

## Reviews

Ann-Sofie Lönngren

**A**vian Poetics

Karoliina Lummaa, *Kui trittitii! Finnish Avian Poetics*. Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2017. 262 pp. €40.



How does a bird manifest itself in a poem, and what is the relationship between the two? These are the initial questions posed in Karoliina Lummaa’s book about “Finnish avian poetics.” The overarching theoretical frame for this study is “ecocritical poetry criticism” (10), with a special focus on material ecocriticism. Against this background, Lummaa argues that Finnish bird poetry (a subgenre of nature poetry) is not only connected to the cultural signification of birds in this context, but also to the physical birds themselves. Being both a literary scholar and an ornithologist, Lummaa directs her interest simultaneously at the text, and at the signification and materiality of birds. “Avian poetics” is the term she proposes for “poems that explicitly discuss birds as birds and consist of avian and non-human poetic influences” (12), and also for a kind of reading that focuses on “the material bond that links our means of expression to the features and actions of birds and the immaterial bond that links our way of building our

world to the ways in which birds build their world” (14). In an early stage of the investigation Lummaa presents Donna Haraway’s concepts of the “material-semiotic” and “naturecultures” as being important influences for the formulation of “avian poetics,” but later she also stresses the signification of thoughts put forward by Bruno Latour, and in the field of object-oriented philosophy.

Following the description of the general points of departure for the investigation is a definition of its Finnish context. The corporeality of birds, their physical environment, and their interaction with humans are, Lummaa explains, essential parts of twentieth and twenty-first century Finnish avian cultures. As a consequence of changing conceptualizations of “nature” from the 1950s onwards, there rose an environmentally conscious kind of literature that departed from the previously folkloristic, symbolic, and romantic understandings. This means that the symbolic meaning that had typically been given to birds in literature — such as life, communication, a fresh start, and an omen — although still narrated was nevertheless challenged by scientific and political discourses. This process rendered birds in poetry more concrete and material than before. Whereas previous research about this change has focused on the environmentally conscious literature of the 1970s, Lummaa wants to contribute new perspectives that show the political, philosophical, and aesthetic potential in Finnish bird poetry from the mid twentieth century onwards. In *Kui trititii! Finnish Avian Poetics* she investigates the relationship between bird poetry and actual birds — their sounds, corporeality, agency, and world — in six more or less well-known Finnish poets that were published between the 1940s and the 2010s: Eero Lyyvuo, Maila Pylkkönen, Timo Haajanen, Sauli Sarkanen, Jouni Tossavainen, and Antti Salminen.

So, how do birds exist and exert influence in Finnish poetry? This question is discussed in three different parts. In the first part, “Beings,” questions are posed concerning what answers literature gives regarding what (or who) a bird actually is, what the world looks like from a bird’s point of view, how the bird experiences the world, and what possibilities there are for human beings to see and understand the bird as an actual bird. In dialogue with Jakob von Uexküll, among others, Lummaa formulates the concept of “other-earthliness” as a means of understanding how every creature is earthly in accordance with the ways in which they understand their own world, and also that these different “earthlinesses” are always “other” from someone else’s point of view. Gradually, the discussion focuses increasingly on the significance of corporeality in these processes.

In the second part of the investigation, “Languages,” Lummaa discusses the ways in which the sound productions of birds are incorporated into and affect poetry. Verbal language is often put forward as a dividing line between human and animal, Lummaa claims, which is something that entails a hierarchy between meaningful words and meaningless chatter. When human conceptualizations of bird sounds are introduced into poetry, however, this does not only mean a design of the possibilities (and impossibilities) of interspecies communication, but also that the birds are made active co-producers of texts, which can thus be understood with the term “naturecultures.”

The last part, “Environments,” is an investigation of the spatial connections between bird poetry and birds. Here, Lummaa introduces the term “immersive textscapes” as a way to understand how these connections are transferred to the reader via visual means. Words that are graphically spread out over the pages, thus creating patterns as well as voids, come across as yet another way to incorporate the concrete living of birds into the human-produced poem.

As a whole, Lummaa’s book *Kui trititii! Finnish Avian Poetics* is a valuable contribution to the field of ecocriticism. Among its many strengths is the richness in the poetry and, in some cases, also the shorter prose-paragraphs that are translated into English and discussed. Together with the volume’s fine reproductions of photographs of birds, this book gives the non-Finnish speaker a solid introduction to Finnish bird life and to the cultural meaning of birds in this cultural sphere. Another impressive trait of this study is the passion Lummaa displays for her subject, as well as her efforts to clarify her arguments and conclusions to the readers, and her thorough and insightful readings of poetry.

However, there are also certain parts where Lummaa’s study could have been developed. For example, I would have liked to see a discussion about the specific qualities and potential of poetry (versus prose) in the field of ecocriticism. Also, the change that happened in the wake of the environmental movement and other political processes concerning depictions of animals as concrete rather than symbolic would also be valid outside Finland, and it would, thus, have been constructive to enlighten the reader about the specificities of this particular geographical context. Moreover, there is a lack of discussion about the distinction between birds and other kinds of non-human animals. What is unique for avian poetics in relation to other forms of animal poetry?

Another objection that I have is the weak connection the study has to human-animal studies, a field which, although occasionally mentioned, it would have been clearly

beneficial for Lummaa to connect more explicitly to. In my view, a lot of the arguments and discussions in this book would have been both clearer and deeper with the use of concepts such as Susan McHugh's "literary animal agency," Eva Hayward's "fingery eyes," Jacques Derrida's "the animal gaze," and Donna Haraway's "other-worlding." The parts about corporeality could very well have been discussed in dialogue with, for example, Elisabeth Grosz, and I do also think that Thomas Nagel could have been put to work much more than was the case. Indeed, I get the impression that some of the concepts that Lummaa herself coins in this study might have been replaced, or at least defined in relation to, some of those that have already been introduced by scholars in human-animal studies. A more thorough dialogue with this field could, moreover, have contributed to a now absent discussion of anthropocentrism in literary scholarship. While Lummaa is very careful to point out that there is no way to know for sure what we can and cannot know about birds, she nevertheless states that elks do not have any imagination, and also repeatedly makes the claim that birds sing primarily to attract the opposite sex for reproduction. This may very well be the case, I do not know for certain, but such assumed knowledge of "humans" and "animals" are exactly what needs to be scrutinized in posthumanist research.

These weaknesses should not, however, be seen as greater than the virtues of this investigation. Lummaa's knowledge of bird life is impressive, as are the empirical and theoretical ambitions of this book. Indeed, with the important insights in *Kui trititii! Finnish Avian Poetics*, Lummaa has made a solid contribution to the field of ecocriticism and to further investigations of the connections between human and non-human and between text and matter, in Finland as well as in other countries and other parts of the world.