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Antti Tuomainen's *The Healer* (2013)

Nordic Crime Cli-Fi

Antti Tuomainen's *The Healer* (2013) is set in a near-future Helsinki where climate change is wreaking havoc both in the Finnish capital and abroad. Incessant rain and floods are the most visible climate change-related curses in Tuomainen's Helsinki, but there is also news of global pandemics, destructive forest fires and water wars. Society is breaking down, and amidst the radical upheaval, a serial killer, the eponymous 'Healer' – the 'healer for a sick planet' – is murdering people he holds responsible for accelerating climate change.¹ The plot revolves around the endeavours of the protagonist, the Finnish poet Tapani Lehtinen, to find his lost wife Johanna, who has been investigating the murders as a journalist. As Tapani learns more about the mysterious Healer, he also makes unexpected discoveries about the past of his wife, who turns out to have known the Healer intimately. In his journey through flooded Helsinki, Tapani guides the reader on a tour of how different areas in the city, as well as different affected citizens, are coping with the dramatic changes.

The novel won the most prestigious crime fiction prize in Finland and is one of the most widely translated contemporary Finnish novels to date. It is routinely mentioned in international climate fiction research.² In Finland, however, the author is mainly known as a crime fiction writer, and the novel has received little academic attention. The novel can be positioned also within the context of Nordic crime fiction, and, in Finland, as part of the recent surge

- 1 Antti Tuomainen, *The Healer*, trans. Lola Rogers (London: Harvill Secker, 2013), 12. The Finnish original, *Parantaja* (Helsinki: Like) was published in 2010.
- 2 See, for example, Karen Thornber, 'Climate Change and Changing World Literature', in Stephan Siperstein, Shane Hall and Stephanie LeMenager, eds, *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2017), 265–71; and Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, 'Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre', *Dissent*, 60/3 (2013), 58–61.

of dystopian fiction. Thematically, the novel focuses on investigating what is lost and what is left when established norms and rules fall away. Desperate care for a loved one and the imperatives of bare survival take the foreground. In its relation to the causes and effects of climate change, key questions posed in the novel are: how to act in the face of disaster; what could have been done to avert this; and whether anyone can be personally held responsible for global climatic events (as the acts of the Healer imply). Two topical features that can be found in this novel as well as more broadly in climate fiction and in the popular imagination are climate refugees and the imagined Arctic as a possible safe haven. Helsinki in *The Healer* is packed with refugees, so much so that, for the protagonist, the city has ‘finally become an international city.’³ Terrified inhabitants are fleeing to Northern Finland and Norway, selling their homes to be able to pay the exorbitant price of train tickets north. The topos of Northern Finland and more broadly the Arctic region and Lapland as possible last resorts is a feature *The Healer* shares with a range of contemporary Finnish dystopian and cli-fi novels, such as Emmi Itäranta’s *Memory of Water*⁴ and Annika Luther’s *De hemlösas stad* [The City of the Homeless].⁵

The Healer has strong satirical tendencies, foregrounding and amplifying existing socio-political fissures in the society from which it writes. It conveys a stark loss of normalcy, with several characters commenting on the disappearance of things that are taken for granted in the Nordic welfare society, such as public health services, a functioning democracy and safe public space. In this sense, the book can be seen as continuing a common theme from Nordic crime fiction: the critical examination of the dismantling of the Nordic welfare state. There is also a subtle stab at the centre-right politics that have steered Finland towards a neoliberalist course in the early twenty-first century in the description of the novel’s serial killer as resembling the prime minister, Alexander

3 Tuomainen, *The Healer*, 229.

4 Emmi Itäranta, *Memory of Water* (London: Harper Voyager, 2012).

5 Annika Luther, *De hemlösas stad* (Helsinki: Söderströms, 2011). See also Saija Isomaa and Toni Lahtinen, ‘Kotimaisen nykydystopian monet muodot’, *Pakkovaltiosta ekodystopiaan. Kotimainen nykydystopia. Joutsen/Svanen*, Special Studies 2 (2017), 7–16; here 11.

Stubb.⁶ It is an intriguing detail that Stubb, a centre-right politician, became prime minister only in 2014, some years after publication of the novel.

A side role is assigned to the question of surveillance, information wars and the unreliability of digitally transmitted data. In the novel, security firms take over public functions as well as public space. The key associate of the Healer turns out to be one of the leaders of the malicious security firm A-Secure (a wink to Finnish global internet security brand F-Secure), which is taking over the infrastructure of the state. Similar themes are taken up in another contemporary Finnish dystopian novel, Esa Mäkinen's *Totuuskuutio* [Truth Square].⁷ More generally, technology is presented as not to be trusted in a world beset by disastrous climate change. Automated lights and electric key cards cease to function, making life in the most modern housing blocks the most difficult to sustain. The novel can thus be read as a reaction to the hubris of post-industrial knowledge society, with strong nostalgic tendencies and a distrust of information technology.

One of the most intriguing features of the novel is also one that will be most invisible to a non-Finnish audience. The novel presents a complex commentary to the early twenty-first century urban planning projects for the Finnish capital.⁸ Several of the city districts (Jätkäsaari, Pasila, Kalasatama), and also the western extension to the metro network described in the novel, were only in a planning phase at the time of publication, but have already become obsolete in the future world depicted in *The Healer*. When disaster strikes, the novel argues, the fancy waterfront developments planned by the Helsinki city planning department in the early twenty-first century will be the first to go under.

While the novel presents intimations of what will be lost when the world continues onto a path towards climate catastrophe, there are few implications anything could have been done by the protagonists to mitigate or counter

6 The reference to Stubb is, however, omitted in the English translation: see Tuomainen, *The Healer*, 139.

7 Esa Mäkinen, *Totuuskuutio* (Helsinki: Otava, 2015).

8 Lieven Ameel, 'Towards a Narrative Typology of Urban Planning Narratives for, in and of Planning in Jätkäsaari, Helsinki', *URBAN DESIGN International* 22/4 (November 2017), 318–30.

climate change. In its approach to climate change as something the reader could deal with in the referential world, the dominating sense in the novel is arguably one of resignation and despair. Possible actions are presented as too little or too late. A telling example is a newspaper article from thirteen years prior to the events in the novel, which describes a new 'eco-efficient' housing district in Helsinki. With the benefit of hindsight, however, eco-efficient housing never constituted a viable mitigation strategy in the storyworld of *The Healer*:

Everything about the neighbourhood was twenty years too late – although the houses produced their own energy and were entirely recyclable, sustainable and non-polluting, the environment was already so changed by then that the innovations were meaningless. On top of that, the houses were too expensive for an ordinary person to afford [...].⁹

The events of *The Healer* are set somewhere in the 2020s or early 2030s; placing the eco-efficient houses (built 'a few decades too late') thirteen years earlier (possibly as early as the early 2010s) means that the last window for meaningful mitigation is *well before* the moment of publication of the novel, possibly in the late 1980s and 1990s. Quite disturbingly, it is the Healer himself, a cold-blooded killer, who appears as the only character with a long-standing ecological interest and with the concomitant desire to act according to his convictions.

In addition to its obvious echoes of the biblical flood, *The Healer* is organized around strong and overt Christian symbolism. The novel is structured following the liturgical year, beginning two days before Christmas with events running up to Christmas Eve. An epilogue, adding temporal depth and some knowledge of what happened after the main events, comes in the form of a short chapter set on the morning of Good Friday. The plot thus moves from darkness to light, and from despair to redemption. It is even possible to discern elements of morality plays (which developed out of Easter plays) at work, with the protagonist as an everyman on a fatal journey, abandoned by his friends and loved ones, who has to consider where humanity has gone wrong.

Several of the themes described above could offer fruitful avenues for teaching the novel. One possibility would be to approach it in terms of its

⁹ Tuomainen, *The Healer*, 87.

reception and genre, with a specific focus on how the novel's implications for climate change depend on the generic prism with which it is approached – Nordic noir or crime fiction; dystopia or climate fiction? A discussion of *The Healer* in tandem with other Finnish dystopian novels, or as a part of a selection of Nordic speculative fiction, would attune students also to the importance of the cultural and historical specificity of literary responses to climate change outside of the English-speaking world. As a novel set in a recognizable real-world setting, the novel could also be integrated in courses that examine the interaction between fictional texts and urban planning narratives.

A last approach would be to examine the novel as part of a course on representations of agency and responsibility in climate fiction. Who is held responsible in this novel for catastrophic climate change, and what room is there for mitigating strategies? Given the role played by climate terrorism in the novel, *The Healer* could also provide insights into changing (and often genre- and culture-specific) depictions of ecological terrorists.¹⁰

The Healer plays on the fear of the future in dystopian and apocalyptic scenarios. Rather than offering concrete insights into the dynamics and the possible effects of climate change, it presents a chilling rendering of what it feels like to live in a society disrupted by radical climate change. The presence of recognizable and everyday environments being turned into war zones, such as the iconic Stockmann department store in central Helsinki during Christmas shopping period, is particularly gripping. At least in explicit terms, the novel does not seek to warn, nor does it spell out specific pathways that have caused the imagined global climate catastrophe, or how the characters in the novel could have averted this. The protagonist is largely impotent throughout the novel, a bystander to events. Towards the end of the novel, there is a glimmer of hope, with the disappearance of the Healer, the rescue of the protagonist's wife, and the arrival of spring. The conclusion of the novel does not give any information, however, as to how life can be sustained in the forbidding climatological and societal circumstances described in the novel. The dominating feeling is arguably a sense of nostalgia for a time when life was less complicated and constructed on more solid ground; the novel ends with a panoramic view

10 See the essays on Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* and T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* in this volume.

of the city seen from the granite heights of Herttoniemi, the 1950s concrete suburb of Helsinki that is the home of the protagonist and his wife. By the end of the novel, no solutions to the storyworld's life-threatening climate crisis have surfaced, but the couple and its suburban home have withstood the storms. The dénouement of the novel arguably confirms the continuing preoccupation of the genre of the novel with the nuclear family and the bourgeois home, even in times of threatening climate change.