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## Opinions and emotions – Finnish women in their comics

It is difficult to classify the specific features of Finnish women's comics, since the field of Finnish comics is very broad, with new styles and techniques constantly emerging. The most typical element in Finnish women's comics is a journal-like approach. Finnish women and girls use comics to express their emotions, worries and joys.

### Women's everyday lives and emotions

Blogs have taught us to follow the fashion choices of strangers and discuss deeper feelings through always up-to-date entries. Similarly, blogs have provided inspiration and a new medium for comic artists.

Since 2005, different blogging sites have been filling with blog posts from female comic artists. Milla Paloniemi's Cursing Hedgehog started life as an Internet phenomenon, but her popular blog *En vaan osaa!* (I just can't) also paved the way and increased the readership for other blog-based comics.

Like many comic bloggers, Paloniemi gives readers the opportunity to follow her and take a peek into her everyday life. She is not afraid to show her feelings and vent her frustrations or moments of weakness through the blog. In the blog format, feedback is instant, and readers can discuss issues raised by the comics.

The autobiographical approach is not a phenomenon created by the blogs alone, it just suits the online environment generated by them. Perhaps the current reality television trend and hectic contemporary narratives help build a foundation for the popularity of comic blogs. Before the era of comic blogs, comics were not necessarily directly autobiographical. For example, Annukka Leppänen's *Anopin unelma*, Kati Närhi's *Hanki elämä* and Katja Tukiainen's *Tyttöjen leikit* all constructed their narratives around the everyday lives of women. The albums all have a strong autobiographical element, but their connection to reality may just be a part of the story.

### Speak out and make a difference

The early 2000s saw several female cartoonists enter the industry through self-publication and anthologies. One of the most significant new female comic artists of the early millennium is Tiitu Takalo (Tuuli ja myrsky 2009, Kehä 2007). Takalo's work depicts life from a minority point of view and aggressively criticises prejudice. Her stories offer a natural view on activist and other alternative lifestyles. In 2001–2007 Takalo also published the *Irtoparta* comic magazine which focused on female cartoonists. *Irtoparta* used comics to provide an unflinching look at different female perspectives on socially generated roles.

Feminist thinking began to emerge during the 1990s, bringing the community of female cartoonists to the forefront. Inspired by the San Francisco magazine *Wimmen's Comix*, published from 1972 to 1992, the *Naarassarjat* anthology of female cartoonists was founded in 1992. *Naarassarjat* was mainly run by editor-in-chief Johanna "Roju" Rojola, who used the publication to create a forum for female cartoonists to express themselves. Female cartoonists could be confident that their everyday routines could be interesting, that comics could be political, and that their handiwork was beautiful.

At the female cartoonist seminar organised at the Päivälehti Museum in January 2011, every speaker mentioned Rojola at least once. Cartoonists Tiina Pystynen (*Lemmentanssit* 2009, *Leskikuningattaren muistelmat* 1993), Kaisa Leka (*Tour d'Europe* 2010, *I Am Not These Feet* 2003) and Miia Vistilä (*Rakkaat siskot*) voiced the thoughts of many female cartoonists in emphasising the significance of the change in the culture in the 1990s and how Johanna Rojola's work and participation helped the field take major strides forward.

These same female cartoonists have in turn inspired several new female comic artists. For example, Tiina Pystynen was one of the people running *Naarassarjat*, while Kaisa Leka and Miia Vistilä were both involved in creating its successor, *Nettinartut*, a comic website where female cartoonists could publish their work before the blogging era.

### The not-quite-humble pioneers of female comics

Of course, Finnish women were drawing comics before the 1990s. In fact, the most significant Finnish comics were drawn by women. Toto Fogelberg, daughter of Ola Fogelberg who created the Pekka Puupää comic, continued her father's work and drew the comic from 1952 until 1975. Toto Fogelberg began to draw Pekka Puupää independently after her father's death, but even before then she worked as the letterer for the comic.

The Finnish comic character which has gained the most international recognition, the *Moomintroll*, was also the brainchild of a female cartoonist. Created by Tove Marika Jansson, the adventures of



Mari Ahokoivu.

Moomintroll are known around the world and have gained great popularity as far off as Japan.

The Moomins and Pekka Puupää are the spiritual ancestors of many Finnish comics. Many comics depicting everyday life can be seen to have the quarrelsome dynamic of Pekka Puupää and his wife Justiina at their core. Stories from the forest have been made into comics since the 1940s, and there has never been a need to go further than your backyard for ideas. Tove Jansson's delicate lines and watercolours are also familiar to many Finns. These visual treats and beautiful stories have been brought into Finnish homes in the form of bedtime stories and even sets of dishware. With this background, it is no wonder that our contemporary female artists are drawn to comics as their narrative form of choice.

### What goes around comes around

The world is full of inspirations and influences for Finnish cartoonists, but the best role models and historical foundations for our female comic artists can be found in Finland.

Finnish female cartoonists jet-set confidently from one international comic festival to the next, creating contacts and even showing a good example of women's comics to countries with little recognition for comic art made by women.



*Tove Jansson, 1945.*

Even a Finnish manga artist raises no eyebrows. Aura Ijäs (Narulla, Animelehti and Japanpop) is one of the first Finnish manga artists who became well known among comic fans. Manga has become the technique of choice for many members of the up-and-coming female cartoonist generation. The next big female cartoonist may well combine elements of manga with those of Finnish women's comics. After all, the ur-Finnish Moomin have become a highly popular manga in Japan.

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