

WEIRD ECOLOGIES AND STORYTELLING PRACTICES

Monster Talks: a Monster Network Podcast

Ingvil Hellstrand:

Welcome to the final leg of our magnificent day of this workshop: Weird Ecologies and Storytelling Practices. This is an open event, but it looks like we know each other from before. But nevertheless, I am actually quite starstruck to be sitting here with acclaimed and esteemed authors: Laura Gustafsson and Johanna Sinisalo. Thank you so much for joining us for this workshop.

My name is Ingvil Hellstrand. I am an associate professor with the Gender Studies Network at the University of Stavanger in Norway. I work with science fiction as a method and I am very interested in the power that stories can have.

There are very many ways we could start this conversation, here tonight, after having had a day of very many interesting discussions already. There are quite a few threats. Donna Haraway would call it proper tentacular, which is a good starting point as well for us. But I wanted to start somewhere very specific because you are both writers of speculative fiction. In addition, you are also playwrights, screen script writers and you write, especially Johanna, for adults and children. So there is a wide range of modes that you can work in. But one tradition that's been evoked several times is the science fiction tradition; the feminist science fiction, which is a very political tradition from the 1960s and 70s. And I was wondering how you position yourself in relation to that tradition. If you could say something about that, just to contextualise your work a little bit. Would you like to start Johanna.

Johanna Sinisalo:

I think that when I was first a science fiction fan when I was much younger, the thing that I was looking after in science fiction was a sense of wonder. I thought that science fiction was better, if better science fiction was exploring foreign planets and meeting alien life forms, this kind of hard science fiction thing. But when I was in my early 20s, I discovered sociological science fiction. And then I understood that this is not just entertainment; you are able to say things with this medium.

I think that that was kind of a turning point. Because as much as I love adventure and the Star Wars type, which is the escapist tradition of science fiction. I just understood that you don't have to talk about the distant future, you can talk about today or the very, very near future. Or even more remarkable to note is that science fiction allows you to make alternate histories, which is one of the most powerful tools I think I have ever found. Because you can't change history, but you can imagine what might have been. I think that is a way of writing that can really explore the mistakes we have made in the past. Perhaps, it is a way to explore what mistakes we shouldn't make in the future. I love the idea that science fiction is not disconnected from today. It's always in dialogue with present-day things, even when it's projected in the distant future.

Laura Gustafsson:

I've never been a fan of science fiction, actually. At least the kind of stereotypic science fiction which takes place in outer space, except for alien movies. I love them because they are about motherhood and women and stuff like that. Actually, I think it was Johanna's books that led me to this genre of speculative fiction. I found my sort of home there; in this idea that you can write anything. For me, it's been a revelatory idea to realise that when you write fiction, you can just lie. You're totally entitled to do that. And of course, that also means that you have some sort of responsibility. You need to acknowledge your power because people are a bit naive. They tend to believe almost everything that has been written, especially in Finland. There's this long tradition that in literature everything is somehow true.

Even in our war history, our main source of war history is a book, a fictional book, a novel by Väinö Linna: *The Unknown Soldier*. People have taken it as some kind of documentary fact —this is the tradition of realism in Finland. It's like lying to kids sometimes. It's not always nice to do that, but people have to learn someday. They have to grow up and start being critical and all that.

I think what Johanna said is that you can make alternative histories. You can alter history. You can rewrite stories and you can rewrite history. Because, of course, history also is just written from somebody's perspective and you can always write it from someone else's perspective.

But I'm most interested in the here and now. I'm interested in trying to imagine what could be now and not so much in the future or what there will be in the future. But writing an alternative now and trying to imagine what there could be.

I'm not sure, some maybe say that my novels are fantasy or speculative fiction, or maybe even sci-fi I don't know. Some say that they are just crap.

I think that when you write about how you... I don't want to say that what you feel is the truth because that's a really popular thing to say. You can write about how you see reality; I don't know if that's really speculative fiction then or is it just fiction?

Johanna:

That was a very interesting notion you had that in Finland the realistic tradition is so strong. I remember when *Not Before Sundown* was published in 2000 and it won the Finlandia Award, there was a part of the literary audience that was really shocked because it wasn't a suitable book to win this kind of prestigious award. Even the biggest newspaper in Finland had the headline: The wrong book won.

I'm bitter. I'm still bitter and it's been 20 years. After that, I got some very, very interesting comments from common readers. For example, an elderly lady, a very, very keen reader, came to me and said: "I started your book because I read every Finlandia Award winner, whatever they are, but I read every one. I started the book and I got so angry because this is not true."

Oh my gosh, in what reality are these people living? In the most realistic novels they have read, those characters are as fictitious as my troll eyes. But somehow it just wasn't right to read something that has something like fairytale characters, even when they are like animals there. But then the lady said: "Well, then I just read further and further and said, oh my God, this is very, very fascinating. I didn't know that it's allowed to write like this in Finland."

Laura:

Yes, we actually live in caves. So please forgive us.

Ingvil:

This is, of course, very interesting because I think there is a very interesting tension between notions of truth and that of speculation. You've both, early today and also now, sort of aligned yourself with the idea that your ways of telling stories are a strategy for telling the world otherwise. And it's also a way of imagining things differently. But isn't this imagining also a way of contributing to an otherwise knowledge production? In a way to expand also the reader's possibilities for imagining otherwise?

Johanna:

Yeah, definitely. And I think that in those 20 years when after that my novel won the Finlandia Award or Finlandia Prize, I don't know which one is correct, we have got tens of writers who have taken the tools of speculative fiction into their tool bag. They have noticed that it's a very flexible way of writing things.

We have had a couple of Finlandia Award winners after that, but no one says anymore that this is science fiction or this is fantasy because it's a kind of everyday literature nowadays. I think that people have gradually found that realism is a tool among other literary tools. For example, people tend to have a very, very clearcut boundary between science fiction and real literature. But you don't have to write about spaceships and aliens if you write science fiction or speculative fiction. You can just take a couple of elements from that kind of writing and introduce them to a mostly realistic way of storytelling.

I think that this kind of broadening the horizons, reading horizons, has been quite a healthy thing that has happened in Finnish literature. Of course, we have to remember that we have a very, very active science fiction and speculative fiction fandom here in Finland. I think when you compare it to the population it's one of the most active, perhaps worldwide. People have a very, very natural relationship with writing outside the realistic tradition; they are growing into it. I think this shows the world for the reception of literature in general, that we have different kinds of approaches to storytelling.

When it comes to realism, for example, some people have asked me: why do you hate realism? Well, they are not exclusive things. No, no. It's like: okay, here, I have the right toolbox here; here's the science fiction hammer; here's the horror drill; here is the fantasy saw; and sometimes I take the reality screwdriver out. I need all those tools to make my fiction.

I don't know if I answered all your questions.

Ingvil:

That's fair enough. The question was... Well, the order of my questions are being jumbled by the way this conversation is meandering. But it was something you said, Laura. You said that art is a way of practicing imagination. That fitted really well with what you've both just said about why you write. So I was just wondering if reading is also a way of practicing imagination. Do you think of your readers or your audience? Is there something? Not that I have a message, but we've talked about a call to action. We've talked a lot about change. So can reading and seeing and participating also be a way of practicing imagination?

Laura:

Yeah, I definitely hope so. For me, at least, it is. But I once went to, I took Mensa's test, the IQ test, and I wasn't as intelligent as I had always thought. So I don't think that it's my task to educate people. I want to produce knowledge for myself when I study these things and when I work with art. I think that can also make it interesting to the audience when I have learned something myself. Because if I just write down something that I already know, then I don't think that it would be very interesting to anyone and the least for me, myself.

Johanna:

Yeah, exactly. Because I also want to learn from fiction. For example, very well-researched historic fiction is very, very entertaining, but it's also very enlightening because you can get a glimpse of how people lived in that time. Of course, people have to be like modern-day people in disguise because we really don't know what they thought and what they felt and things like that. But we can get some very important knowledge about the circumstances where they lived and what kind of twists in history led to different kinds of branches in our past.

Some people had said directly to my face that: "You have too much information in your books. I don't want to be taught. I don't want to be lectured." There's only one way to defend myself and it is that I write exactly the kind of books I would like myself to read. I have no other responsibility to my audience, but those books that my kind of people would like. I mean my kind of people is nothing that might be political, but usually, it is just they just love knowledge. If you can't put a nice story, some pieces of information that widen your perspectives and your knowledge of things, I don't think it's a bad thing at all.

Ingvil:

No, no, absolutely not. But it's, I think, back to the first question on the relationship with the feminist political science fiction tradition, because that was very much about social change and envisioning social change. There are, even if there is no sort of maybe educational responsibility, which maybe, in hindsight we can look at the literature from that time as a huge political and societal project, we can now see that.

Perhaps, people don't like being labelled and classified as we've learned today. But there is a rise in speculative fiction at the moment. So perhaps even if now you're writing to create knowledge for yourself, it's still about social change, this element is very strong in both of your works.

Do you think that in 50 years' time this will be considered political fiction? to speculate? And what would that be?

Laura:

First, we need to think whether there is literature or civilisation after 50 years. I don't want to be pessimistic, but... Or is it even pessimistic? It's just like, we never know what will happen, but I really don't know. What do you think?

Johanna:

If we look back into the history of science fiction literature, I remember when I started reading it, it was in the 60s, it was quite controversial even to have a female protagonist in a science fiction book. The roles of the females in science fiction were mostly big-breasted professor daughters whom the scientist could explain, in very, very easy terms, technology and stuff to those bimbo ladies so that everyone can understand what this nice science talk is about.

We have come a long way from that. I think that one of those classics that I remember that is still a classic is Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*. It was the first time I saw that kind of thought experiment, where we have four different ladies who all have different histories as females in different worlds. And then I started to realise how powerful a tool this is. Because you can't do that in conventional, realistic storytelling ways.

Ingvil:

No, and thank you both for your answers actually, because that's a trick question. Because you've also said this must be about the now. I am interested in this element of social change because that is very political. But there's also something that you've both mentioned; that it matters where you tell the story from.

As Aino-Kaisa was talking about earlier with the Haraway quote. Because the protagonists aren't necessarily traditional so there are non-human actors, for example.

It's been discussed also that part of our time is this critique against the faith in human supremacy. So for example, your book, *Animalia*, is very much this negotiation of human superiority. And you can find the same in *Birdbrain*, for example — the conquering. This negotiation happens on very many different levels. It's not just societal, it's also individual.

Could you say something about the relationship between the individual and the society? This is probably where I'm going with all of this. Or why it's important to have non-human actors as part of your protagonists in a way.

Laura:

I think, and this is something we discussed on our table tonight. We were talking about how it's important to acknowledge your species and that you write as a human. You make it visible that there are also these others that are non-human and they also participate in this world and they are part of our shared reality and they exist and they have their knowledge and their existence and also their perspectives.

I mentioned earlier today that I think it's always something that art does, whether it tends to or not, that it helps us to sympathise with the other and feel compassion towards the other. When having these non-human others, I think it's possible to make it clear that there are these other perspectives; that there are these non-human perspectives that we just haven't because we've seen everything from a human perspective.

I think that being a woman, it's easier to kind of understand that because I've been exposed to a lot of cultural products and art and entertainment that's been told from the male perspective. I know that there are these other perspectives that haven't had their voices heard, but I don't think that everyone knows that there are those. Widening that scale to other animals also helps us to position ourselves in the world. And it's not telling about them,

it's more about telling about us, because then we can perhaps see ourselves from someone else's perspective. We can step aside from ourselves and look at what we actually are like.

Johanna:

I think that my angle is that there's so much we don't know or we don't acknowledge about, want to acknowledge. But animals or non-humans, that's perhaps the better word.

Because there have been these kinds of discussions during our history. There have been heated discussions if women are sentient at all. There have been discussions if blacks are human beings and so on and so on.

I think it's a very logical continuum to start to discuss if non-humans had to be treated as something else than a resource. I think that you asked about society and individuals. I think that there is a very big role in individual behaviour in that. For example, I know that people are consuming less meat, and even part of us are dropping it from our diets. But more and more people are making these kinds of individual decisions. When there is enough mass behind that kind of life choice, it has to be listened to. It really has. It's a capitalistic thing.

When you think about meat substitutes that are now very common in every supermarket. It was five years ago. I remember that somebody interviewed a boss of a very big supermarket chain. And he said: "Oh, we would be so happy to provide some meat substitutes, but there are no people buying them. There is no demand for those." And I was thinking that I know so many people who would happily buy those if there were any.

In five years, it just went upside down. Now there are dozens of that kinds of vegan products in the supermarkets. I think that it was about the individuals. Because that supermarket chain didn't really care about those people who want to eat vegetarian or vegan food. So he said, there's no demand. He really did a personal decision not to care about this potential customer sector. A couple of years after that, some other person made an individual decision to include this merchandise.

Ingvil:

There's definitely power in stories and they have an impact on people's life choices and decisions. But there's also another dimension. When you both mentioned that this is a continuum, that there was a school of others at stake in the speculative fiction of today. The

science fiction from the 70s was very much about men and women. But now we have a range of different species, and we have a range of different perspectives.

Maybe the question of individuality or society is the wrong one. Maybe it should be about relationality. Isn't there also change? We have to rethink what societal change means. We need to rethink what sentience means or individuality means or collectivity means. Coexistence is one of your words. I think your works are doing that. But I don't know if that's something that you've reflected on or thought about, that it's relation-building in a way.

Laura:

Yes, probably in a way, if I understand correctly what you are asking. I think the animal question, actually, has a lot to do with social questions. Because I think it's at the root of all other social justice questions. Because as long as we have this, what we should first and foremost do is rethink the animal. Because as long as we have this concept of the animal, that's exactly how long we can put someone else into that category of animals. When we have these animals, then there are always some others who are not morally significant or juristically significant and to whom anything can be done.

It's not just these other animals, not just non-human animals. As we've seen in the past and also nowadays, it's also other human beings who are discarded in that category. That's really something we need to rethink. And when we rethink that, then we need to rethink the human, the category of human and what actually means to be human and how that has been built in this culture.

Ingvil:

Donna Haraway, a favourite among many of us, argues that science fiction or speculative fiction is political theory. What do you think of that?

I'm trying to dislocate the political in a way from the human and human society because I think that's what your works both are doing. So the animal question is a very political one. Because all changes affect other things. Can we maintain our notion of the political within these more expanded networks of voices? How do we do that?

Johanna:

I haven't given it a very specific thought, but I was interested in Haraway's notion about science fiction being political. In that way, science fiction, or speculative fiction, is the only literary tool to make visible something that has never been. If we expand this thought to, for example, a novel. Somebody could write a novel about a future where we have broken down the barrier between human and animal. Where there is not a clearcut boundary between those life forms. And then explore the possibilities of that world: How would it differ from this world we are living in? Would it be better? Would it be worse? In which ways and from which angle? Better or worse? I think that that kind of book just waits for writing somewhere. I haven't seen one.

I remember reading a very early science fiction novel which was called *Brain Wave*. I think Poul Anderson wrote it. It has a very, very interesting premise. The idea was that the Earth had, at some time in very ancient history, passed, getting into a cosmic radiation cloud. This cosmic cloud happened to lower animal intelligence. But human beings had developed a little bit higher intelligence. So that they could have had their IQs intact. Then in the near future, the Earth comes out of the cloud. Then these animals start to behave in the same way as us. They are starting to talk and have the kind of skills that we have thought only human beings can do.

I think it's a very, very interesting thought experiment. And that kind of thought experiments, I think we need more. Of course, I actually read it and re-read it half a year ago. And it is a horrible book. Just a nice premise. Finally, the male author found out that of course female intelligence is proposed. There was a problem because some ladies got very dissatisfied to be intelligent and they wanted back to be housewives and so on.

I don't recommend reading that book, but you know, nice premise! So 60s, so 60s!

Ingvil:

There is a spectacular science fiction novel called *Children of Time* by Adrian Tchaikovsky where the humans have decided to build a planet for themselves, a new one, an artificial one.

Because it's going so badly with the one that we have. But there are terrorists who disagree that humans should continue with their superiority complex. So the link, the elevator to the planet, is severed. They have introduced that they want to evolve, in a truly transhumanist

fashion. They want to evolve and become super humans so they've put nano or some kind of virus.

But being no humans on this planet, it is the spiders and the ants that evolve and it's a fantastic sort of experiment in how to build a society. Of course, there is a big sort of equal rights movement by the spider males who aren't allowed to do anything but be killed after mating. There is what I would call a new wave of science fiction, you have these sorts of untraditional protagonists and nature is a very big one.

The whole Donna Haraway thing with being political theory... yes! that's probably still true, but isn't it also becoming more ecological theory in a way? Because it's a way of saving or trying to find strategies for salvaging what we can from this damaged planet. And just that we might not be here in 50 years so there might not be any literature left.

That's very, dystopian! But you have climate strikes, you have, a real-life dystopian sense. Is fiction responding to this or is fiction also fuelling it in a way to build some kind of critical mass?

Laura:

I think that if we don't, we as humanity do not imagine things and imagine what could be done and how to make this, how to get out of this situation that we are in, then of course we cannot get out of it. Because, first, we have to imagine it and it can happen; but it cannot happen unless we do.

It's kind of weird or disturbing that people can always imagine for instance so many innovative ways to torture and do shit like that. But then when it comes to more productive things we think that everything has been already thought and nothing is original. We have to give up the idea that we can't come up with new plans and new ideas. We have to start thinking about what would it be like to be human in the future. And think about the future from that perspective and try not to think about flying cars or something really stupid like that. It starts from us: how we could be and behave and exist in the future or in the now; what would be different.

For instance, what kind of life would we have if we didn't coexist with oil and fossil fuels? and how dissatisfying would that be? It would be horrible. This is something that I'm trying

to write about in both my and Erika's work and my own novel. About what it would be like to live without oil and how we could get rid of that haunting and the possession of the oil.

For me, that is also producing knowledge for myself. Because I really wouldn't want to live without all that, all these nice things: having food from the store, having these warm inside places, and warm water, and makeup, and beer and all that. But then it might be, we might have to. It's important to try to think, not to think what it would be like, but what kind of human being I would be, we would be if we existed in that kind of reality.

Johanna:

I think that's a very good idea to try to imagine a world without fossil fuels. Because somebody has to think it through because politicians and the industry say that that's impossible, that we just can't do that. But when somebody imagines that and puts it on paper, perhaps, it's not so horrible a future at all. Perhaps, it could be even tolerable.

This is what science fiction is about, we are creating possibilities, possible futures. We are not trying to be futurologists, we have a freedom to... We have to be logical, of course, but we don't have to think that there is going to be economic growth every year, we don't have to think about that. But I think that everyone else in politics thinks that it's something inevitable, that we have to do, but we don't. We can imagine other futures.

You said that the utopians are very boring and disturbing and sexy. I agree, I agree totally. Because people are more interested in drama and conflicts. You know that Jehovah's Witness paradise, but there is also a science fiction sub-channel called Solar Punk. It is not utopian literature; it is literature that tries to vision a future in which we are coping with climate change, with those resources and that knowledge we already have.

I think that's empowering. The stories can be very entertaining and there can be disturbing elements or lots of drama and conflicts and human behaviour, not just you know petting lambs and lions. But they are giving a glimmer of hope. If someone is able to imagine that kind of future it is a possible future.

Ingvil:

Isn't there also a risk of advocating a kind of return to nature so that nature gets fixed again as some kind of utopian place?

Johanna:

There are risks of those kinds of utopias. Because it gives us the dream that everything could be reversed. I don't think it's something that is in any way possible. Of course, we can write a book like space aliens come and then they you know snap their fingers and say okay let it be 1850 again and start over, please. That would be very nice but I'm not really expecting that to happen.

Ingvil:

We will soon, reluctantly, close this very interesting conversation and open the floor for some questions. But one last one about this idea of social change and a *we*. For example, a future without fossil fuels. There is, in this sort of new wave of science fiction all about social change, an animal perspective. There is a technology perspective, but there is also a rise of black science fiction; native population science fiction. That sort of making stories that have been marginalised.

For us to be, for this *we* to live without fossil fuels, we would have to unlearn a lot of our privileges in order for that to be happening now. The *we* I suppose will always have to be negotiated.

Any last comments on this idea of science fiction, social change before we open the floor? Do you think it is a mission even if it's not to educate? What drives your writing? Why do you keep doing it? Is it to educate yourself, knowledge for yourself but is it also to tell stories?

Johanna:

I think it's that so-called moral passion.

Laura:

For me, I think it's curiosity. Because always when I write I have this study, something I want to study. I have some questions. For instance, what would I do if the world as we know it would come to an end? Or what is it that's really wrong with me? This was, with my last book, the question I tried to answer; I couldn't. I have to probably make a sequel.

With my first novel, it was: what do I actually think about prostitution? I don't still know but I have different angles to think about it.

Johanna:

I have to say that you said in your talk that art is a moral passion and entertainment. I think you should never forget the entertainment part of it. We have been talking about very, very difficult social concepts: the future, animal rights and everything. But in my honest opinion, it doesn't matter if we can't tell them in stories that are intriguing and immersive. In one word: entertaining.