



# Novel Districts

*Critical Readings of Monika Fagerholm*

Edited by  
Kristina Malmio and Mia Österlund

**Studia Fennica**  
Litteraria

**Studia Fennica**  
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# Foreword

*N*ovel *Districts* is the first major volume in which Finland-Swedish author Monika Fagerholm is studied in a Nordic and international context. The study grew out of the special seminar arranged by the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland, where the Council for Literature dedicated a whole meeting to the work of Fagerholm on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2013. Here Nordic scholars presented readings of Fagerholm's work from different theoretical perspectives.

Scholars and critics have repeatedly argued that Fagerholm's works demand new ways of reading. In this volume the perspectives offered by current literary theories open up new approaches and interpretations. The insights and concepts of gender, feminist and girlhood studies as well as narratology, poststructuralism, posthumanism and reception studies are tested in close readings of Fagerholm's works between 1990 and 2012. The ideas of transition, transformation and transgression connect the articles in the volume.

We are grateful to the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland and especially the Council for Literature for assisting us in arranging the seminar in 2013. We also wish to thank the researchers for their contributions to this volume. We are grateful to Dr. Maria Lassén-Seger, Åbo Akademi University and Dr. Marlene Broemer, University of Helsinki for help with proofreading the English and for great comments on the content. We are especially thankful to the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Helsinki for funding the proofreading. In addition, we would like to express our gratitude to our two anonymous peer reviewers whose sound and constructive comments on our manuscript helped us greatly in the final revision. We are especially grateful to the Finnish Literature Society for including our book in this international publication series. Last but not least, we want to thank Monika Fagerholm for her vivid participation at the seminar in 2013 and for providing us with such extensive thought-provoking material that surely will be interpreted again and again in future research. We hope that the scope of this volume is as intriguing as the literature it represents.

Helsinki and Turku, Finland May 2016  
*Kristina Malmio and Mia Österlund*



## Introduction

### *An Aesthetics of Her Own*

In April 2010 Finland-Swedish<sup>1</sup> writer Monika Fagerholm's novel *The American Girl* was featured on American media mogul Oprah Winfrey's talk show as the first Nordic novel to gain attention for the broad public in USA. The odds of a Nordic author, who writes within the domain of a small minority literature in a faraway country, to appear so visibly in American media, are indeed small. There are, however, many reasons why this is not all that surprising in the case of the writer in question.

Monika Fagerholm's witty play with literary traditions coupled with visionary and wild descriptions of girlhood, in a suggestive, provocative, repetitive and transgressive form has long had an impact on the Nordic literary landscape, with many literary followers of both her mainstream and young adult fiction. Her experimental, puzzling and daring novels *Underbara kvinnor vid vatten* (1994), *DIVA* (1998), *Den amerikanska flickan* (2004), *Glitterscenen* (2009) and *Lola uppmåttner* (2012) have attracted much critical attention; she has won several literary awards<sup>2</sup> and her works have travelled across national and cultural borders as they have now been translated into

- 1 There is a population of approximately 300 000 people (ca 5 % of the whole population) in Finland who speak Swedish as their mother tongue. By Finland-Swedish literature is meant the literature written by Finnish authors who write in Swedish.
- 2 *Underbara kvinnor vid vatten* (Wonderful Women by the Sea) was nominated for the Finlandia prize in 1994, the August prize in Sweden in 1995, the European Union's Aristeion prize in 1996 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1998. It was awarded the Runeberg prize in 1995 and a *Tack för boken* (Thank You for the Book) medal in 1995. *DIVA* was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize and received Nyland Art Council's prize in 1999 and the Swedish Längmanska stiftelsen's prize in 2003 for creating modern classics with immense impact on the younger generation of authors. Fagerholm's international breakthrough *Den amerikanska flickan* (The American Girl) was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 2004. It won the Swedish August prize in 2005 and received the Aniara prize for daring experimental prose from the Swedish Library organization in 2005. This book was also recognized by the Swedish Books Society in Finland and by *Göteborgsposten* in 2005. In 2010 Fagerholm received the prestigious Pro Finlandia medal and in 2013 *Glitterscenen* (The Glitter Scene) was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize. In 2016 she won the Nordic Prize from the Swedish Academy.

several languages.<sup>3</sup> The English translations of her central novels, *Wonderful Women by the Water* (transl. 1997 by Joan Tate, *Wonderful Women by the Sea* in the US a year later by Joan Tate), *The American Girl* (transl. 2009 by Katarina E. Tucker) and *The Glitter Scene* (transl. 2010 by Katarina E. Tucker) enhance the international attention on her authorship. The current interest in Nordic authors due to the popularity of Nordic noir fiction similarly paves the way for the visibility of other interesting Nordic contemporary authors like Fagerholm.<sup>4</sup> In literary histories her ability to unite entertainment and experimentation has been repeatedly emphasized as she combines features typical of reader friendly realism – suspense, interesting characters and living depictions of milieus – with daring renewal of the narrative conventions of prose (Ingström 2014; Ekman 2014; Korsström 2013). However, there are only a few scholarly works that deal with Fagerholm's texts and no work that fully grasps her authorship.

This is precisely where the book you read comes in. *Novel Districts. Critical Readings of Monika Fagerholm* is the first volume in which the central themes and features of the works of Monika Fagerholm, by far one of today's most important and appealing contemporary Nordic authors, are studied. We will first give an overall introduction to her life, letters and the minority literature context of her writing, before we briefly describe the scholarship on Fagerholm's works. After that, we will present the contributions in this book. Our overall aim is not only to enhance and deepen the understanding of Fagerholm's fiction, but also to suggest some important trends that take place in contemporary Nordic literature. The common point of departure of this volume is the recognizable Fagerholmian idiom: a unique form of language use and its complex relation to the topics and themes depicted in the novels such as love and death, identity, sexuality, corporeality, girlhood and small town social life.

### *Fagerholm and the Conditions of a Minority Literature*

Monika Fagerholm's (b. 1961) career as an author began in 1987 when her first book, *Sham*, a collection of short stories, was published. Before that

3 The list is long: *Wonderful Women by the Sea* has been translated into Danish, Finnish, French, Lithuanian, Dutch, Norwegian, English and German. *DIVA* has only been translated into Finnish, Dutch and Norwegian, probably because it is the most experimental novel and therefore a great challenge for translators. *The American Girl* has been translated into Albanian, Danish, Finnish, French, Lithuanian, Dutch, Norwegian, Russian, German, Hungarian and English while *The Glitter Scene* has been translated into Albanian, Danish, Finnish, French, Dutch, Norwegian and English.

4 *The American Girl* also featured on the net pages of Oprah Winfrey's *O. The Oprah Magazine* under the heading 'A Helsinki Whodunit. A Masterful, Thoughtful Thriller about a Girl without a Dragon Tattoo'. Thus, a reference to the tattooed protagonist Lisbeth Salander in Swedish author Stieg Larsson's famous thriller series, *The Millennium Trilogy*, was used in order to introduce Fagerholm to a new reading audience, already intoxicated with the lure of Nordic crime fiction.

she had studied psychology and literature at the University of Helsinki. She had also worked as a journalist and was one of the founding members and driving forces behind the most important cultural journal of her generation: *KLO* (1985–1987). The debut was soon followed by another collection of short stories, *Patricia* (1990). In these early collections, she depicted the individualism and depressive tendencies of complex girl characters in the middle of metamorphosis and boundary breaking.

Fagerholm's breakthrough as an author occurred with *Underbara kvinnor vid vatten* (1994), a postmodern novel describing a couple of summers in the countryside, mostly told from the perspective of a young boy. Depicting women's liberation and a growing consumer culture through a nostalgic portrayal of the late 1960s, the novel was soon adapted for the screen. In 1998 Fagerholm continued her postmodern depictions of childhood in the novel *DIVA*, a witty, ironic and metafictional story about an extraordinarily mature and strong school girl in a suburb in the 1970s. After a break of six years, she published *Den amerikanska flickan* in 2004, and its sequel, *Glitterscenen* was available in 2009. If *DIVA*, which has the curious subheading *En uppväxsts egna alfabet med docklaboratorium (en bonusberättelse ur framtiden)* [The Alphabet of Adolescence with a Laboratory of Dolls (A Bonus Tale from the Future)], was mostly humorous and cheerful, the two following novels form a tragedy which also flirts with thriller conventions, as the story begins with the mysterious death of a young American girl in a small rural place in Finland at the end of 1960s. Fagerholm's latest publications include *Havet* [The Sea], a collection of essays written with Martin Johnson, and the novel *Lola uppochner* [Lola Upsidedown]; both appeared in 2012. *Lola uppochner* continues the depiction of young women and focuses on a murder in a small, rural town. The novel has currently been adapted for television by Finland-Swedish film director Ulrika Bengts.

Fagerholm writes in Swedish in Finland and belongs to the small but vital Finland-Swedish minority literature, which has managed to survive in a milieu dominated by the overall presence of Finnish language and literature. In addition to Finnish, Swedish is an official language in Finland as it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that Finnish became the most predominant language. For centuries before that, Swedish was the language of administration, education and culture in Finland because Finland was part of the Swedish territories from 12<sup>th</sup> to 1809, when it became a Grand Duchy of Russia. Gradually, however, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of Finnish increased in all areas of society and Swedish authors writing in Finland became increasingly aware of their position as minority authors. Written in Swedish, but published in Finland is the core condition of the Finland-Swedish literature and book market. Therefore, the development of Swedish literature in Finland has at times been highly independent, at times more or less similar to Swedish or Finnish literature. The Swedish spoken and written in Finland differs slightly from the Swedish used in Sweden, which has at times been a trouble, at times an advantage for the Finland-Swedish authors (Ekman 1995; Tidigs 2014). For example, it has been suggested that compared to Finnish, Swedish in Sweden, and other Nordic literatures, the early, modernist breakthrough in Finland-Swedish



Finland-Swedish writer Monika Fagerholm is one of the most important contemporary Nordic authors; she is known for her experimental style and visionary descriptions of girlhood.

*Novel Districts. Critical Readings of Monika Fagerholm* is the first book to study Fagerholm's works. In this edited volume, literary scholars scrutinize the central themes and features that characterize her suggestive works in the light of up-to-date literary theory and introduce new ways to understand and interpret her oeuvre that spans the postmodern and beyond.

The volume enhances the understanding of Fagerholm's fiction; moreover, these articles suggest multiple perspectives on contemporary Nordic literature and ongoing cultural developments. It is of interest to students and scholars in literary and Scandinavian studies as well as women's, gender and girlhood studies.



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