boys who read a lot and those who read 'space adventures'. Later, in the international study of young people in 12 countries, it was found that SF readers are truly heavy readers, and they are also clearly more media orientated and use media more consciously and with better skills than others (Suoninen 2003) In my work I have been able to confirm both these conclusions. Moreover, the SF fans who participated to my study learned to read at a very early age. (Hirsjärvi, 2005) I am impatiently waiting for the results of Farah Mendlesohn's wide international study that should throw more light on the childhood reading habits of SF - readers, too (<http://sfquestions.blogspot.com/>).

[7] In the postcolonial world that aims keeping 'the foreign' out (Smith & Brinker-Gabler 1997, 10) the way that fantastic literature brings strange cultures, values and habits into our consciousness is vital to our tolerance, understanding and knowledge (Hall 1996, 4). One aspect of the importance of fantasy is in its social networks, fandoms, which form exceptionally tolerant societies, where handicapped and isolated people as well as sexual minorities have found free space (Jenkins 1995, 237-243). Fandoms bring about bigger changes in our social life, forming new tribes (Maffesoli 1995, 90-91) that are triggered by popular phenomena, such as the Harry Potter novels. These new kinds of communities are created by affects, active devotion or desire towards the phenomenon (see Grossberg 1992). It could be claimed that fantasy as a genre is devoted to moral and ethical issues, practically to the questions of life and death, and this way it is an excellent tool to young readers intellectual, social and identity growth. Especially science fiction fans seem to be active, critical and aware citizens (Hirsjärvi 2005) which could strongly be seen to be connected to the utopian and critical nature of the genre (Williams 1980). No wonder that its role is seen in preventing the future shock in post-industrial world, too (Toffler, 1970). Fans of fantasy and science fiction also blur the line between real world and their favourite texts. However, they also seem to be very aware of the difference between fantasy and realism in an analytical way, perhaps guided by the symbolic ambivalent struggle between good and evil and by the constant reminders to readers of one's limited ability to perceive the world around us (Ihonen, 2004, 78-79).

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