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Author(s): Hirsjärvi, Irma; Kovala, Urpo

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Two Paths to Fantasy Studies

Irma Hirsjärvi & Urpo Kovala

Fantasy studies is a broad field as it is, and possible inroads to it, especially these days, are numerous. In what follows, we “look backwards” at how we ended up doing research on fantasy and its reception. Those paths are different but have crossed a few times. And at the end, we also look at other paths that are having their beginnings as we speak.

Irma Hirsjärvi (IH): I learned to read at the age of four. My literary appetite was voracious and I remember reading The Bible, a children’s picture dictionary, old Lutheran texts, and even *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway – all this before I was six. When I interviewed Finnish sf fans for my doctoral thesis, they told me quite a similar story. Furthermore, many of them mentioned having become aware of this exceptional genre called science fiction through Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Mars series. This was my case, too, when I read my first Mars book at the age of nine. However, in my doctoral dissertation (2009), it was also shown that reading habits are different with my generation and the younger ones, who have a narrower literary taste but who use the media more extensively. The difference between my generation and the younger ones is also visible in finding other fans. We only found each other as adults, through magazines and sf-clubs. The young today find their networks in childhood, through media.

Urpo Kovala (UK): As for me, I was never a fan of fantasy or sf in any strong sense of the term. I did read them, but hardly more than anyone else doing relatively much reading. The first book of my own was, I think, *Peukaloisen retket (Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige)* by Selma Lagerlöf. Later favourites were *Winnie the Pooh*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jules Verne, Lewis Carroll, *Tiitiäisen satupuu (The Tumpkin’s Wonder Tree)* by Kirsi Kunnas - and *Asterix*, which I’m still almost a fan of. Tolkien came up only in my student years, with e.g. Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, which is one of my favourites. The focus has definitely been on older literature, although I did read some sf proper – Le Guin, Heinlein ja Asimov above all.

IH: It is interesting that I did not recognize in me the affective nature of a fan that was expressed in the interviews of the Finnish sf fans I later studied. I was really interested in sf, but not so much in the authors. Sf was fun, but not “all” sf. Then I accidentally met Kirsi Kunnas, the writer of that nursery rhyme book *Tiitiäisen satupuu* that you mentioned above, which was read to me as a kid, and which I had read to my kids and my grandchildren. This elderly lady was also the mother of two major Finnish rock musicians (in the band Eppu Normaali), and at the moment I saw her, the tender memories of reading the book, and the memories of the deeply meaningful (for me, obviously) rock music of her sons went through my mind, simultaneously, in a second. It literally wiped me off my feet, and really taught me a lesson about meaningful media relations.

Back to the years preceding the arrival of fandom studies in Finland. It was a time when feminist research was forbidden in our department, that of Comparative Literature, University of Jyväskylä. The early feminist scholars in the department were spreading the new ideas through reading groups and workshops, and I knew only a couple of seminar papers and one master's thesis on sf or fantasy to have been done in Finland. We did translations of feminist texts and tried to read the works of J. R. R. Tolkien in English to be able to get any information about the things that we were so interested in. Thanks to Sirkka Heiskanen-Mäkelä we were able to form our own reading group around Tolkien and fantasy. Simultaneously I followed the activities of the amazing Research Centre for Contemporary Culture at the University of Jyväskylä. Under the leadership of professor Katarina Eskola the centre had created a wide network of cultural studies scholars, and it seemed to constantly have such interesting seminars and events, like the visit of the inspiring mass media researcher, professor James Lull.

All this (and several heated discussions around, e.g., the total absence of women in the lectures on symbolism in literature) encouraged me to suggest writing my MA thesis about Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as a feminist utopia. Thanks to professor Sinikka Tuohimaa, the topic was accepted. After my graduation I was chosen to work in the Council of Central Finland to run EU projects on cultural tourism in Central Finland for four years. But time passed, and meanwhile Urpo was following the most interesting things...

UK: I got the very first impulse to launch fandom studies in the mid-90s, in a conference arranged at the then University of Joensuu in Finland. There Matti Savolainen, literary scholar, commented on the extensive reception studies presented there and asked – without using the term “fan” – couldn't you, even for once, try and turn your gaze to special audiences, for instance those of horror literature? I thought – why not, as soon as I'm done with my PhD thesis, I'll set up a project like that.

Actually I tried it out foolhardily long before defending my dissertation (which was a theoretical treatise on contextualism). In the early 1990s, I had spotted the rise of a new research orientation, fandom studies, and got access to a couple of books, at least *Science Fiction Audiences* by Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch. Aware of Irma's active involvement in sf fandoms, I suggested launching together a research project in which she could take up a doctoral dissertation on sf fandom. We did write a research proposal, which however – understandably, from today's perspective – did not get us any funding. It was almost ten years later that Irma could finally start her dissertation project in practice in 2003.

At around that same time, in 2002 and 2003, I edited the first Finnish-language textbook on fandom studies, a collection of articles called *Kulttikirja* (Cult book, SKS 2003), together with Tuija Saresma. For that volume, Irma wrote an article called “Star Trek phenomenon in the light of fandom studies” and I a theoretical piece on fandom research. A bit later Irma and I launched what would become a tradition of fandom studies conferences – the first one was arranged in 2006 and the latest to date in 2016 with the topic “the rise of nerd cultures”.

IH: As a single parent of two kids it was practically impossible to take up postgraduate studies until I got funded by The Finnish Cultural Foundation in 2003. That was practically a miracle. Our local sf society arranged a successful series of sf and fantasy events at the Jyväskylä Arts festivals, and we became an active agent in an international fandom network. During the first year of my PhD work, I was also involved in creating the Finncon Society, ensuring that the rising support of literary foundations for the society and the annual funding of the Ministry of Culture to the Annual Finncon-event (Finnish science fiction and fantasy convention) were administered properly. So I was simultaneously a member of the fandom family and doing my research on it. No wonder the international Aca-fan web pages felt like a familiar venue.

For me, sf has been a revolutionary genre, full of societal critique, but also the land of freedom, as a human and as a woman. Radical feminist groups landed in Finland in the early 80s, and I joined the activities. It must be said that it was from feminist research that I got the best kicks for research on reception. I ended up asking again and again what is audience, what is reception, how do readers and fandom and media intertwine, how do the power of the production machines, writer, and fandom converge, what do we talk about when we talk about culture, and whose culture? Now I see that when we wrote the first project proposal, there were no proper words yet to describe what we have later been doing, to make a convincing proposal.

UK: At the beginning of the so-called fantasy boom in the early years of the 21st century, the department of Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, arranged a lecture series on fantasy, which turned out to be a huge success. Partly on the basis of the lectures, Irma, Kristian Blomberg and me compiled a collection of essays and offered it to BTJ Kirjastopalvelu for publishing. The result was two volumes, *Fantasian monet maailmat* (Worlds of fantasy, 2004) and *Totutun tuolla puolen* (Fields of fantasy, 2005). The third volume, an English-language one, independent of the lecture series, was in the works, but was never finished.

A continuation of sorts, however, to those volumes and to the extensive reception and audience studies carried out at our homebase, Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, was the comparative research project “Young people reading fantasy”, which was part of the Baltic Ring project of the writers houses in the Baltic sea area, funded by the Culture 2000 programme. The project looked at the reception of one short story (“The Kerastion”) by Ursula Le Guin among secondary school students in six countries of the Baltic Sea region. There were one or more local researchers in each country – in Finland, Erkki Vainikkala and us two. As a natural continuation to this project, Irma received an invitation by Martin Barker to carry out the Finnish part of his extensive “World Hobbit Project” audience research project.

IH: While writing my PhD, I was shuttling between literary studies and youth, reception and media studies, and looked at the fandom phenomenon through meaning making, economy, reception, and social networking. In all of them, fantasy seemed to be a very interesting factor. The experiences in international sf fandom, fellow researchers of fantasy and my work in different projects have all influenced the way I see fantasy as an essential part of everyday life and society. During my PhD project – mostly funded by The Finnish Cultural Foundation – I was also funded by the Academy of Finland in professor Tuomo Lahdelma’s project “Cult – community – identity”. Later, I was a Finnish representative in European Union *COST* initiative “Transforming audiences, transforming societies”, and a researcher and coordinator of the comparative “Global Comparative Youth Media Participation” project, which was led by Professor Sirkku Kotilainen and included researchers from Finland, Egypt, India, and Argentina. This has all been instructive and even transformative for me, but I wish to be able to return to utopias, as they are a hot topic just now, in this long dystopian time. Keijo Lakkala is currently editing a collection of articles on utopias and I wish to contribute to the volume.

During the last years the most demanding job has been the almost three years long attempt to get funding for the Finnish researchers in the “World Hobbit Project” led by Professor Martin Barker at the University of Aberystwyth. The funding for the Finnish sub-project “Uses of Fantasy” was garnered from The Finnish Cultural Foundation and the scholars funded were Tanja Välisalo, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Maria Ruotsalainen, Jyrki Korpua and me, with Urpo Kovala, Jani Ylönen ja Minna Siikilä taking part as non-funded members. As a consequence of our participation in that project, we are also in in Barker’s next global “Game of Thrones Research Project”.

The GoT project is really something else. Fantasy is characterised by a strong livedness, and in the past few decades, also with adults, a clearly articulated fandom. One might think that the

global fantasy media spectacles started with *Star Wars*, which was enhancedly subcultural and a thing for children, youngsters, and nerds. But that is not the whole story. Due to the new media, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy had a global online audience, and following that phenomenon gave us old fans/fan researchers some extra heartbeat. At the same time in Finland there was this rapidly emerging anime thing with dressing up and hoards of fans. It was actually introduced here in Finland by sf fans – and eventually turned the field of the Finnish fantasy fandom upside down. Now we have ended up in a situation where it is almost a routine thing to set up a multidisciplinary research project on the reception or audiences of a global fantasy text.

Along with the media spectacles, there is a renewed need to understand the audiences and reception of fantasy, not the least because of the participatory cultures connected with it. What we need is basic research – cases on which to ground fandom theory. Thinking about Barker's projects on the audiences of the two Tolkien trilogies and now *GoT*, it feels like we are facing something new. They allow us to combine the study of transnational audiences, the use of widely different materials, and qualitative and quantitative research.

UK: Of us two, I think I am the brakeman – irritatingly suspicious of hard-and-fast generalisations, a priori conclusions, and anything even vaguely reminiscent of hype. Fantasy, as any genre, has multiple determinations, and fantasy studies, as any research, require a degree of perspectivism – just as you suggest above. I also agree that the main “affordance” of these genres has to do with the indirect representation and analysis of contemporary society. My main interest is perhaps in the meaning production aspect in the reception of fantasy and the cultural functions of fantasy. These things, among many others, are looked at in the “World Hobbit Project” and the “Game of Thrones Research Project” led by Martin Barker and others. But in addition to exciting and fruitful contextualisations, it is important to keep the analysis of devices and resources of expression in the picture as well.

IH: Finfar, the Finnish Society of Science Fiction and Fantasy Researcher, founded in 2013, and the refereed journal *Fafnir* that it publishes, together constitute a significant turning point in the Finnish field of fantasy studies. Science fiction activist Juri Timonen's offer to make a website for the society (made in the night out of the Helsinki Finncon) was pondered on for a moment, and after I phoned professor emerita Liisa Rantalaiho and researcher Merja Polvinen, the plan for setting up the society was made. The founding meeting was held in Tampere in 2013. The society started to gather together young researchers into yearly seminars and supported their activities and international mobility.

It has indeed been inspiring to follow the careers of a whole legion of promising fantasy researchers. For instance Sanna Lehtonen's (now Tapionkaski) doctoral dissertation and her studies on fantasy literature for children and youth were of high international quality from the first beginning. Together with Jyväskylä “nerd scholars” and a number of games studies scholars, these researchers now constitute something of a new school of fantasy research of their own. Our research group taking part in the “World Hobbit Project” produced perhaps the most insightful analysis in the project, based on the Finnish materials. Jyrki Korpua, who defended his doctoral thesis on J. R. R. Tolkien in 2015, is now editing a collection of articles on fantasy research, aimed for the general audience, together with Tanja Välisalo, Urpo, and me. Both Jyrki and Tanja, who is expert in transmediality, game studies, and the furry phenomenon, were part of the Hobbit project as well. Maria Ruotsalainen comes from game studies and her cup of tea is web analysis, and Aino-Kaisa Koistinen focuses on media and popular culture, science fiction (especially in TV series), gender studies, and posthumanism.

The Finnish sub-project of the “World Hobbit Project” also includes Minna Siikilä, who is doing her doctoral dissertation on the Internet debates over the intertextual relations between

Tolkien, Rowling, and Paolini, and Jani Ylönen, who is writing his PhD thesis on the issues of humanity, ethics, and societal critique aroused by gene technology in contemporary science fiction. Comics research is in the picture as well, with two scholars who work with comics at our department. Katja Kontturi defended her doctoral thesis on Disney comics as postmodern fantasy in 2014, Essi Varis is doing her dissertation on comics characters, and Oskari Rantala is writing his thesis on the narrative techniques and medial self-awareness of Alan Moore's comics. The list of topics covered by these scholars illustrates well the versatility of contemporary fantasy and Finnish science fiction studies: science fiction, feminist posthumanism, gene technology, gender, dogs, ethics, monster theory, representation...

IH and UK: Looking at young fantasy scholars in Jyväskylä and elsewhere, it would not seem all that far-fetched to speak of a new generation of fantasy studies. That generation would be characterised above all by multidisciplinary, interest in inter- and transmediality, the use of many different kinds of research materials, and a focus on the multiaspectuality of fantasy and its potential for cultural critique. The approach has extended far beyond aesthetic analysis, in a narrow sense of the term, to include versatile, theoretically informed contextualisation. Theoretical horizons increasingly consist of new materialism and posthumanism as well as feminist approaches. Genres studied cover not only fiction but also games, movies, comics, and metatexts such as Internet discussions. Accounts of reception, fandom, and consumption are often combined with analyses of productional aspects. Methodwise, digital information gathering and combinations of qualitative and quantitative data are typical.

Fantasy is thus studied in connection with the material world, including market economy with its forces and counter-forces, and even advertising does not escape the critical and analytical gaze. This new generation of scholars, it seems, can both identify as and study (fantasy) fans and nerds without having to do the apologetics of the first generation of fandom scholars.

It has been exciting and rewarding for both of us to follow this new phase. Just like fictional heroes – and now you have to excuse a degree of pomp – have evolved from adventurous hulks to thinking human beings, fantasy scholars have come out from the margins and entered the avant garde of the human sciences.

Biographies: Dr Irma Hirsjärvi is an independent scholar in connection with Research Centre for Contemporary Culture projects. She is one of the founding members of Finfar, member of the editorial board of the publication series Nykykulttuuri (Contemporary Culture), columnist and politician. Her PhD was about the literary community of science fiction fans, and she has worked in several EU cultural and research projects as researcher and coordinator. Her interests are in science fiction and its audiences, fandom, activism, political populism, and feminist utopias.

Dr. and docent Urpo Kovala works as Senior Researcher at the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, University of Jyväskylä. He is member of the advisory board for Fafnir and editor in charge of the publication series Nykykulttuuri (Contemporary Culture). His earlier research interests were in the areas of theory of meaning, contextualism, and cultural translation studies. His present work has to do with reception and fandom studies, fantasy, and the study of cultural discourses and rhetoric in connection with populism and activism.