

JYX



**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Lönnroth, Harry

**Title:** Foreword

**Year:** 2020

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © The holders of Lauri Viita's copyrights and WSOY, 2020

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Lönnroth, H. Foreword. In L. Viita, & V. Mattila (Eds.), *Earth's Hardy Chattels* (pp. 3-6). The Lauri Viita Society. Lauri Viita –seura ry. <http://www.lauriviitamuseo.fi/novel-earths-hardy-chattels/>

## Foreword

The Finnish author Lauri Viita was born in the village of Pispala in the parish of Pirkkala on 17 December 1916. He was born at a time when winds of change were blowing in both Finland and Europe; Finland won her independence in December 1917, and the following year the young Finnish nation was tragically divided in a civil war. The city of Tampere and its environs were particularly heavily embroiled in the fighting. In 1937, Pispala, where Viita spent his childhood and youth, “the Red pocket by the side of Tampere” and “the Creator’s jigsaw”, to use Viita’s own words from the pages of *Earth’s Hardy Chattels*, became part of the city of Tampere. Since the 1800s Tampere had risen to become Finland’s leading industrial city, commonly dubbed “the Manchester of Finland”.

Viita lived some thirty years in Pispala, a time when it was a distinctly working-class area, while Tampere was “an infernal technological and social churn” and the main agglomeration of Finnish heavy industry. The city stands on a narrow strip of land between two lakes, transected by rapids from which the city drew its power. As it says in *Earth’s Hardy Chattels*: “Onwards! Onwards! One lake pushed and the other lake pulled and in between was Tampere town and the Tammerkoski rapids.” This is one of the many quotations fresh in the minds of Finnish readers.

“Before you call anybody strange, go with him and see where he comes from,” wrote Viita in his *Suutarikin, suuri viisas* (A shoemaker is a wise man too) anthology in 1961, and for Viita, that place was Pispala. Pispala and Pispala Ridge, the highest gravel ridge in Finland, are pivotal for everything Viita did in his life; it was his whole world, as he himself put it. The houses where Viita was born and where he spent his childhood are still there on Pispala Ridge, overlooking Lake Pyhäjärvi. Pispala and its denizens are the very moraine (in Finnish *moreeni*) of which Viita writes in the first few pages of his novel of the same name: “They came from the country,

not just from the north, but from south, east and west. From all sides came the never-ending stream of human moraine, of Earth's hardy chattels, whose dreams made them take their fate in their own hands."

Lauri Viita's life was cut short. On 21 December 1965 he was involved in a traffic accident at Mäntsälä in southern Finland and the following day in Helsinki died of his injuries, aged only 49. He is buried in Kalevankangas cemetery in Tampere.

Viita married three times and had in total seven children, born between 1940 and 1963. His first marriage lasted from 1939 to 1948. His second marriage, to the author Aila Meriluoto (1924–2019), lasted from 1948 to 1956, and the marriage of two writers was not without its problems. Meriluoto subsequently wrote an acclaimed biography of Viita published in 1974 under the title *Lauri Viita: Legenda jo eläessään* (Lauri Viita: A legend in his lifetime). Viita's third marriage lasted from 1962 to his death.

As mentioned, Pispala was Viita's home and it is with Pispala that he is invariably associated, although he spent most of his adult life elsewhere in Finland. In the late 1940s, he lived in Orimattila in southern Finland and in Pieksämäki in eastern Finland. In the 1950s, when his mental health began to fail, Viita lived in various localities in Finland, including the village of Murole in Ruovesi, and also in Helsinki. He spent his last years in Kellokoski Hospital in Tuusula in southern Finland. There he was treated for his mental health problems. It has subsequently been speculated that Viita was suffering from bipolar disorder rather than schizophrenia.

Like his contemporary, the author Väinö Linna (1920–1992), Viita was a self-taught writer with scanty formal education. He attended primary school in Pispala in the 1920s, continued to the Classical Lyceum of Tampere, but left in 1933. His father Emil (1870–1941) was a carpenter and general handyman, and, like his father, Lauri Viita also worked as a carpenter.

In the course of his life Viita published four anthologies of poetry and two novels. Although in terms of titles (only six) he was not particularly prolific, he nevertheless merits a place in the canon of Finnish post-war literature. Professor Yrjö Varpio, whose doctoral dissertation *Lauri Viita: Kirjailija ja hänen maailmansa* (Lauri Viita: The author and his world) was published in 1973, has accomplished distinguished research on Viita's oeuvre from a biographical, societal

and historical perspective. Varpio later researched among others the Mäkelä Circle, a literary circle influential in Tampere in the period 1946–1954, to which also belonged Väinö Linna, the author of *Tuntematon sotilas* (Unknown Soldiers) in 1954 and the trilogy *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star) in 1959–1962. In the 2000s Viita has begun to interest a new generation of scholars and readers, with new doctoral dissertations and new editions, and Viita's life has become a subject for film and theatre adaptations.

Viita first made his appearance as a poet, and indeed a poet he was, although his best-known work is a novel. According to Varpio, Viita himself insisted that *Moreeni* was not a novel but simply *Moreeni*. Viita's first work, *Betonimylläri* (Concrete mixer), was published in 1947 and is considered among his best, followed in 1949 by the collection of fairytales *Kukunor*, or "A fairytale for mankind". His masterpiece *Moreeni* came out in 1950, and in the 1950s also the anthology *Käppyräinen* (Crooked, 1954). Works published in the 1960s include a collection of poems and aphorisms entitled *Suutarikin, suuri viisas* in 1961 and the novel *Entäs sitten, Leevi* (So what then, Leevi) in 1965. This was to be Viita's last work and he had envisaged it as the first part of a trilogy. Viita's *Kootut runot* (Collected poems) were published in 1966, soon after his death. In 2016 the anthology *Ne runot, jotka jäivät* (The poems that remained) was published posthumously, containing poems not included in the earlier anthologies. Among Viita's best-known poems are "Alfhild" from the *Betonimylläri* anthology, named after his mother, Alfhild Josefina (1874–1949), and the potpourri "Onni" (Happiness), which came out in the literary publication *Parnasso* on the day of his death.

*Moreeni* marked a significant literary development in Finland, and it was immediately well received in the domestic press. According to Varpio, the pervasive theme of the work is a description of the lives of a working-class family. These Viita portrays against the background of three historical events: the formation of a working-class suburb in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Civil War of 1918, and developments in the aftermath of that war – economic growth and a variety of hardships. The novel also includes documentary elements originating in Viita's own life. Varpio sees as a characteristic feature of *Moreeni* the respect Viita has for the lives of his fellow men, but the language also breaks new ground in its style.

It has been claimed that Moreeni has no real protagonist. However, earlier research has put Iisakki – or in this English translation – Isaac Nieminen centre stage, with his wife Joosefiina and their youngest child, Erkki. Varpio identifies in the character of Isaac traits of the author's father, Emil Viita, whereas Joosefiina might be documentarily perceived as Viita's mother Alfhild, and Erkki as the young Lauri Viita himself. The Nieminen family has other children, seven of them, just as in Viita's own childhood home.

The Finnish language was everything to Viita, and his mastery of it was superb. Viita was in every sense "a man of words". In the anthology *Suutarikin, suuri viisas*, he himself has this to say about the relation between author and language: "If an author hasn't got a grip on his language, he cannot have a grip on anything else." Perhaps for this very reason Viita has not been extensively translated; his mode of expression is so rich and his energy so powerful, and this has inevitably inhibited the spread of his fame beyond Finland. Yet Viita deserves to be read in the wider world, thus Virginia Mattila's translation into English, doing justice to the source text, is a more than welcome addition to the series of Viita translations. This is a contribution to culture more than a hundred years after Lauri Viita's birth in 1916. Moreeni has previously been translated into only five languages: German in 1964, Swedish in 1965, Polish in 1970, Hungarian in 1977, and Russian in 1981. And now at last a translation into English.

Harry Lönnroth