Introduction

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The preceding poetry excerpt by Maria Dorothea Schrattenholz arguably describes a longing for a home, a home that no longer exists. A similar longing might be experienced today when encountering ecological problems such as melting glaciers, changing forests and highlands, and absent snowscapes. Furthermore, imagery of cold, inhospitable environments; resilient, taciturn characters; and a gloomy tone ornamented with a thousand shades of wistfulness might be described as "typically Nordic" features, popularised recently by the Nordic noir genre. What, then, are the specific characteristics that make Nordic speculative fiction recognisable, perhaps as its own geographical sub-genre? How are the changes in Nordic environments and societies, caused by climate change and other environmental or societal phenomena, negotiated through speculative fiction? These are some of the questions that sparked the creation of this anthology.

We are proud to state that the book you are now reading is the first definitive research anthology on Nordic speculative fiction and the first one written in English. It brings together the discourses of research, texts, and bodies of work from a region previously underexplored in the fields of speculative and science fiction and fantasy studies: the Nordic.

What we mean here by *Nordic* is the geographical and cultural region of Europe that consists of the nation-states Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. In addition to these states, the Nordics include the Åland Islands (an autonomous and demilitarised region of Finland), the Faroe Islands and Kalaallit Nunaat or Greenland (which form part of the Kingdom of Denmark), and Svalbard (which is protected by the internationally acknowledged Svalbard Treaty but is under Norwegian sovereignty).

There are also other specific areas within the Nordic countries, with their own rich cultures and traditions and some degree of autonomy, such as Sápmi, the region traditionally inhabited by the indigenous Sámi people, which stretches across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, as well as the Kola peninsula in the extreme northwest of Russia.

In this publication, the emphasis is on Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish work, and perspectives, which, to our knowledge, reflects the current state of research on speculative fiction. Despite our efforts, we were unfortunately unable to attract chapters showcasing speculative fiction research and perspectives from Iceland or smaller cultural areas of the Nordics such as Indigenous communities. We hope that these shortcomings will be addressed in subsequent anthologies. We also acknowledge that Finland is overrepresented in this publication, something which is owed to the fact that speculative fiction research in the Nordics is similarly Finnish dominated. This dominance was also very much reflected on the responses to our open call for papers when compiling this anthology. However, we do our best to also showcase research on Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish speculative works.

Finland has a larger fandom, creative, and academic community orbiting speculative fiction, with longstanding traditions, than the other Nordic territories. There, we find large-scale conventions and research conferences, and societies like Finfar – The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, which publishes the open-access journal *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, now central to the Nordic research community. In 2020, *Fafnir* became the first academic journal to win a World Fantasy Award, one of the leading international awards in speculative fiction. There are also a number of annual speculative fiction awards, such as the Tähtivaeltaja Award, which is awarded for the best science fiction book released in Finnish, and the Atorox Award awarded to the best science fiction short story (more on Atorox can be found in Chapter 15).

What, then, is speculative fiction? In our understanding, it is a broad umbrella term for texts that include elements that do not exist, or do not exist in the form in which they are portrayed, in the referential known universe (e.g. Selling 2004, 21; Korpua et al. 2021, 11–12; Koistinen & Mäntymäki 2022). This includes most works in genres such as fantasy, science fiction, magical realism, supernatural horror, alternative history, weird fiction, slipstream, New Nordic Magic (see *Kosmorama* 2021), the Russian wondertale (as discussed by Vladimir Propp), and more, not simply falling along the lines between "genre" and "mainstream" texts (Suoranta 2023, 16). Beginning with the premise of posing the question "what if" or suggesting the reader/viewer/player to "imagine if," these works use speculation as a strategy to reveal something new and relevant through engaging them into addressing the premise (Roine 2016). Furthermore, speculative fiction can be argued to be a genre in which the structures of storytelling and forms of

worldbuilding are put self-reflectively on show (Polvinen 2023, 11) and thus a means for addressing contemporary reality through the acknowledgement of the creative artifice of any attempt to organise the world into a narrative form (Kraatila 2021, 52).

One of the most known authors whose work (or some of it) is typically categorised under the umbrella of speculative fiction, Margaret Atwood, has argued that the genres that speculative fiction encapsulates all draw from the same deep well: "those imagined other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension, through a doorway into the spirit world, or on the other side of the threshold that divides the known from the unknown" (Atwood 2011). Another influential author, Ursula K. Le Guin, has beautifully described speculative fictions as the realism of a larger reality, "perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves" (2007, 87).

Although this anthology concerns itself mainly with Nordic speculative fiction from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the histories of speculative fiction in the Nordic countries are long and diverse. Folklore, fairy tales, myths, sagas, older literature – "Northern Myth," as J.R.R. Tolkien called it (Flieger 2005, 27–37; Whittingham 2008, 37–38) – and the cosmologies of ancient Norse religions are testament to the longstanding and strong traditions of visiting "worlds located somewhere apart" and exploring "a larger reality."

In recent decades, Nordic speculative fiction has blossomed, emerging explosively on to global markets, quickly becoming its own recognisable "brand." From Norway, Maja Lunde has reached unprecedented levels of success with the novel series *Climate Quartet* (2015–2019), now translated into 40 languages. From Finland, Emmi Itäranta has had great international success with the novel *Memory of Water* (2022). Both Lunde's and Itäranta's works are discussed in this anthology. The Danish short story collection *Sky City* (2010) and the Icelandic poetry-collection *Dimmumot* (2019) by Steinunn Sigurdardottir (in English "Dusk," about glacier downwasting) have made an impact outside of Nordic borders.

There is also a thriving Nordic fandom community as well as large communities organised around games and gaming, Live Action Role Play, transmedial art, and fan fiction, all more or less overlapping with speculative fiction fandom. The fandom community is especially active in Finland, of which the selection of Helsinki as the site of Worldcon, the World Science Fiction Convention in 2017, is yet another proof. Furthermore, Finnish video game developers have enjoyed extraordinary international success since the beginning of 2010s, and many of the well-known video games incorporate elements from speculative fiction. These include, for instance, the action adventure game *Alan Wake* (2010, Remedy) and its recent sequel (2023), which make use of the survival horror genre; a platform roguelike *Noita*

(2019, Nolla Games), which references Finnish mythological creatures and the *Kalevala;* and *Returnal* (2021, Housemarque), which is discussed in this anthology. In the latest Nordic Game Awards, the big winner was *Skábma – Snowfall* (2022, Red Stage Entertainment), a game by Tampere-based indie game studio and inspired by the beliefs and folktales of the Sámi.

Within Nordic television and film, "new nordic magic" is currently in vogue, and an increasing number of media productions have begun to reach for the speculative toolbox. To mention but a few examples, films such as the Finnish surreal thriller *Apeiron* (2013, dir. Maria Ruotsala), based on Leena Krohn's novel *Umbra* (1990), and the Danish dystopian time travel narrative *Qeda* (*Man Divided*, 2017, dir. Max Kestner), set in Denmark in 2095 and 2017, showcase emotionally and cognitively engaging Nordic speculative fiction. Moreover, Swedish *Gräns* (*Border*, 2018, dir. Ali Abbasi) serves as a prime example of speculative political imagination in film as it deals with the boundaries of gender and humanity. In television, the Swedish science fiction series *Äkta Människor* (*Real Humans,* 2012–2014) tackles the relationship between humans and human-like robots in an alternative Sweden (see Hellstrand, Koistinen & Orning 2019) and Icelandic *Katla* (2021) hints at Stanislaw Lem's classic novel *Solaris* (1961) with its uncanny doppelgängers (that raise timely questions of ableism among other things).

Often, speculative fiction and crime fiction are combined (see Koistinen & Mäntymäki 2022, 2020): for example, the Norwegian *Okkupert* (*Occupied,* 2015–2017) blends dystopia and crime thriller in a storyline where Russia attacks Norway (that currently seems less speculative than before), the Swedish *Jordskott* (2015–2017) blends together fantasy and a traditional police series, and the Norwegian-made international HBO success *Beforeigners* (2019–), also discussed in this anthology, seasons the crime story with time travel.

There are, of course, examples of the speculative in Nordic film already before, with forerunners like Benjamin Christensen's fictive documentary on witchcraft, *Häxan* (*Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages*, Sweden & Denmark, 1922), or Erik Blomberg's horror-fantasy *Valkoinen peura* (*The White Reindeer*, Finland, 1952). In television, a forerunner in speculative fiction is Danish Lars von Trier's *Riget* (*The Kingdom Exodus*, re-made in 2022, original series 1994–1997) that plays with both horror and fantasy and enjoys a cult status.[1]

We argue that the recent boom of Nordic speculative fiction should be given more attention within academia. What work is speculative fiction doing in the Nordic societies today? What does the increased popularity of genre fiction perhaps tell about recent technological, economic, political, environmental, and social developments, and how are these developments received, both within the Nordic societies and beyond them? How do the creators and fans use speculation as a strategy to negotiate global and

regional issues such as climate change and mass extinction, migration and xenophobia, war (in Europe and beyond), and the continued struggle for queer and transgender rights? Some of these questions are discussed already in this anthology. Future studies should, however, take these discussions further.

Nordic countries are often praised for equality, such as in terms of gender. The praise is deserved to some extent, but many gendered problems, structural inequalities, harmful assumptions, and violent practices exist in the Nordic context. In this anthology, we have attempted to do our part in the struggle for gender equality by championing the use of inclusive language. In the spirit of the Finnish gender-neutral personal pronoun "hän" (in Finnish, there are no gendered personal pronouns, just "hän") and the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun "hen" (introduced alongside the two binary pronouns), we have encouraged all authors to, when applicable, use the pronoun "they" when referring to people. That said, specific genders are, of course, mentioned, and specific pronouns utilised when gender identities are known, or gender is relevant to the analysis. In terms of inclusivity, we have also chosen to keep a very light touch while standardising language, allowing the authors to maintain their own, personal style of writing.

As mentioned above, this anthology was compiled through an open call for papers. Consequently, the structuring of the anthology into four thematic sections follows from our aim to draw out some recurring themes in the field of Nordic speculative fiction. These themes are prominent not only in research and theory but also in speculative artistic practice in the past and present alike.

The first section, titled "Strategies of Speculation," kicks off with Hanna-Riikka Roine's chapter on speculative strategies used in narrating the future of Finnish democracy. With the case study of an anthology of short stories commissioned in 2021 by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, Roine lays out the elements of speculation as a strategy and argues that speculations both draw on and have the potential to shape their social and cultural contexts. While Roine analyses the relationship of speculation to narrative, Laura Piippo examines its intersection with the experimental in the three novels by Finnish author Jaakko Yli-Juonikas published between 2009 and 2015. Drawing on the discussions on the relationship between the postmodernist novel and science fiction, Piippo shows that the connection between literary experiments of the contemporary avant-garde and speculative genre fiction is very much present in the Finnish context.

Michael Godhe then discusses possibly the first Swedish science fiction novel, Claës Lundin's *Oxygen och Aromasia: Bilder från år 2378*, published in 1878. Departing from the interdisciplinary field of Critical Future Studies, Godhe deconstructs Lundin's novel and shows that while Lundin's usual progressiveness is more ambivalent in this tale, the novel both widens the

scope of possible futures and shuts down imaginative possibilities. The first section closes with Pekka Kuusisto's chapter, which presents a reading of the structuralist critical tradition of the literary fantastic in terms of its generic encyclopaedism and how literature theorist Tzvetan Todorov's predecessor Vladimir Propp's criticism of the Finnish school of folklore studies (e.g. Julius Krohn, Kaarle Krohn, and Antti J. Aarne) links structuralism with the Northern tradition of nineteenth-century philology.

The second section focuses on different forms of "Uncanny and Ecological Impulses." In the first chapter, Jyrki Korpua analyses uncanny experiences created by Swedish-speaking Finnish author Tove Jansson's five short stories written between 1935 and 1991. Korpua argues that Jansson uses at least two distinct kinds of motifs, those of the sublime and horror, to evoke such experiences in readers. Next, Sophie Wennerscheid examines the contemporary trend in Danish speculative fiction where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, familiar and unfamiliar, as well as past and future are renegotiated in darkish visions of possible futures. By making use of the concepts of the uncanny and speculation, Wennerscheid argues for speculative literary practices as a means of opening up for unknown dimensions of reality and for possible futures that might unfold on premises we still do not know.

Juha Raipola's chapter considers the speculative cross-genre of Finnish Weird (*suomikumma*) as a platform for environmental themes in the works of Leena Krohn and Johanna Sinisalo. In Raipola's analysis, Finnish Weird is approached as a specifically Nordic subgenre of weird fiction which has more generally been construed as notably well attuned to the portrayal of the disturbing effects of global environmental crisis from a non- or anti-anthropocentric viewpoint. Continuing with the environmental theme, Claudia Nierste's chapter wraps the section up, examining references to the primary world in the contemporary Finnish climate fiction written by Emmi Itäranta and Risto Isomäki. Nierste's analysis finds that not only the connections between the novel's storyworlds to the primary world serve a variety of purposes, but even direct references to the primary world do not fulfil a solely mimetic function. Instead, they provide powerful communicative tools and building blocks in the storyworld.

The third section is centred around different "Border Crossings." Kasimir Sandbacka focuses on the tension between a historical past and a speculative present in Finnish author Jani Saxell's *Europe* series (2010–2017). Sandbacka proposes that the key narrative device Saxell's series deploys to represent such a tension is dream narration, a form of metamodern in-betweenness that contributes to the reconstruction of historical understanding and utopian imagination after an era of postmodern deconstruction. Jenniliisa Salminen, then, explores the two first novels of Susanna Hynynen's and Dess Terentjeva's fantasy trilogy *Neonkaupunki*

(2020–2024) within the wider phenomenon of introducing Russian culture to Western fantasy readers. In particular, Salminen analyses how the novels use elements of the fantasy genre and of Russian culture to build and negotiate the identity of young Finland Russians and to mediate Russian culture to Finnish readers.

For its part, Marta Tveit's chapter discusses extractivism in Norwegian author Maja Lunde's *Blå* (2017) and Mame Bougouma Diene's African speculative fiction novelette *The Satellite Charmer* (2020). By looking at how the shared theme of extractivism operates in these two texts, Tveit argues that while they differ in tone, both Lunde's and Diene's texts employ a bottom-up perspective on injustice, explore avenues of resistance, and portray experienced complicity and ambivalence in relation to natural resource extraction. Next, Ruth S. Wenske's chapter presents a hydrocolonial reading of the Norwegian speculative television series *Beforeigners* (2019), examining the thematic, visual, and setting-specific references to the ocean as central to the plot's unfolding. By contextualising these references within Norway's maritime history, Wenske argues that *Beforeigners* is characterised by a "hydrocolonial unconscious" that evokes various mythologies, both historical and folkloric.

In the last chapter of the section, Josefine Wälivaara focuses on borders of a more psychological sort, analysing the depictions of mental illness and their relations to space and time in Swedish science fiction film *Aniara* (2019). Wälivaara's analysis shows how the temporality of spaces becomes intrinsically connected to the mental states of the characters. Through this connection, the film avoids Othering mental illness and instead depicts distress, despair, and mental illness as intrinsic to what it is to be human.

The final section of the anthology turns to "Art, Games, and beyond Fiction." Maria Ruotsalainen examines the intersections of gender and age in the gameplay and reception of Finnish game studio Housemarque's roguelike *Returnal* (2021). Ruotsalainen notes that even though age and gender in the game are mostly ignored in the critiques of the games, keeping in line with the traditional "masculine" ways of valuing games based on game mechanics, for many players, *Returnal's* representation of a middle-aged female protagonist proves important. Thus, the game and the players' reception of it both seem to resist the masculinist values inherent in game cultures. Oskari Rantala presents an overview of Finnish speculative fiction fandom through the examination of the history and debates around the Atorox Award, a prize annually awarded to the best Finnish speculative fiction short story published during the previous year. Rantala focuses on the aspects setting Finnish SFF fandom apart from other national fandoms, suggesting that many of these peculiar aspects can be traced back to the fandom's relatively young age, initial lack of commercial venues for genre material as well as decentralised structuring.

Finally, Caroline Elgh focuses on environmental imaginations in contemporary art, discussing the speculative in the work of two contemporary artists, Larissa Sansour and Johannes Heldén, who both have connections to the Nordic context. Influenced by the work of feminist science studies scholar Donna J. Haraway and the environmental humanist research of Kathryn Yussof and Jennifer Gabrys, Elgh approaches the work of the artists by a feminist visual analysis with a focus on "Chthulucene environmental imaginations," arguing that the artists' work builds – and contributes to the broader societal, global, and planetary building of – rich multispecies assemblages that, during the current ecological crisis, are essential for the survival of humans and nonhumans alike.

The anthology concludes with a thought-provoking coda, a collaborative speculative conversation written by Finnish poet, researcher, and creative writer Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Danish researcher and creative writer Line Henriksen. The text centres around two fictive readers from the future who read the collection at hand and discuss it between each other, unsure of what to make of it. In the spirit of found poetry/collage, the coda utilises textual material found in the anthology at hand and brings together poetry's techniques of estrangement with the estrangement of speculative fiction – as well as the register of scientific language (on the connections between speculative fiction, namely science fiction, and poetry, see Chu 2010). By beginning and ending the anthology with poetry, we wish to remind the readers that speculative fiction has its poetic roots and connections, especially so in the Nordic countries, where speculative imagination has its beginnings and strong traditional backgrounds in folk poetry and myths.

Note

1 As the chapters of the present anthology mainly revolve around literature – with a few exceptions, that is – we wanted to give a short overview on audiovisual fiction here. We nevertheless realise that there are many productions that remain unmentioned here.

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