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Title: 'You Grow Up to Be A Duck Fan In Your Mother's Womb' : The Bond Between Finnish People And Donald Duck

Year: 2022

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Kontturi, K. (2022). 'You Grow Up to Be A Duck Fan In Your Mother's Womb' : The Bond Between Finnish People And Donald Duck. In P. Hobbs (Ed.), *Interpreting and Experiencing Disney : Mediating the Mouse* (pp. 40-50). Intellect. https://doi.org/10.1386/9781789384741_2

‘You Grow Up to Be a Duck Fan in Your Mother’s Womb’: The Bond Between Finnish People and Donald Duck

Katja Kontturi

Introduc(k)tion

Finnish people love Donald Duck. It is a nationally known fact that can be based upon the readership of the weekly comic magazine *Aku Ankka*, which bears the Finnish name of the temperamental, sailor-suited duck. Since the 1970s, it has been one of the most-read magazines in the country.

According to the readership survey conducted between 2017 and 2018, *Aku Ankka* was the third most-read magazine in Finland, with the readership of 540,000. It was superseded only by the two major, free customer magazines of Finnish grocery store chains, Yhteishyvä (S-group stores) and Pirkka (Kesko group stores) (KMT ~~2017–2018~~ 2018). In a country of approximately 5.5 million citizens, these numbers are significant. Finnish people know their Duck artists, quote the lines from the comics, and vote for Donald Duck in the national elections if there are no suitable candidates. Finns They empathize with Donald because there is something similar in the stereotypic, gloomy Finnish personality.

But what are the reasons behind Donald’s popularity? As I was working on my doctorate on Disney comics, I realized-noticed how everyone was extremely interested about-in my research, and that even a regular citizen had detailed knowledge of the comics I was writing about.

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To [study](#) the significance of both Donald Duck and the magazine *Aku Ankka* in the lives of Finnish people, I conducted an online survey. [Done](#) via the Webropol online survey tool, [it was conducted](#) between late May and mid-June 2017 and was spread among Finnish student e-mail lists and social media, including my own blog, Facebook contacts and Twitter. The timing was somewhat challenging since schools were closing for summer. Had I begun the study earlier, I might have received more [responses from](#) underage pupils and students.

During the four weeks the survey was open, I received 284 answers: the youngest were under the age of 10, the oldest over 71. [The maximum participation](#) was from [the 21–25 age group](#) (18 per cent); 55.3 per cent were women, 41 per cent men, a few of the informants did not want to announce their gender and 9 were non-binary. Based on the slight dominance of female informants, we can conclude that Disney comics in Finland are read by all genders, not just boys or men.

To analyse my data, I searched for the most repeated answers [to](#) the open-ended questions. Based on these answers, I formed keywords that I could classify. I then compared these keywords to the answers [to](#) the structured questions to back up my findings. [In this manner](#), I was able to use thematic analysis and classify the results under different themes. Furthermore, I used close reading to analyse the answers I received for open-ended questions such as: ‘What is the best thing in *Aku Ankka* magazine?’, ‘To what things do you identify with in *Aku Ankka*?’ and ‘Based on your opinion, what’s the reason behind Donald Duck’s popularity in Finland?’ With the help of these questions, I was able to identify the basic reasons why Finns still continue to subscribe to the comic magazine and why they prefer Donald Duck over Mickey Mouse.

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This section is an introductory overview of the significance of Disney comics in Finland.

Firstly, I will present the previous studies [on](#) Disney comics. [Thereafter](#),

I will introduce the main results about the significance of *Aku Ankka* comic magazine for the Finnish people. The third section will concentrate on the character of Donald Duck and the importance he bears in Finnish culture. I will conclude by tying the results to the concept of cultural identity presented by Stuart Hall ([1999](#)). Hall's views on cultural identity can be applied [to analyse](#) readers' reception of Disney comics and how people identify with fictional characters as well as how they see the contents of the comics reflecting their own culture.

In case I have needed to use citations from the informants, I have translated them into English but included the Finnish originals in endnotes. The informants are marked with initial of their gender followed by their age group.^[1]

[The previous Disney comics research](#)

Even though Disney comics are substantially popular in Finland, this kind of reception research has not yet been made, apart from general readership surveys. The two doctoral dissertations [on the subject](#) done in Finland deal with the translation of the Disney comics (Toivonen [2001](#)) and fantasy and postmodernity in Don Rosa's Disney comics (Kontturi [2014](#)). Next to countless non-academic essays dealing with Disney comics there are only a handful of academic articles discussing [these](#) comics.

Though comics and popular culture scholars [such as](#) Martin Barker ([1990](#)), David Kunzle ([1990](#), [1995](#)), Thomas Andrae ([2006](#)), Andreas Platthaus ([2010](#)) and Peter Schilling Jr ([2014](#)) have targeted the works of Carl Barks (1901–2000), the most (in)famous study continues to be Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology*

in the *Disney Comic* (1971). However, the work of Dorfman and Mattelart cannot be labelled as a critical, academic research due to its pamphlet format targeted against the cultural imperialism of the United States.

Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (2011) deals with the ideological background of the products of Disney's vast industry but concentrates more on animated works, like most Disney research does. However, she notes that Disney comics should be dealt with separately from the animation, not only because of the different format but also because of the freedom comic artists like Carl Barks had compared with the animators working in Disney studios during the 1940s and 1950s (Wasko 2011: 110, 145).

Italian Disney historian Alberto Becattini's encyclopaedic *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* (2016) offers an interesting insight into the amount of Disney comics published globally but refrains from acknowledging the popularity of these comics in Finland. My chapter offers an initial insight to the readers of Disney comics. This is pertinent not only to the field of comics research, which rarely focuses on readership, but also to the field of cultural studies: American origin Disney comics have been adopted to Europe and adapted to be a part of our culture.

Figure 2.1 Here

Aku Ankka: A magazine like no other

Aku Ankka magazine was launched in Finland at the beginning of the year 1952², the same year Helsinki hosted the summer Olympics and Coca Cola was introduced to Finns. Finland was recovering from the war against Russia and was turning towards the West instead of the East. American popular culture was embraced during the economic boom, and the so-called baby boom generation had just been born in the previous decade. This was the perfect time for

Disney comics to be published in Finland: *Aku Ankka* was the first four-coloured comic magazine meant for children of all ages and genders.

The versatility of the magazine has kept its ground: 69 per cent of the informants stated that *Aku Ankka* is meant for everyone, even for adult readers. One informant's answer to that question was quite vivid: '[*Aku Ankka* is meant] for 0–500 fantastica trillion years old, and cats as well' (N₁ 31–35y).⁸ The obscure number refers to Scrooge's fortune which, according to Don Rosa's *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, is 'five multiplujillion, nine impossidillion, seven fantastica trillion dollars and sixteen cents' (2005: 7). Even though many of the elderly informants said that the magazine is not the same it used to be and saw it presently to be targeted more and more to the children of primary school age, the majority of Finnish informants still see *Aku Ankka* as a magazine suitable for everyone.

What made *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* extremely popular during the 1950s in the United States were the comics by Carl Barks. Barks created the entire city of Duckburg and many new characters to support Donald, Daisy and the nephews and wrote and drew adventures that did not underestimate child readers yet were entertaining enough for older comic enthusiasts, while demonstrating the concept of the American dream (Andrae 2006: 8, 19).

In the early issues of <i>Aku Ankka</i> , the comics of Carl Barks were a regular sight, and many young
Table 2.1 Here

Despite this disappointment, the informants noted more positive [than negative](#) elements

Interestingly, when asked the reasons behind the popularity of the magazine, 22 adult readers noted that *Aku Ankka* had had a respectable marketing mechanism: it was launched at the perfect time and in full colour; 23 informants stated that the magazine had not had, and still does not have, any rivals, which [has](#) made [the](#) rise [in its](#) current popularity [possible](#); [and](#) 17 informants brought up the previously mentioned historical reasons [—](#) recovering from

the war, the need for escapism during the recession, the boom of American popular culture and the general optimism caused by the ending of the war.

However, the most often mentioned reasons for the popularity were the ‘family magazine’ aspect (suitable for everyone, 16.6 per cent) and the tradition and conspicuousness which was noted by the whole third of the informants. Finns grow up with *Aku Ankka*. When parents have a good experience [with](#) the magazine in their childhood, they cherish the memories of the comics and are more likely to subscribe the magazine [for](#) their children. This leads to a tradition of generations that was also visible in the results of the survey: many informants had associated *Aku Ankka* with memories of a summer spent in the house of grandparents or the family cabin reading old *Aku Ankka* magazines over and over again. [Moreover](#), 35.5 per cent had learned to read from *Aku Ankka*. One informant (F, 51–55y) aptly [summarizes](#) the thoughts of many:

Aku Ankka has always been made with love and great expertise (drawings, stories, language). Its stories are tight to present day. The same story offers an experience to a small child, insightful teenager and an adult grasping *Aku Ankka*. You grow up to be a Duck fan in your mother’s womb. The magazine has always interested all genders and generations.¶

[Yet](#), almost 42 per cent [felt that](#) the main reason [for](#) the magazine’s popularity in Finland rests on the identification [with](#) its anti-hero protagonist, the unlucky Donald Duck.

Donald: Practically a Finn

When Mickey Mouse started to turn into ‘an international bore’, the Walt Disney Studios needed a new star who could return the insolence Mickey had lost. The new character was ‘the anti-Mickey, or rather all the things that Mickey had been and more’. Donald Duck’s first appearance was in an animation *The Wise Little Hen* in 1934. Donald was an irascible, selfish duck who

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wore a blue sailor suit with a sailor's cap. By 1935, the Duck started to take over the Mouse (Gabler 2007: 200–202).

Walt Disney's biographer Neal Gabler offers some reasons behind the popularity of Donald Duck:

In some respects Donald Duck seemed to offer audiences both a vicarious liberation from the conventional behavior and morality to which they had to subscribe in their own lives and which the Duck clearly transgressed.

(2007: 202)

Flora O'Brien notes that Donald was a product of his era: 'his character development parallels the sociological changes in America during the 1930s' (1984: 23). The shifts in population, the changed values from rural to urban as well as the variety of jobs and depression created dislike for society among people. Donald was a 'Depression Duck', who possessed a fighting spirit that ensured survival in problematic times. This period was in parallel to the publication era of *Aku Ankka* in Finland, as stated in the previous section.

Even though the character of Donald Duck has changed from the animations, he is still the unlucky, hot-tempered anti-hero, yet always persistent in trying again. There is something appealing in his personality: almost half of the informants (47.35 per cent) chose Donald Duck as their favourite character in the Disney comics. The second most favourite, Donald's uncle Scrooge McDuck, received less than 20 per cent of the votes. In comparison, six of the informants (2 per cent) stated that Mickey Mouse was their favourite.

When asked whether the informant would choose Mickey over Donald, the dominance of Donald became even more obvious: 85.5 per cent chose Donald over Mickey, and some added exclamation marks, wrote DONALD in capital letters or added defining words such as 'absolutely', 'always' and 'obviously'. One informant (M, 16–20y) even stated that 'there is only

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one answer to this and we both know it' ⁸ without giving the actual answer. To him, the choice was so obvious that I should have known it.

The reasons for choosing Donald as a favourite character were typically based on his personal
Table 2.2 Here

Donald Duck was characterized to be a person of bad luck but with a warm heart. He is a

In her article about Finnishness and Finnish identity, Merja Jalava states that Finland is the best country to observe its weaknesses because Finns have a negative and underrated self-image as a nation. She notes that emphasizing the deficits and weaknesses is a part of Finnish speech and its function is to build a common, imagined national identity. By undermining their talents, Finnish people create social cohesion, and often this is foregrounded through the negation: the 'us versus them' attitude (Jalava [2012](#): 164–65). The most typical way Finnish people build their national identity is during [the](#) ice hockey world championship games against Sweden, where Finland is the underdog and Sweden is the 'Gladstone Gander' who comes in the final second and makes three goals. ⁹

Jalava's observations are in parallel with Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity. Basically, Hall states that cultural identities are mere discourses that consist and change their form as a part and in relation to the representation. How a certain nationality has been represented in the culture defines the cultural identities associated with that nation. For Hall, national culture is a way to build significances which guide and organize both our actions and our perceptions ([1999](#): 46–47). Following Hall, Donald Duck has basically been adopted as part of Finnish representation. The stories, memories and images all help to build the imagined community and the national identity ([1999](#): 47). According to my survey, Donald Duck is associated with several Finnish cultural characters because of his anarchist, anti-hero attitude. This association helps the readers to identify with Donald more easily and place him as

a part of the negative, underrated Finnish identity. He fails like we do; he is like us. This identification is spread through the generations of comic readers thus creating the cultural representation of Donald Duck as a Finnish icon.

Conclusion

The popularity of Donald Duck in Finland seems to be based on the imperfections of his personality, because they make him a very human character. Donald's life is not perfect, and he rarely gets the glory he deserves, even though he might be the actual hero of the story (Kontturi 2014: 130). This imperfection is something we Finnish people identify with easily: in our nation's cultural identity, we are the underdogs who rarely succeed in anything next to big Russia or perfect Sweden. In the survey, 42 [per cent](#) of the informants repeated this talent-undermining speech by identifying with the mishaps of Donald Duck.

But it is not only Donald Duck who is significant to Finnish people, but the magazine *Aku Ankka* as well. The magazine's over 65 years long history tells a story of a comic that has been a part of several generations. People learn to read from it, some survive school and work by reading it and some find their career path through *Aku Ankka*.

[Continuity](#) and permanence are some of the main [features of](#) the magazine. Even though *Aku Ankka* has an online service, from which one can read all the magazines published in Finland, only 13 per cent of the informants had it. On the contrary, it was the physical copy of the magazine that was waited for, fought [over](#) with siblings and read with family and friends.

This was a mere 'introduc(k)tion' to the cultural significance of Donald Duck in Finland and for Finnish people. More research and detailed analyses are required to cover all the data

received from the survey. In addition, it would be beneficial to do a comparative study with, for instance, Italian readership of Disney comics.

As for Finns, their relationship with Donald is still on sound foundations. Following informant #57 (M, 41–45y), there are two things we do not exchange and the first is Donald Duck.

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Table 2.1: The best things in *Aku Ankka* magazine (N=271)

Keywords	N	%Percentage	Rationale
Stories	143	52.7 %	Non-violence, adventure, variability, twists
Language	107	39.4 %	Diversity, translation, colourfulness
Humour	61	22.5 %	
Certain artists	56	20.6 %	Carl Barks, Don Rosa, Kari Korhonen
Characters	48	17.7 %	Identification, familiarity
Style of drawing	31	11.4 %	
Intertextuality	24	8.8 %	History, society, culture, twisted names

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Table 2.2: Why did you choose Donald as your favourite character? (N=134)

Keyword	N	Per-centage
Bad luck, mishaps	31	23 %
Identification	28	20.8 %
Emotional variety, warm-heartedness	17	12.7 %
Sympathetic	16	12 %
Tenaciousity	14	10.5 %
Versatility	14	10.5 %
Main character	14	10.5 %

Figure 2.1: The magazines are collected in folders and the pocketbooks are usually travelling companions. The albums became collectables. Photo: Katja Kontturi.

To clarify, when citing the respondents, I will use the abbreviation M for male, F for female, N for non-binary and X for those who preferred not to state their gender, when citing them respectively.

² The inaugural issue was published in late December 1951, but the magazine was properly launched in 1952.

³ 0–500 fantastisiljoonavuotiaille ja kissoille myös.²

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⁴ In the survey, they could choose up to three of their favourite artists. Barks was followed by Don Rosa with 78 [per cent%](#) of the votes. The third most popular, Vicar, was left far behind with 16 [per cent%](#) of [the](#) votes.

⁵ Though Rosa worked with Disney comics between 1987 and 2006, his comics take place in the 1950s following in the history and era [in which](#) Barks placed the Ducks.

⁶ ²Aku Ankkaa on aina tehty rakkaudella ja loistavalla ammattitaidolla (piirroset, tarinat, kieli). Sen tarinat ovat kiinni nykypäivässä. Sama tarina tarjoaa elämyksen pienelle lapselle, oivaltavalle teinille ja Ankkiaan tarttuvalle aikuiselle. Ankkafaniksi kasvetaan jo äidin kohdussa. Lehti on aina kiinnostanut kaikkia sukupuolia ja sukupolvia.²

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⁷ Scrooge McDuck's popularity is largely based on Don Rosa's collection *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, which showed the history and complex personality of Scrooge to the readers worldwide. Rosa received a Will Eisner award ~~of~~ [for](#) the series (1995) and is ~~yet~~ the only Disney comic artist [ever](#) to have that honour.

⁸ ²Tähän on vain yksi ainoa vastaus ja me molemmat tiedämme sen.²

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⁹ This reference is authentic and not just symbolic: Finns use it frequently and it was mentioned ~~also~~ [even](#) in the survey.