



# Development of Swedish literature in Finland

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# Historical background


- Finland was a part of Sweden till 1809, and then a grand duchy within Russia till 1917
- During the Swedish time, literature part of the Swedish and European culture
- During the 19th century literature was characterised by nationalist enthusiasm and a work for the Finnish culture, conducted by a Swedish speaking elite
- 1863 a law according to which Finnish should be equal with Swedish as an official language
- In the 1880s the Swedish-speakers constituted 14,3 % of Finlands population (now 6 %)

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# Historical background

- 1906 a major parliamentary reform
- Due to this reform the political, social, economic and cultural importance of Swedish and the Swedish speaking population decreased
- Also the rapid development of Finnish literature after 1870s played in
- These has severe consequences for the identity and literature of Swedish speakers in Finland


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# Culture and literature in Finland, main features

- Finland has two national languages and two literatures: one Finnish and one Swedish
- The Swedish culture had its roots in Latin and European literature
- The development of Finnish literature and culture starts in the 19th century
- The importance of the Swedish speaking authors and their works in the creation of the idea of "Finland", the Finnish nation and it's inhabitants was huge



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# Historical background

- The national poet J. L. Runeberg (1804–1877) wrote in Swedish for the entire Finland – but gradually the Finnish authors took over the writing of national literature


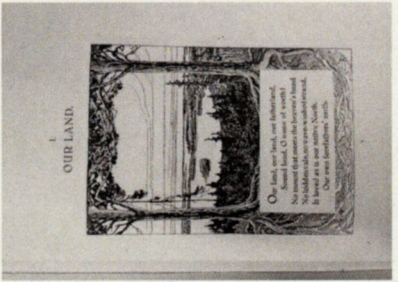
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J.L. Runeberg 1804–1877

Zacharias Topelius 1818–1898

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# Finland-Swedish literature



- Finland-Swedish literature arises at the end of the 19th century due to the changes in the position of the Swedish population in Finland
- Swedish authors in Finland become aware of their position as representatives of a minority literature at the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century
- Feelings of despair, linguistic insecurity and of being without a mother tongue
- This new marginal position is also possible to see in literature, e.g. in descriptions of spaces, places and milieus

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# The central symbols of the Finland-Swedish condition in literature

- The dwarfed pine (Cias Ziliacius, *Finlands svenska litteraturhistoria II*, 2000)
- The Narrow Room (Merete Mazzarella, *Det trånga rummet*, 1989)
- The Moomin Valley (Janina Orlov, *Från kulturvåktare till Nightriders*, 1996)

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## The "Narrow Room"


- Depictions of bourgeois reality in prose fiction written by Swedish male authors in Finland, 1890s to 1980s
- Recurrent depictions of shut-in milieus, feelings of suffocation, claustrophobia
- Recurrent milieu: the shut-in provincial city
- Both the authors and the characters in their novels suffer from the narrow room, and try to escape it in different ways
- Literary reviewers' disappointment: why don't Finland-Swedish authors write huge, realistic novels, why don't they depict all social classes?
- (Merete Mazzarella, *Det trånga rummet*, 1989)

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## The MoominValley

- A metaphor for Finland-Swedish culture and literature in-between Sweden and the Finnish-speaking Finland
- The sea in the west is a possibility and an opening
- The river indicates a border between the familiar and secure and the unfamiliar
- The idyllic, protected valley
- (Orlov, *Frdn kulturvaktare till Nightdrivers*, 1996)



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## Characteristic features of Finland-Swedish literature

- The linguistic situation has a great impact on the apprehensions of the Finland-Swedish minority literature
- According to Thomas Warburton [*Eighty-Years Finland-Swedish Literature*, 1984]
  1. Doubly provincial
  2. A literature of the middle classes
  3. Poetry being its highest genre
- Michel Ekman [*Finland-Swedish Literary History 2*, 2000]: the prose fiction is mostly written from a "cyclops perspective", in one person language and perspective dominates

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## The development of Finland-Swedish literature

- Does not always develop in the same way as Finnish literature
- Is more open for influences from European and Nordic, above all Swedish literature but does even have a dialogue with Finnish literature
- 1910s: "Dagdrivare", flaneur literature
- 1920s: Finland-Swedish modernism in lyrics and prose
- 1940s-1970s: A strong modernist tradition within poetry, and a restrained prose
- 1960-70s: "Confessor literature", political prose and poetry
- 1980s, 2000s: New literary forms, postmodern prose and poetry

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## "Dagdrivare", urban literature, 1910s

- "Dagdrivare", flaneur
- "Dagdrivarlitteratur": a group of young male writers of prose literature, 1907-1917
- Portray young men who are decadent, weak and passive, and dream of being healthy and strong
- Central features: urbanity, modernity, to look at the world from aside, melancholy, pessimistic, nostalgia
- Runar Schildt, most famous author of this group, an outstanding novelist (e.g. *Den segrande Eros*, 1912, *Häxskogen och andra noveller* (1920))

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Runar Schildt 1888-1925

## Cosmopolitan literature: Finland-Swedish modernism, 1920s

- An avant-garde literary movement, a strong poetry which revolted against literary tradition and renewed the poetry
- Hailed pathos, deviation, development of new poetic language, motifs, free rhyme
- Expressionism and cosmopolitanism: "Open the windows towards Europe!" (Diktonius, "Muualia ja meillä", *Ultra* N:o 2, 1922)
- Edith Södergran (1896-1923): *Dikter* (1916) - "Pioneer"
- Hagar Olsson (1893-1978): *Lars Thorman och döden* (1916) - "main ideologist"
- Elmer Diktonius (1896-1961): *Min dik* (1921) - "agitator"


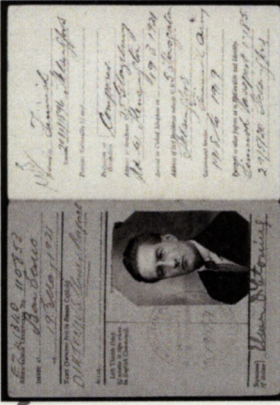
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Edith Södergran  
1892-1923





**Elmer Diktonius 1896–1961**

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I live forever.  
Whether a human being or a fixed star,  
solar systems or a dwarf pine  
on a barren rock by the sea,  
it's all the same.  
The same power courses through me,  
the same desire makes me bloom,  
the same storms slay me.  
put new clothes on my innermost being  
For me there's no flyspeck  
or Chimbrazzo—  
all is in all.

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On the tip of a moment  
I stand and cry:  
it is a joy to live and be transformed!

Elmer Diktonius, *Min dikter* (1921), transl. George C. Schoolfield

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**Intimacy and aesthetics, 1940–1970**

Literature is aesthetic, centered around individuals, detached, unworried, distanced from the political

- Three major Finland-Swedish authors with a long, high quality literary production in many different genres:
- **Solveig von Schoultz** (1907-1996): lyrical poetry and short stories which often focus on nature, women and children
- **Bo Carpelan** (1926-2011): lyrical poetry which emphasizes the openness and spatiality of poetical language, often metaphorical and centers on nature, writes also lyrical prose fiction – the master of so called cyclops perspective (*Axel* 1986)
- **Tove Jansson** (1914-2001): the books about the moonin trolls 1940-60s (*1945 Smårollen och den stora översvämningen*), but also a very fine writer of short stories (*Brev från Klara* 1995)

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Tove Jansson 1956

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**Bo Carpelan: Silent trees**


Will an unknown hand raise the continents  
and the song transfix the bird,  
the tide abandon the shores  
or wash them with a light that will endure?  
And I who form the shadow  
that my soul casts over things,  
will I exist in this poem  
or be read by no one?  
It is almost midnight,  
the trees stand silent.

*The Cool Day*, (1961) trans. David McDuff

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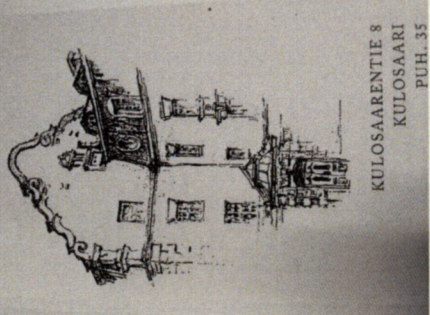
**1960s and 70s: A rising against the bourgeoisie**

- The demands of the social and political importance of art and literature become central, authors should be radical and socially engaged
- The Confessor literature, "literature of the (self) explorer": biographical matters, forbidden motifs, intimacy
- For example:
  - Henrik Tikkanen's "adressnovels" 1975-77: *Brändövågen 8 Brändö Tel. 35* (1975), *Båvågen 11 Hertontás* (1976), *Mariegatan 26 Kronohagen* (1977)
  - Mäntä Tikkanen, *Män kan inte våldtas* (1975) and *Århundradets kärleksaga* (1978)

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KULOSAARENTIE 8  
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**Henrik Tikkanen, Brändövågen 8 Brändö Tel. 35 (1975)**

This is a gruesome book about sudden death, ruin, adultery, and drink. It tells of the misfortunes of a family and of the struggle against misfortune that is the meaning of life and of its impossibility.

In Finland a story is like a winter's day. Short and dark, and you cannot see anything at a distance. I shall begin my story within my range of vision, but where the story begins I cannot say, nor do I know what it is like. Of course, I shall blame the wrong people. I shall twist and distort everything. I shall wriggle like a worm trying to get off the hook.

Perhaps it is better to blame fate for letting me be born in an impossible country, in which there live a little over three million people whose language is incomprehensible to everyone in the world.

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## Wide, wide worlds – late Finland-Swedish literature

- A major transformation of prose fiction in the 1990s and onwards – new prosperity and freedom of expression
- News ways of depicting the world: polyphony (dialect, foreign languages), many perspectives and new narrative strategies
- End of the Narrow Room: wide worlds in fiction, goodbye to the Cyclops perspective
- Postmodern novels, parody and metafiction
- Finnish history is retold in new ways
- Central authors: Ulla-Lena Lundberg, Monika Fagerholm, Kjell Westö, Pirkko Lindberg, Lars Sund

## Märta Tikkanen, Arhundradets kärleks saga (1978)

An alcoholic's wife  
that's someone  
who is always wrong  
whichever way she turns

and comforts  
and believes and believes and believes  
and hopes

then she is a self-righteous bitch  
who's always so goddamn perfect  
and wonderful

and forgives  
and almighty one  
who thinks she can move mountains  
and offer forgiveness for every sin

and smooths things out  
and keeps the relatives at bay  
and quiets the children  
and admires

The Love Story of the Century, transl.  
Sina Katchadourian

## Prose fiction and poetry in the 21st century

- Young, promising female authors advance strongly: Hannele Mikaela Jaiavassalo, Emma Juslin, Malin Kivela, Johanna Holmström
- Young female protagonists tell stories from the margins of society
- The boundaries between fantasy and reality are questioned or problematised, for example Johanna Holmström: *Camera Obscura* (2009), a collection of short stories about ecoactivism
- Also an experimental, often humorous poetry, for example Agneta Enckell and Eva-Silma Byggmästar (language materialism), Ralf Andbacka (Google poetry)



Uncanny X-men,  
Marvel Girl  
becomes Phoenix  
1976

## The situation today

- Finland-Swedish literature is not anymore doubly marginalised
- Not only a literature of the middle classes
- Prose and poetry are equally important
- No narrow rooms anymore
- Instead: wide worlds, various perspectives
- A rich and vital literature with many established and promising authors
- Motifs written about: late modernity, subjectivity, sexuality, history, eco activism, and so on

And that is not all. In this same country my parents speak another language, which only a tenth of the population understands. Moreover, the way my parents express themselves is such that only a hundredth part of that tenth understands them. In actual fact they don't care a damn for the rest of the people. On the other hand they are magnanimous enough to hate the whole of the Russian people who are their neighbours. Naturally, they have never tried to learn Russian, so they don't understand a word of what two hundred million people say or think, and they are proud of it.

A *Writer's Day*, transl. Mary Sandbach

## Monika Fagerholm: *Diva. The Alphabet of an Adolescence with a Laboratory of Dolls (A Bonus Tale from the Future)* (1998)

[Here is a little dog]  
Phoenix-Marvel Girl

I am Diva, everything I tell is true. Shut your eyes, dream of the most beautiful thing in existence. Open your eyes again. See me. The Girlwoman. Divalucia. Thirteen years, almost fourteen. BabyWonder. The girl you didn't think existed.

Transl. Kristina Malmio

