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## A Writer Must Run Away to the Forest

When I was five years old, my family moved to a row house at the edge of an old coniferous forest. I only needed to walk twenty meters from your front door across the lawn, and the ground became soft under my feet. Then I was in the realm of moss, in the forest. I quickly learned that I liked in there. I walked the narrow paths, craned my neck at the tops of spruce trees, sat on logs that had fallen decades ago and felt insignificant in a very positive way. I Was no longer an inhabitant of the human world, I had entered a bigger and stranger reality.

I did not go to the woods for any love of nature. I have never been particularly fond of animals, for example. I respect them and I hope they respect me, meaning they leave me in peace in the same way I try to avoid them. Originally I went to the woods because there I had room for my thoughts. And I never came completely back.

We humans are biological entities. Through our bodies we are directly connected to nature. We breathe, we eat, we drink and we excrete, we are cold and hot like any other warm-blooded animal. There is no escaping biology: without bodies, without nature, there are no humans.

That is all we really need to think about nature. Biology is easy to forget, and it is easy to see nature only as the physical environment which scrolls past behind a train window or makes our everyday life difficult with torrential rain or scorching heat. Nature means forests, swamps, mountains, lakes and the sky, something that we can visit for a while and then come back to rejoin human society the real world.

But there are those who are taken by nature even in childhood. They learn to know the birds, the plants and the mushrooms, and when they grow up, they are prone to take their backpack vanish for a week into the fells of Lapland.

Are authors mostly city people or nature lovers? At first glance, the city seems to dominate. They live in towns and do not readily discuss bird migrations or beetle species found in old forest habitats. But if you go deeper into a conversation or closely study their work between the lines, oftimes the nature-lover starts to emerge.

I do not think I can, in general terms, state anything about authors and their relation to nature, as I do not know each and every author. Usually I try to avoid generalization, since there are 7,7 billion people in the world and each of them is different. In my mind an exception overturns the rule, instead of proving it.

My first novel was published five years ago. For five years I have studied authors a bit more closely than before. I have noted that many of them are, in addition to being good writers, also brilliant speakers. Depressing, that. I write, because it is the only way for me to clearly express my thoughts. By speaking I only present a cracked shell. It is also common for an author to be an actor or a professional performer of some other kind. But there are also us who like to remain at the edge of the crowd in cocktail parties. Today there is a lot of talk about introverts, but I like the word *observer* instead. How do observers experience the world and writing? What is their nature, and where does it come from?

Through the use of imagination, an author has a direct connection to a world which is not real. That world you can only enter if you are alone and silent. That state you

shall most likely meet in nature. It was in the forest that I learned to hear the voice of my imagination.

As a child I felt the forest was a zone between the real and the make-believe. I went to the forest to have stories. In the company of people I lived, and I still live, my own life, so there is no room for stories to be born here. In the forest I search for imaginary events. As a child I was read lots of fairy-stories, and in those stories miraculous things often happen in the forest -- think for example about Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, who is also enchanted in a forest made out of rose stems. From the very beginning I assumed fairy-stories had once been true, but there had been some miserable turn of events, and as a consequence the world had become drab and commonplace. I thought I might find miracles in my forest, if I just looked long and hard enough. In an almost desperate way tried to connect the stories I knew to the real forest. I imagined the forest was a labyrinth, with the Minotaur lurking in the middle. As Prince Theseus I grabbed a ball of yarn from my mother's sewing basket, for the string of Ariadne, and tied the end to the first tree of the forest. I walked into the labyrinth expecting to meet the monster -- but the yarn ran out twenty metres from the forest edge, where I could still glimpse our houses between the trees. These anticlimactic moments jolted me back into the real world, but I have never entirely given up my conviction that the forest is a gate to another reality.

Slowly the stories started to arise from the swishing of trees, the sound of brooks, the scent of spruces and the feel of moss underfoot. I did not find miracles, but I started to create them myself: they were worlds where anything might happen. I sunk into the forest like one might sink into the sea. My experience was that of the Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg more than a hundred years previously, when he wrote: 'in forest you wander like on the bottom of the sea, in an unchanging, monotonous silence, and hear only the wind droning in the top of spruces and cloud-high pines.'

The longer I walked in the forests, the more familiar they became. At last I became interested in their inhabitants and started to learn the birds, plants and mushrooms. When the forests, abodes of my silence, started to disappear around me due to logging, I had a great need to tell what was happening. The forest had given me the mind of a story-teller, and when I started to tell stories, I did it on behalf of the forests. My first novel *Kultarinta* was described, in the biggest newspaper in Finland, as 'the green forest bible of the environmentalist generation'.

Today we are told that an author has to represent some genre or another. I became, superficially, a nature author, although my books deal mainly with people, people like myself: people who end up in nature, because for them it is the only place where they find peace. My main characters like people, as I do myself, but we can not bear to socialize for more than our share. Indeed, one of my characters states: 'There can be days when I do not speak a single word. At first it is worrying, then it is not. Words are the aftermath of thoughts. Not speaking does not mean you don't have new thoughts.' (*Kultarinta*, Gummerus 2014).

I have wondered where authors find the story-teller state of mind, if they don't find it in nature. Where do they find the silence they need to immerse themselves in their imaginary worlds? If an author is born into a metropolis, they must find their own forest: a place which the imagination relentlessly exploits, a place where they take refuge like shipwreck survivors on an island.

Maybe there is no problem. Cities can be forests just like a real forest. Especially in a metropolis of millions, one person sinks to insignificance. I have been to five such

cities: one in Europe, four in Russia. Once I thought I could not survive them, but I did, with my familiar bag of tricks. I walked them like I walk the forest, zigzagging from street to street, and when I found myself in the middle of people I did not stop, like one does not stop in an open swamp for fear of being mired in. I walked briskly, knowing that no-one cares about me, that there is no reason to be afraid. City streets open up a path for you much like a forest does, and also in a city you feel yourself insignificant in a positive way. And you feel the same exhilaration you get when trekking in the wild -- I can make it, I can vanish into this and still survive.

Forest or city, both give us the freedom of insignificance. That is the solution. When an author feels themselves insignificant in the real world, in their mind rises that which is not real. The forest and the city both feed the unreal. When we walk their paths alone, meaningless, inside us there builds up a tragic joy and excitement, which sends out shoots. And eventually those shoots grow up to be words on a computer screen.

But an author also needs a place to stop and listen to the details of a story being born. In forest, the place of stopping might be a cliff-edge or lakeshore. In a city peace may be found in a remote corner of a park, a graveyard, an unpopular café or a dimly lit hall in an old museum.

An author owes a debt to the world that helps them write: the forest that has made them an author. Even fiction may, and indeed must, carry a message. With my own works I wish to defend places which provide solitude and silence. In my novels both nature and cultural environments are endangered by ignorance or greed, as so often happens in real life. My goal is to find a story that manages to save a forest, a swamp, a rock or an ancient heritage site. I do not want to preach. A novel must have an opinion, but it must not be stated outright. Nature, human rights -- no good cause must be allowed to take such a hold over the author that they start to pontificate. The author must hold the reins, the author must tell what is happening and show what it means for the victims. That is all you need -- you have to trust the between-the-lines. However strong the desire to spell things out clearly, the author must remain calm, as stated in the lines by the poet Fernando Pessoa: 'The poet is a pretender

/ So good at his act / That he even pretends the pain / Which he really feels.'

Sometimes I have wondered if an author might run out of story ideas if they only stay in solitude and silence. According to the Finnish author Erno Paasilinna: 'No-one is an author at birth. -- You must live a life which gives birth to an author.' One way to read this is that an author must collect different experiences, travel, live through everything they write about. This is not true; the hallmark of an author is that they can do whatever they wish and visit every corner of the universe without ever leaving home. If an author wants to write about people, they must study the people around them and learn to understand the realities of different characters. There's nothing they need to experience themselves. Their task is only to write.

John Maxwell Coetzee sums up an author's life in his novel *The Master of Petersburg*, in the voice of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Do people tell him stories only because they know he is an author? Do they think he has no stories of his own?' James Joyce, again, states that an author must always write about his own life, however poor and small it might be'. I agree with both. Authors write their own stories; one way or another authors write about their own life. That is the only life there exists in an author's muscle memory.

In addition to imagination and a cause, an author needs deficits. As I said, an author might be a gifted speaker, but not everything can be told in speech. Writing is an exertion on the human body, and the nature in us steers us away from unnecessary expenditure of energy. If we could convey our thoughts in the way of speech, we would not write. Speech and writing are both language, but in essence they are as far removed as the kitchen is from the living room. Speech aims at instant effect; text aims at a slow understanding. Speaking is for the quick, writing is for the slow; a speaker forms one word at a time, a writer only one letter.

Authors are biological entities, but sometimes they are granted a passage to another world. This can be compared to osmosis. Osmosis is a chemical phenomenon where water passes through a membrane, but the substances dissolved into the water do not. An author is water; an author can slip through the curtain between the real and the imaginary. To this imaginary world an author takes the soul, but not the body; the body stays on this side.

The most famous fictional account of the author's osmosis is the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. The visual version of the story, the movie by Miloš Forman, has remained in my mind more prominent than the novel. In the end of the novel, Chief, a patient in the mental hospital, decides to escape. He gathers all his strength, rips a wash-basin from the wall, throws it through a barred window and runs off to a forest looming in the morning mist.

The modern world can not be compared to an asylum; however, it is insane. Through our labours we have achieved both climate change and a wave of extinction. Like Chief, an author must run away to the forest, whatever a forest means to them -- run to their own nature. For an author, their nature is what they have inside. An author turns their back to the world, loses and forgets themselves in the deep forest or the city jungle. There an author picks words and stories. When they rejoin the human society, they tell about their experiences, who they did meet and who they wanted to defend. Little by little an author writes the world a better place.