

LEHTIKUVA / KIMMO MÄNTYLÄ



Science fiction author Hannu Rajaniemi.

VEIKKO SOMERPURO

Heikki Hietala, whose debut novel *Tulagi Hotel* was the first novel by a native Finn to be published in English outside of Finland.

# Second-language literary trailblazers

A new crop of Finnish novelists have discovered a different path to selling books abroad from securing a translation deal.

ALLAN BAIN  
HELSINKI TIMES

**FOR A FINN** to get one of their novels translated is a big accomplishment. The Finnish-language book market is so small that translations hold the key to expanding an author's audience. However, only a handful of novels from this country get translated each year, so most Finnish authors have to make do with a purely domestic audience. Finland-Swede writers are in a slightly better position but face the same problem if they want to sell books outside of the Nordic countries.

There is, of course, another route to getting non-Finns/non-Scandinavians to read something you write – write it in a more widely used language! Yet this is beyond

most writers. Finlandia Prize winner **Sofi Oksanen**, for example, felt understandably bewildered when British reporters asked her why she didn't write in English while she was promoting the English-language translation of her novel *Puhdistus* (*Purge*).

But all this doesn't mean writing a novel in one's second language is impossible. Slovak author **Alexandra Salmela** has proven this to literature enthusiasts in Finland, but the small group of courageous Finns forgoing writing in their native tongue are less celebrated.

## Breaking new ground

One member of the group is **Heikki Hietala**, who published his debut novel *Tulagi Hotel* in April last year, making it, by the author's own reckoning, the first novel by a

native Finn to be published in English outside the country.

"I remembered there was some noise made about someone who wrote a book in English a few years back that probably never got past the publishing hurdle. I did a fair bit of research into this, asking FILI [the main association that promotes Finnish literature abroad] and many other organisations whether they knew of one, but no one did," explains Hietala.

"I am of course aware of **Anselm Hollo**, whose poetry was published already in the sixties, but he's been an expat since 1958," he adds.

Hietala certainly has had time to ponder the issue, as the writing and publishing of *Tulagi Hotel*, a novel set in the post-WWII Solomon Islands, was a 12-year process. What he didn't really consider dur-

ing that time was changing the language the novel was written in.

"I was aiming for the global market from the start, and it is easier to get ahead with an English-language book than first getting it published in Finnish and then getting lucky again with the translation," Hietala points out.

"Of course, there were moments when I had the perfect line for a situation, but in Finnish! – hunting for the right translation was part of the fun of writing."

Another major reason for sticking with the English language was the specialised subject matter: US marine aviation in WWII, not the most popular topic in Finnish!

"To write in Finnish would have meant a massive hunt for terms, and then again in the other direction if the book was translated into English," he says.

## The leader of the pack

Probably the best-known Finnish author plying their trade in a foreign language at present is UK-based **Hannu Rajaniemi**, whose book *The Quantum Thief*, also released last year, has been extremely well received, particularly in his adopted country and the US. The book has

received such praise that it's even made its way into Finnish translation, with reaction in his homeland being described by the author himself as "phenomenal".

It would be easy to presume, without reading his book, that Rajaniemi's success is at least partly a result of the novelty value of a non-native English speaker writing so-called hard sci-fi, using terminology most native speakers would have difficulties understanding let alone producing themselves. However, Rajaniemi doesn't think this has been the case.

"As far as I can tell, the 'second language' aspect was mentioned in a couple of reviews in the UK immediately after the publication but has completely disappeared from all American reviews and subsequent UK reviews. So the book seems to stand on its own merits, which of course makes me very happy."

Hietala has had a similar experience.

"In the reviews of the book, my nationality and native language has never been mentioned. The book had three full editing rounds by native English speakers, as do all books that are published, and I can safely say they added value immensely."

Unlike Hietala, though, Rajaniemi's decision to write in English was mostly the result of circumstance rather than design. Although the author had previously written in Finnish, upon joining a writers' group in Edinburgh it made sense when his turn came to present his own work to have written in a language other members of the group could understand, "because then I could learn from everybody else, get input and be part of that community," he explains.

"I'd also read a lot in English and my everyday environment was in English, so it felt like a natural choice. Al-

so, early on it was easier to go through the growing pains of writing by having something that was one step removed from your emotions and gut reactions to criticism, for example. It was easier to view the text analytically in a second language."

At the same time, Rajaniemi, echoing Hietala, notes that, "all the concepts I've been exposed to and that come into my writing are in English."

## Influence of the web

Like most aspects of modern life, new technology has affected the way a novel is written, published and sold. Nowadays, numerous writing fora exist on the internet where aspiring authors post their own work and comment on the texts others have produced. Additionally, a positive blog entry or review on the right website about an author's work can also help to increase popularity, while social networking sites can be used to both plug books and meet like-minded authors.

"My first published short story *Shibuya no Love* was in the online market *Futurismic.com* and it got quite a bit of attention after being featured in the popular blog *Boing Boing*," says Rajaniemi.

"But," he continues, "my breakthrough story, *Deus ex Homine*, which eventually attracted the attention of my agent **John Jarrold**, was actually via a more traditional short story anthology route. So it [i.e. publishing/sharing stories on the internet] has helped but, in my case, has not been the critical element."

Hietala has made more use of the internet.

"Ten years back it would have been well nigh impossible for a Finn to get published in England. But with the internet, my net presence is just as big or small as it would be if I were based in Britain."



**Hannu Rajaniemi**  
www.tomorrowelephant.net

**Heikki Hietala**  
www.sabulo.com/?cf=9

Rajaniemi is currently working on the next volume in the *Quantum Thief* trilogy, entitled *The Fractal Prince*, which will come out in March 2012. Hietala has recently had two short stories published in *Words to Music: A Short Story Collection*, a book containing the work of 40 authors from 12 countries. His short story collection *Slivers* will be published by PfoxChase Publishing in August.