

Reviews

Virtanen, Beth L., ed. *Finnish-North American Literature in English: A Concise Anthology*. Preface by Börje Vähämäki. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. viii + 578 pages. ISBN 978-0-7734-3818-7. Hardcover \$139.95.

Unlike other Nordic immigrant literatures, Finnish American literature is a field that has attracted far less interest and scholarship. While Finnish immigrants to the United States and Canada have produced a remarkable amount of literature, first in Finnish and later in English, these writings have not been easily accessible and are seldom studied by scholars. There are, however, promising signs of increasing interest, including the formation of the Finnish American Literature Association, the publication of a special issue on the topic by the *Journal of Finnish Studies* (2007), edited by Beth L. Virtanen, and Raija Taramaa's recent study *The Stubborn and Silent Finns with "Sisu" in Finnish-American Studies: An Imagological Study of Finnishness in the Literary Production of Finnish-American Authors* (Oulu University Press, 2007), her doctoral thesis which is hitherto the most extensive single analysis of contemporary Finnish American writing. As a part of this development, the publication of the anthology, here under review, of fiction and poetry, edited by Finlandia University Professor Beth L. Virtanen and presenting literature written in English by second-, third-, and fourth-generation American authors of Finnish descent, showcases the work of twenty writers and brings their work published between the 1960s and 2000 to a larger and international readership. Virtanen's anthology is the first to map out the multifacetedness of the literary production of Finnish North America, its only drawback being its focus on the English-language literature of Finnish Americans, written mainly during the past four decades, as the Finnish-language writings of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, however, remain to be anthologized.

The breadth of the present collection by far extends that of earlier at-

tempts to present Finnish American writing such as Michael Karni's edited collection *Sampo, The Magic Mill* (1993). This extensive anthology contains work in various genres, from science fiction and autobiography to poetry and prose, by both male and female authors representing various generations and ways of immigrating to the United States. Texts selected for the volume include, among others, excerpts from Emil Petaja's science fiction inspired by the *Kalevala*, experimental poetry by Beverly Dahlen and Anselm Hollo, fiction with a Midwest focus by Lauri Anderson, Joseph Damrell, and G. K. Wuori, Stephen Kuusisto's autobiographical reflections on his study in Helsinki, a city foreign to him, and poetry by such writers as Aili Jarvenpa, Jim Johnson, Nancy Mattson, Kathleen Halme, and Kirsten Dierking. The authors are carefully selected and presented in a chronological order according to their year of birth. The editor briefly introduces each writer and their life and work in her remarks preceding the selected work of each writer. It should also be mentioned that, in addition to Börje Vähämäki's Preface, the volume includes a critical introduction by the editor and closes with a useful bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. For research purposes, the latter, however, should be complemented with the more extensive bibliography available on the website of the Finnish American Literature Association.

While the contents of this volume cannot be described in detail in a short review, some general trends are clearly identifiable in the texts. First, there is the issue of ethnic identity and its articulation. As Virtanen mentions, and what the reader of this volume may also easily discern from several contributions, Finnish American writers, as is also the case in many other groups of immigrants, do not necessarily deal with their Finnishness in an explicit manner. Yet for many of the writers collected in this volume, the sense of ethnic identity is a central issue and easily seen in their use of Finnish myths and symbols and way of locating their texts in spaces reflecting their Finnish Americanness. For instance, the national epic *Kalevala* with its mythical characters, figures, and narratives has offered inspiration to many writers. In addition to the resurgence of Ilmar and Louhi in Emil Petaja's *Kalevala*-based Otava science fiction series, several other writers seek to construct a sense of Finnishness in North America with similar references: Aili Jarvenpa, in her poem to Ilmatar, Mary Lumijarvi Caracker in her novel *Women of the Kalevala*, and Shirley Schoonover in *Winter Dream*, with Luohi [*sic*] and Vaino as the central characters, to mention some examples. As cultural identity is constructed around cultural myths

and practices, this can be seen as an example of the important role of a myth of origin in carving out Finnishness in America. In her introduction Virtanen also points to the importance of Zacharias Topelius's *Maamme kirja* (*Book of Our Country*), a nineteenth-century Finnish nation-building text that was influential in creating a mythology of Finnishness, not only in Finland but also in North America, by fostering such traits as hard work and self-discipline. Modern writers, however, are also able to counter perceived stereotypes and dominant historical narratives. As Kathleen Halme's poem portraying an old Finnish immigrant woman puts it: "All summer Signe's knees were red from kneeling/ on pineboard, scrugging bare wood/ as though she could scrape knots away./ *Have I turned her into an Other, exotic and alone?*" (469).

Similarly, Finnish American texts utilize other tropes of Finnishness such as the *sauna*, the forest and the birch trees, and the rural landscape enabling a close relationship with nature. While the references to some of the markers of identity may appear cliché-like for a reader approaching them from a Finnish perspective, in their own North American context they are rather markers of difference specifying the Finnish identity and its particular characteristics. While for the poet Aili Jarvenpa, the *sauna* is a link to the Finnish tradition ("in my sanctuary/ my Finnish *sauna*/ its origins deep/ in the soul of Finland" [60]), Diane Jarvenpa, a younger poet, sees it as a site of regeneration and community: "We follow the lake scent of iron and fish scale/ to the sweet dry some of birch/ where my mother feeds the fire her old sorrows/ in the small, wooden room,/ where I come out of the long darkness" (512). As Kirsten Dierking puts it, the *sauna* means to be "[...] clean,/ with family, and koti, belonging" (572). While the Finnishness portrayed is often linked with the rural experience, the small towns on the Great lakes, as seen in the poetry of Judith Minty and Jim Johnson, it is not a mere expression of nostalgia for a lost way of life but a way of articulating the local construction of identity and the role that landscape, seasons, and nature play in the lives of many Finnish Americans. Similarly, prose narratives examining the way of life in such places, like those of Lauri Anderson and Joseph Damrell, may reflect critically on the various factions, oddities, and internal divisions peculiar to such communities. Anderson's sarcasm, in particular, shows that today's Finnish American literature, even when focusing on the rural, does not seek to provide romanticized representations of an ideal community.

The Finnishness of these texts also involves a relationship with the old

country, its language, and those who immigrated to North America. Two issues are particularly noteworthy and appear to be linked with gender. First, several poems reveal a particular sensitivity to the Finnish language, a language often lost and present only in memories of the deceased, phrases, and individual words, a loss that is also present in the anthology as most Finnish words are explained to the reader in footnotes. As a result several poets seek to bridge the gap that is both linguistic and cultural, separating a generation from its predecessors. In so doing it cuts daughters off from their mothers and the tradition they represent. To use the words of Sheila Packa, "I migrated from another tongue./ My mother spoke another language/ had another border I didn't learn" (441). What appears to emerge is a view according to which a lost language is equated with identity and can be reconstructed through memory and writing only to a certain extent, never fully. Second, when reflecting on the history of immigration and the lives of those who arrived early, the figure of the Finnish woman is emphatically present as a strong and enduring character. This is the case, for instance, in the *Taava Miina* poems by Marlene Ekola Gerberick and the *Maria* poems by Nancy Mattson. In so doing, these poets seek to counter traditional male-centred understandings of immigrant history.

In sum, this anthology is a major contribution to Finnish North American literature. It opens up a dispersed and little known literary tradition by making accessible a variety of authors exploring different aspects of the Finnish American identity, its characteristics, and links with the Finnish tradition. By providing the reader with these various voices, the anthology will be an indispensable research and teaching tool. In addition to readers wishing to familiarize themselves with the writing emerging from the Finnish American community, it can be recommended to all academic libraries with an interest in the literatures of immigration.

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