

## **There is Soviet romanticism in Viktor Kärppä**

**The author of three detective books, Matti Rönkä, wanted to create a character who felt like himself: the Ingrian immigrant Viktor Kärppä was born!**

A huge number of detective stories are written each year in Finland, and surprisingly many of them deserve the characterisation "the most interesting book this year". But only one detective character deserves to be called Finland's most original: Matti Rönkä's news anchor, Viktor Kärppä.

It is a matter of opinion if the three books describing the life of the Ingrian immigrant are detective stories at all. They do talk about the world of crime, but fleetingly, in a most unusual set-up. There are no police in the books investigating crimes committed by criminals. Instead, there is the immigrant Viktor Kärppä, who in the first two books looks after his fellow-immigrants' affairs and conducts business on the fringes of the black market.

In the third book, *Friends Far Away*, Victor resembles a legitimate Finnish entrepreneur, and no longer seems as amusing and helpful.

In Matti Rönkä's own words, the Viktor Kärppä books could also be described as "human relations" detective stories. The first book, *A Man With a Killer's Face* (2002), delved into a mother-son relationship, the second book, *Good Brother, Bad Brother* (2003) contained jealousy, and the third book's themes could well be brotherhood and friendship.

In Matti Rönkä's opinion, the books could be described as containing a kind of playful criminality.

"But I have not been unduly concerned about what to call them. "

"When I wrote the first book, I did it simply because I wanted to write a book. I opted for the detective genre because the plot structure acts as a useful framework, to which can be added those other things that I really wanted to talk about," explains Rönkä, whose day job is that of a news anchor at Finland's national public broadcasting corporation, YLE.

In detective stories, the murder is often of secondary importance.

Matti Rönkä considers it a positive thing if, when opening a book, the reader needs to use his brain cells to figure out what the book is all about. He muses that if he learns more about the genre, he may one day pluck up the courage to write a book without a clearly defined storyline.

Rönkä tells us that he has read plenty of detective stories, but still would not consider himself a true practitioner of the genre. Once again, we come up with the difficulty of definitions. What exactly does the word "detective story" mean these days?

"I think that to many Henning Mankell readers, the crime story and its solution are just excuses. It is everything else about the book that the reader finds captivating."

According to Rönkä, the same applies to Raymond Chandler.

“I only started reading his books recently, and wondered what it was about the books that I liked so much. I decided that it was the unconnected situation that was completely irrelevant to the rest of the story, but hugely enjoyable to read nevertheless.”

When planning his books, Matti Rönkä wanted his main character to be a unique and different kind of character, not an alcohol-dependent middle-aged policeman. As he created Viktor Kärppä, Rönkä made use of the material obtained in his day job concerning Finnish communist defectors, material acquired during trips to Russia, and his experiences as an adoptive father of a Russian-born child.

“I noticed that I had enough material and a pretty good idea of Viktor’s family history and his surroundings. I did not have to spell out why Russian relatives surface half-way through the books, and why Viktor has acquired the status of an Ingrian immigrant.

“When organising other people's affairs, Viktor naturally resembles a private detective, but the more I thought about the character and considered it, the more useful this character appeared to me.”

### **Predominant culture through the eyes of an outsider**

Matti Rönkä feels camaraderie towards those detective writers who view the predominant culture through the eyes of an outsider. One such detective is an American living in Italy, Donna Leon, who makes everyday observations about her adopted homeland through the eyes of Inspector Guido Brunetti. Walter Mosely’s *Easy Rawlins*, on the other hand, is a black man through whose eyes we can view white America. In Tony Hillerman’s books the same task is undertaken by two Navajo policemen, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee.

The lifestyle of Russians living in Finland seems very genuine in Matti Rönkä’s books, but he has not familiarised himself with it in depth.

“Sometimes I have to keep reminding myself that this is not journalism. It is enough for the main facts to be correct,” he adds.

“But in this second generation of returning immigrants, the criminality of children is a statistical truth. And there is a small Russian minority, who buy groceries in their own shops and listen to Radio Sputnik. These kinds of structures exist, and when you meet people you make more observations. If on a jogging path you see a couple of women walking hand in hand, they usually speak Russian.

“My impressions are the result of these kinds of observations, but I have no direct contact with Russians living in Finland.”

### **Russian Romanticism colours the books**

Viktor Kärppä is an unusual character in Finnish literature also because he is not a menacing mafioso; instead, he leads a relatively ordinary life. Rönkä explains that Viktor Kärppä is also a product of his own Russian Romanticism.

“Every time I go to Russia I get angry about things. But I also find many things attractive. People there are kind and warm-hearted, but in other respects things often end up in a total shambles,” he adds, laughing.

Rönkä does not disapprove of the typical picture in Finnish novels of Russians as mafioso characters and prostitutes. “Stories are often told through stereotypical characters and simplification,” he notes.

Matti Rönkä has not received feedback from his Russian-born readers. He admits to having been slightly worried about whether they understand these stories.

“My starting point is the fact that people are either good or bad. I tend to think that people are good, and that fact should come across through all the characters.”

Matti Rönkä has no major urge to become a full-time writer. He is very happy working in the television news department of YLE.

“I am genuinely thankful to be doing a job, the usefulness of which I don’t constantly have to question”.

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Originally published in Kansan Uutiset weekly newspaper 4 th of November 2005