

CHERISHING THE SENSE OF WONDER

THOUGHTS ON THE TASK OF WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Climate change is threatening life on Earth. Young people go on strike for the climate. Writers are often expected to be socially responsible, discuss, and participate. We are asked to write about threats and possibilities in solving them. What is the task, the responsibility of an author writing for children and young adults in our time?

While writing, I do not distance myself from my time, or my environs. One way or the other, topical issues often crawl into my text without my really deciding to tackle them at all. In my new fantasy novel for children called *Kadonnut kaupunki* ("The Lost City"), issues of marine pollution and migrancy are very much present, for example. Questions of climate change have been in evidence in my books for children and young people for several years.

Those who are able to make their voice heard in books always wield a modicum of power. This is why writers have to pay special attention to what they say, about whom they say it, and how. Who is given a voice? Does everyone have an equal opportunity to be heard?

I cannot write anything about myself, anything abrasive, by commission. It has to happen by my own initiative. That's the only way the writing seems to take off and fly. I often write slowly. Writing a book takes a lot of background work, too. Many an urgent topic grows old, if you try to wriggle them into your text by force. The same goes for fashionable expressions, or the latest digital applications, for example. It is very important, however, that the world and its problems are brought to light in books for children and young readers. In addition to its themes, literature influences and changes the world in other, subtle ways.

As a child, when reading, I experienced a kind of warmth emanating from books, and this warmth stuck to me never to leave again. Writing, I'm on the lookout for that feeling, and try to pass it to others.

What is this warmth made of, then – the feeling that makes the reader return to books time and time again? Writing is a hard one to explain through and through, but it is somehow related to play, and to dreaming, thus also to childhood. As I write, I sometimes feel the same warmth as in a dream, a fairytale, or when playing alone in a quiet room when I was a child.

The sense of wonder as attraction

In the very core of my writing is the wish to find stories that protect secrets and keep up the sense of wonder. Secrets and wondering are an essential part of the warmth emanating from books. With my writing, I want to show the power of imagination and celebrate it. Maybe that is why I am so attracted to magical realism and fantasy. By the means of fantasy, one can tell a whole lot about the real world.

Rich and versatile language is an important part of the attraction of children's literature. Rhymes, rhythms, colours and tastes of words make the language dance and give joy to the reader. Books ask them to stop for a while at words and the strange alliances they form. In children's literature, illustrations also play an important role. For instance, while focusing in small details of the natural world, the pictures and texts are windows to wondrous and vital realities.

With words and pictures, the makers of children's books can bring forth life's fine and mysterious hues. We can show the smallest of readers something wondrous, delicate, joyful, and meaningful. This strengthens their imaginations, and their ability to appreciate literature and art. Picture books are often an infant's first contact with art's power to conveniently sidetrack us from everything banal and commonplace. This, too, makes me think that reading aloud to a child is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

Peace to face oneself and others

Literature is a place of peace. Like observation of nature, writing also requires time and inner silence. Words arise from silence, that is where they find their place, colour and weight. Reading defies the hurry and efficiency often understood as a part of modern life. Like forests, books are always ready to give us what we lack most: space to breathe in our own rhythm, and face ourselves.

Visiting schools, I have often asked children and youngsters what reading means to them. Many times I have heard them say that reading is a good pastime because books give them a peaceful place just to be and rest. One can find comfort and wholeness, feel good while forgetting the rest of the world for a while. To a reader, a book can offer these moments of repose and peace in many ways, even if the subject is harrowing in itself; with the language itself, the rhythm of narration, fantasy etc.

Books do not require a reaction, clicking a like-button, they are ready to discuss with their reader. They give their interlocutors as much time as they need. Within the tranquility of a book readers can find something about themselves. You can face yourself by imagining yourself to be someone else. Along someone else's words our silhouettes sometimes melt together, and for a little while we can share a feeling of wonder about being human.

Literature – like all art – often invigorates our emotional life and renders us more sensitive. With books one can gain an insight into one's soul, one's heart, one's core. If you're out of touch with yourself and do not monitor your thoughts and feelings, it may be hard to establish a genuine connection with anyone else either. With literature and art it is possible to encounter other people on a deeper level where everyone regardless of nationality, material wealth, or ethnicity is equal with our deepest wishes, fears, and questions. Literature can help us to communicate with each other, and live more peacefully together.

Questions and incompleteness

In this world of ours, we don't understand half of what's happening around us. The power and warmth of literature lies in brittleness, in cracks on the familiar.

There must be freedom to breathe in books for children and young adults. They must make room, not give ready answers. Oftentimes they raise questions about life and what it is to be a human being in a world, where we seldom have time for questions and incompleteness. New points of view are established when the long-cherished old ones give way. Self-evident assumptions are questioned: what, for example, is success? Is it money, consumption, or perhaps being in the public eye?

It is no good to bemoan the decline of children's love for reading. We have to continue our work. We must not lose our belief in stories. The longing for stories, as well as beauty and mysteries, is an integral part of being human. We have to take the reader by the hand and yank them to travel with us any way we can.

Stories channel hope

I believe in the power of literature, in quiet moments with manuscripts and books. For me, literature is basically a question of hope. Literature is life, a part of its living flow. When I write, I hope for my own part to be able to channel that hope. The ability to imagine – what power! While strengthening the imagination and communication with oneself and other people, books give room for hope and dreams. A person with imagination can make out alternatives, can see further ahead. At best, books are a battle against cynicism and disillusionment. To return once more to that strange warmth I have felt emanating from books: Stories have always given confidence in coping with challenges in life – even the biggest ones.