

The Red Line

Punainen viiva

Presented by: Eric Bergman

Just like Chekov's gun that, appearing in the first act must be fired in the last, the introduction of children at the beginning of a Finnish political novel concerning early 20th-century poverty must see them dead by the final pages. The more tragically they die—for want of money to buy simple medicines, hungry, filthy—the more the political point is driven home: the poverty of the majority of the Finnish population around the time of independence (1917) was such a disgrace that only radical political and socio-economic change, driven by anger yet also tenderness and beauty, would suffice. Such is the case in Ilmari Kianto's 1909 novel *Punainen viiva* [The Red Line], a novel that follows the political awakening of a man and wife living in the deep forests along the Russian border. Kianto was awarded the State Literary Prize for the novel in 1910. According to author Sari Malkamäki, *Punainen viiva* is a "Finnish classic, a naturalist burlesque in which the significance of nature in people's lives, the protagonists' poverty, the author's ethical message and stand on the side of the poor [are] all a part of Finland's vast national inheritance" (1997, 206).

The context is the build-up to the first Finnish Parliamentary election in 1907, a result of the general strike of 1905, while Finland was an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. Political agitators traveled through the country rallying votes for their party, yet, of the six extant parties, only the Social Democrats are mentioned in the novel. It is only the Left that appeal to people like Topi and Riika, the impoverished protagonists of the novel. The democratic socialist 'revolution' promises, via the new medium of newspapers, which feature prominently in the novel:

Redistribution of land! Revoke taxes on the poor! Ensure pensions for the elderly! Officials, good-for-nothing idlers, will be reduced! Thousands-of-Mark salaries will be squeezed! Gentlemen's luxury will be forbidden! Knowledge and enlightenment will be spread for free. Children will be clothed and schooled! Doctors will be put to travel the far-flung places, both doctors and veterinarians! Every impoverished person will from now on live by the work of his own hand in his own home without having to travel miles to make a penny! The whole shape of life will change!

From Topi and Riika's perspective, where "gentlemen had always accused [Topi] of being lazy and inefficient" (Kianto 174, all translations by the author), this kind of propaganda has its effect. Though the scope of the novel is only one winter, first Topi and then Riika become fervent supporters of the Social Democrats (humorously Topi, an uneducated man, mispronounces them as the "soli-sali-rattien" party rather than the sosiaalidemokraattien party) and the couple ceremoniously draw their "red line" in the ballot for that party in March. Now, they imagine, all their problems will disappear.

Of course, that's not the way the real world operates. In fact, society is much more closely attuned to the savageness of nature, which not only frames the novel but is alluded to continuously. The novel opens with a bear, the king of the forest, whose thoughts readers are privy to, along with his

humanesque emotions (anthropomorphism), as he searches for a place to hibernate as the first snow then falls. Let it also be noted that 38 years before George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was published *Punainen viiva* is home to a group of "comrade" cockroaches ("brown-coats") who debate the finer existential points of politics and finally make a "pilgrimage" to their holy place—the family's worn-out hymnal (Kianto 58–64).

Though there is also humor in the novel (the "burlesque" Malkamäki refers to), along with tenderness within the family, the existential threat of nature via the long, cold winters and the upper-classes' lack of solidarity and fairness (Topi is paid as little as possible for the birds he traps in the forest) means that the family, along with the poor in general, are doomed. The end of the novel returns to the bear, who's just awoken from hibernation sometime after Topi and Riika cast their votes. He's hungry. He hears a mouth-watering clang, the familiar sound of a cowbell. He breaks through a fence and kills the terrified cow and lifts it to carry back to the forest. Topi, however, who was watching over the cow while clearing brush, attacks the bear with his axe. "[D]istress made him into a hero" (Kianto 197). The bear kills Topi, with a "red line" (Kianto 198) of blood running down his broken neck. The last words of the novel describe one of his two living children watching the scene from the cabin's window.

It is a tragic end to a heart-breaking novel that, nevertheless, soars at moments to imagined heights of political justice and equality. And there are some equalities already present: Topi and Riika's marriage is, in terms of the historical context, alarmingly equal. At one point, Riika declares that it is she who will go sell the birds in town so as to attend a political meeting and Topi quietly—and even happily because she can then explain to him what is actually going on—acquiesces. "You'll be the house-husband!" (Kianto 105), she tells him. Finland was the first country in Europe to give women the vote and the first in the world in which women were elected; the female characters take politics very seriously and some are in leadership positions. There are also beautiful moments of tenderness between Topi and Riika, made more profound by their shared poverty, misery, and, despite it all, tenacity.

The novel is not only about the nexus of poverty and politics, but this is its central theme. In one of the most moving details, the eldest son Sakeus pleads with his father to allow him to use the skis to descend the hill. Topi finally gives in and Sakeus is over-joyed. He is only wearing a dirty shirt in sub-freezing temperatures—skiing in bare feet—which is why for the six or so months winter lasts at these latitudes the children are almost entirely indoors. Hence Sakeus's joy at this exception. And hence readers' gut-wrenching pity. "A poor child doesn't need much to be happy" (Kianto 41–2), thinks Topi.

Christmas is coming. Will Christmas "come on skis?" (Kianto 95) asks a child. Topi allows the children to taste a coffee bean (the luxury for most Finns at the time) after a child asks, in incorrect and hench childish Finnish, "let father taste!" (95). Then a small piece of sugar each. (Contemporary political engagement might include forcing children—whenever they complain about food or the amount of Christmas gifts they've received—to read this novel in the corner.) "Hoi, father!" the children tend to say to get his attention. This is not the strict, hierarchical, children-as-periphery-objects family so familiar from that era of Finnish literature. There is love, tenderness, and warmth in their relationships.

And so it comes as nothing less than devastating when three of the children die. "The gentleman-class has to be blamed for the death of your children," Topi is told by a 'comrade' woman in town after burying his three children in a single coffin. "If you'd had money and medicine, then of course they wouldn't have died like puppies" (Kianto 192). The religious consensus is that the children's

death was vengeance from God for meddling in his ordained ways through political engagement: “God doesn’t allow himself to be mocked” (188). Topi misses his eldest boy Sakeus the most; “Sakeus, come quickly down from the tree!” he thinks. “Her own little flower made Riika cry the most. Iita Linta Maria...” (192).

In Riika’s words, the “red line was drawn with the blood of the hearts of a suffering people” (Kianto 183). Suffering, alas, is what she has in store after the novel ends. There’s the suggestion that she’s pregnant and there are the two children to feed; but their only cow, good for milking, her other children, and her partner against nature, against the cruel mechanisms of society, are dead. The novel has made clear that politics, democracy, socialism, and all the rest of it won’t alleviate this suffering and hopelessness. For suffering and hopelessness stem from nature and nature, in Finland for the poor, is all-pervasive.

Works Cited

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LANGUAGE: Finnish/Suomi

CENSORSHIP STATUS:

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

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