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Book Review: *The Sauna is Full of Maids*

by Karima Karppinen



About the Author

Karima Karppinen is a Finnish doctoral student of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Helsinki. She holds an MA in Theology and Religious Studies from the University of Aberdeen and an MSc in Science and Religion from the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include mysticism and wellbeing. Karppinen is also a poet and a Solution-Focused Brief Therapist. Her poetry has been translated into Latin and Italian and published both in Finland, as well as internationally.

Book Review

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Fish, Cheryl J . 2021. *The Sauna is Full of Maids*. Brunswick, ME: The Shanti Arts Publishing.

Inspired by *Kalevala* (Elias Lönnrot 1802–1884), a 19th-century collection of epic poetry based on Finnish and Karelian oral folklore and mythology, Cheryl J. Fish's *The Sauna is Full of Maids* (2021) is a collection of selected stories based on Fish's lived experiences of saunas and Finland. This poetry collection tells a multilayered story. On one hand, it is an exploration into the modern-day Finland, as it consists of the author's field observations and is a depiction of life stories she has heard along the way while exploring the country. Yet its chosen poetic methods and themes also allow a fresh perspective into the Finnish mythology (*Kalevala*), with references to the Sami indigenous tradition. Thirdly, it is the author's personal journey, not simply a travel diary, but rather a sincere dive into a foreign culture, into her own roots, concept of home, and her soul's unexplainable connection with a country far from her own. The poems are set in saunas, lakes, forests, and private homes. They explore the themes of ecological matters, various human relationships, and encounters, as well as cultural and political changes. Most of all this book opens a timely pondering into what culture is, what aspects of it keep transforming and what remain eternal.

Cheryl J. Fish is an environmental justice scholar, who has been a professor of English at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, a Fulbright professor at the university of Tampere, Finland, as well as a docent at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She has thirteen years of experience in deeply exploring and researching Finland and the Sami culture. Fish is also a fictional writer and a poet, who has published several books related to ecology and social change. Her long international experience between cultures allows her to see Finland both from a birds-eye view perspective historically and geographically, as well as to zoom into its individual details of the experiences of people living there today. Today's Finland is a

multicultural one, and the fact that this poetry book is written from the perspective of an American professor, adds more value for a Finnish reader, as it allows a unique peek into the perspective a foreigner might take when experiencing Finland.

Unlike most academic methods, Fish's poetry manages to transfer to the reader much more than just the writer's personal interpretations, analysis, or conclusions. For someone researching cultures, it allows a deep moment of simply taking in the experience of an atmosphere, without pushing into attempts to understand what is happening. It leaves space for imagination and awakes all senses, with mentions of various foods, beer, smells, bodily sensations, and nature. The book doesn't need photographs to describe the poems, for the poems themselves are like vivid images. Yet Fish's photographs have an important role in how they add to the poems. In the end the message is hidden between the words and the visual elements.

The Sauna is Full of Maids refers to *Kalevala* through direct quotations, references to a magical artifact that produces prosperity and wealth called Sampo (Fish 2021, 20, 30), the power of magical poetic singing (such as the poems sang by Väinämöinen, the main character of *Kalevala*), and the story of the birth of the earth from a broken egg. Elements shared by Finnish mythology and the Sami culture are seen in mentions of spirit animals and the respect towards the healing power of nature. The book begins with lines of poetry from *Kalevala* describing a moment when a hare arrives at the threshold of a sauna where the maids bathe. In *Kalevala*, this extract is part of a longer story in which the hare brings a message about the death of a young woman, Aino (Landström and Lönnrot 1985). In the Finnish mythology, animals were thought to be channels to spiritual realities and to have more knowledge, especially of the afterworld, than humans did. The fact that the hare squats at the threshold of the sauna can be interpreted as related to the sauna being a place where one is close to spirits, also those of the deceased ones (Pulkkinen 2014). The sauna was believed to be filled with magical powers. The steam produced by throwing water onto the hot rocks of the sauna stove could be healing or dangerous depending on the time of the day and on the spirits (2014). The Finnish word for this steam, *löyly*, also refers to the soul that makes our body alive (2014). In the final poem of *The Sauna is Full of Maids*, the poet reveals she recently lost her father. Perhaps through her experiences in the sauna she may find a way to be closer to her father.

The poems are full of ecological themes in how they explore people's relation to nature and take the reader on a journey to *the land of thousand lakes*. The reference to the lakes of Finland as "the Gulf of Finland" carries a sense of the magical power of water found in Finnish mythology. As Fish's experiences show, most Finns still today have unpretentious summer cabins, go mushroom and berry picking, rowing, and swimming

at lakes. She illustrates the environmentally friendly, simple way of Finnish living, greenhouses, and flea markets. Some of the poems are like songs of praise for nature: “Oh lake Näsijärvi”, and the photographs depict some of the most untouched and clean forests and lakes in the entire world (Fish 2021, 17). Yet Fish also refers to how people destroy the seemingly eternal forests: “How can a cuckoo bless a forest if only one tree remains unfelled?” (18), and how the nuclear power plant brings jobs while threatening the environment (46). From an ecological perspective *The Sauna is Full of Maids* is a call to return to our roots in the nature and to respect it as our provider.

The poems open windows into relationships between parents and children, married and divorced couples, ex-lovers, one-night stands, colleagues, strangers in the sauna, foreigners visiting Finland, immigrants, and multicultural people. The book manages to weave together modern-day Finland all the way to Finnish mythology by recognizing the power of nature, singing, and inner, as well as outer nudity. It shows the presence of these eternal elements all the way from the countryside to city life, to today’s reality of cross-cultural marriages and nightlife. In between work, love making, fire making, and eating strange foods, the Finns like to meditate in the heat (25). It cleans and stabilizes. After the sauna, one may start again from the beginning, without the weight of what has been. In the sauna, strangers may be close, and after the sauna, they may return to their silence again.

Many of the poems are dedicated to Fish’s friends in Finland. In a sense, the book is like holding out a friendly hand to the locals saying: *Look I understand you, I see you, I have experienced you and the soul of your culture. I am not a foreigner; I am not a visitor; I am fully here experiencing, just like you. And look, this is what I saw, this is how many new horizons you have given me by allowing me into your homes, into your culture.* Yet just as much as the poet is deep into the Finnish culture, in many of the poems, she is also politely observing, not claiming to experience everything as the locals, but expressing her sincere curiosity towards the foreign. Like in the poem “Another round of heat” where she tries to understand why the Sami singer is isolated: “I wish you would join, instead of keeping your distance” she writes (30). But unlike Americans, the Northern folk like to isolate and sing alone. Perhaps sometimes the best way to connect with someone like that is also to go within yourself, as the poet does.

Yet this book is about more than Finland, or the poet and her friends. It is a dive into what the concept of culture means, how cultures mix with each other, and how political situations around the world lure in the background affecting the whole world. The poet beautifully illustrates social change and transformation of cultural norms, while in the background also noting the presence of current world politics: Brexit, Trump, Putin.

Some of the poems take place at saunas in Finland, some at saunas in Sweden, the United States, and on a cruise ship to Canada. The magical healing effect of the sauna and how it brings people together on a deeper level is universal. Once the poet has found Finland, she keeps finding it elsewhere, too—she keeps bringing it with her. She finds others captivated by the culture, others, like Tom, who have brought their own share of Finland with them back home (28).

In Finland, Fish meets people from various countries—Iraq, Iran, Japan, Sweden, and the United States—and they all have found a home in the Finnish culture and added something precious to it in their own ways. Although mostly feeling welcomed in Finland, she, like many foreigners abroad, also faces the prejudice of locals concerning her being an American (42). In the poem “Songs captivate the traveler” she writes: “I apologize for my Americanness. The sound of my voice ...”, and in this sense she also recognizes that despite her deep inner connection to Finland, in some people’s eyes she remains different than the locals (18). Yet such a perspective is challenged by the fact that what it means to be Finnish today has changed and is less and less related to one’s biological roots. The book raises important cultural questions. Is culture anything specific, or are there only different experiences of it? Is the foreigner’s experience any less authentic than the locals’ experience? What differentiates a foreigner and a local in today’s multicultural world? What is the cause of cultures mixing?

The poet constantly self-reflects and recognizes how she brings her own past with her into the way she experiences life (18). She remembers her own mother and lets her mind wonder back to memories from homeland in the United States. Perhaps the journey the poet takes us on is also a spiritual one. A journey into herself, but also into a sense of belonging that we all look for, a sense of nostalgia that we all carry within. Why do we sometimes find certain unexpected places we keep wanting to return to? From the perspective of old Sami mythology on three souls, one may say that the author’s bodily soul is born of a mother and has limited time to explore earth (Mononen and Mononen 2020). Her spirit soul travels in between spiritual realities collecting wisdom. And her third soul, *haltijasielu*, is her double (Kettunen 1935). Perhaps as her third soul traveled, it arrived temporally and spatially before her in Finland, so that as she followed, she landed at the homes of familiar strangers. Something tells me she will return to Finland again. “Impatient with what separates us. Meet me again soon... Silence. River, I miss your shadows” (Fish 2021, 18).

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