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Kokkonen, Sara

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Reading Girls' Literature: Popular Finnish Heroine Tiina

Literatūros mergaitėms skaitymas: populiarūs suomių herojė Tiina

Sara Kokkonen sara.kokkonen@utu.fi
University of Turku, Finlandia

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Vilniaus Universitetas, Lithuania

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Abstract: The *Tiina* book series for girls circulated in Finland for a considerable period of thirty years (1956–1986). This girls' series was quite popular among young girls during the whole period, and the protagonist Tiina has appealed to young Finnish readers for decades. Different generations have read the girls' books about the brave and tomboy heroine. Girls' series books are part of the girls' literature genre, which was developed originally in the mid-nineteenth century. This article explores the reading and reception of *Tiina* books in the context of the Finnish and international girls' literature and reading research. Female readers of various ages participated in a reading survey and submitted written accounts of their experiences reading the *Tiina* books. In particular, this article seeks to examine the engagement of readers with the books and the girl protagonist.

Keywords: girls' literature, girls' series, girls' books, series books, reading experiences, girlhood reading, rereading, Finland.

Summary: Knygų mergaitėms serija „Tiina“ Suomijoje gyvavo ilgą laiką – trisdešimt metų (1956–1986). Visą laikotarpį ši knygų serija buvo itin populiarūs tarp jaunų merginų skaitytojų. Ištįs dešimtmečius jaunosios Suomijos skaitytojos žavėjosi jos pagrindine veikėja. Skirtingų kartų atstovės skaitė knygas mergaitėms apie drąsią bei nutrūktgalvę herojė. Knygų mergaitėms serijos yra literatūros mergaitėms žanro, kuris buvo išplėtotas XIX a. viduryje, dalis. Leidyklos neretai nusitaiko į jaunąsias skaitytojas mergaitėms skirtomis knygomis. Šiame straipsnyje tiriama serijos „Tiina“ knygų skaitymas ir jų supratimas suomių ir tarptautinės literatūros mergaitėms ir skaitymo tyrimų kontekste. Įvairaus amžiaus skaitytojos dalyvavo skaitymo apklausoje ir aprašė individualią serijos „Tiina“ knygų skaitymo patirtį. Straipsnyje ypač siekiama išnagrinti skaitytojų susidomėjimą šiomis knygomis bei pagrindine veikėja.

Keywords: literatūra mergaitėms, knygų mergaitėms serijos, knygos mergaitėms, knygų serijos, skaitymo patirtis, skaitiniai mergaitėms, pakartotinis skaitymas, Suomija.

Introduction

Classic girls' series books have been popular reading among girl readers in Finland. Good examples of internationally popular girls' series are the Anne of Green Gables series, written by Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery, and American Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books. In these series, the protagonist is a powerful girl character whose coming-of-age story is followed in the books from girlhood to womanhood. The other type of popular North American girls' series in the twentieth century were formula stories like the Nancy Drew mysteries and Cherry Ames nursing stories, where the never-changing heroine goes on adventures and solves mysteries along the way. The girls' series

books have been a central part of children and juvenile literature.¹ Girls' literature is gender-bound and girls' books are often targeted at young readers by publishing houses,² especially at avid girl readers. The ages between 9 and 12 are usually described as the "book devouring age."³

Girls' literature has a strong tradition in Finland. Finnish-language juvenile literature, which included gender-bound literature, was established at the beginning of the twentieth century. Domestic, family and school stories targeted at girls were written mainly by female authors. The Finnish translations of American and Nordic girls' mystery and career story series started to appear in the 1950s, which resulted in the development of similar Finnish series books for juvenile readers.⁴ At a similar time, in 1956, Finnish author Anni Polva (Polviander) published her first part of book series about a girl protagonist named Tiina. Polva wrote a total of 29 Tiina books; the last book of the series, *Taitaa olla rakkautta, Tiina* ("It Seems to Be Love, Tiina"), was released in 1986, thirty years after the first book was published. Tiina books have been printed in over a million copies, while new editions were still being printed in the 2000s. The Tiina series was targeted at a readership of young girls aged 8–12 years. They were very popular reading among preadolescent girl readers during their whole print run; the honest and tomboyish girl heroine became a role model over the generations to many Finnish female readers.

In this article, I explore the reading and reception of Tiina books in the context of the Finnish and international girls' literature and reading research. I use the empiric materials of my reading survey of Finnish girls' books as the main source for analysing reading experiences about the Tiina series. I explore the readers' responses by asking the following questions: How are readers engaged with the Tiina books? How does the protagonist's character appeal to their readers? How has the reading of the books influenced the readers in their girlhood or later in life?

Previous studies of girls' literature and reception

How is girls' literature defined? The emergence of girls' literature occurred when gender-bound literature was separated to girls' and boys' books in Anglo-Saxon countries in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ Girls' fiction took domestic realism as its generic model at that time.⁶ One of the pioneering books in the genre was American Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and its sequels. According to Mary Ørvig (1988), who has studied the history of the girl's literature in the Western world, the genre was initially aimed at girls from the upper and middle classes who had the time and the opportunity to read. Forerunners of the girls' literature were the books of advice on good conduct for girls. These conduct books trained girls for marriage and motherhood, and they were the foundation for later girls' books, which were tales about good behavior and the power of example.⁷ Thus, early girl's literature has a didactic background that is a characteristic feature in children's and juvenile literature.⁸ The

socialization of the heroine into the roles of a virtuous woman, a wife and a mother is central in early girls' books, although there are subversive traits in the genre.⁹ Scholar Boel Westin (1994) has stated that girls' books equally present alternative depictions about education, studies, a career of choice and other options for young women. As a genre, girls' literature is not static and immutable but instead an echo of its times.

When we discuss girls' literature, different terms can be used to describe the genre, such as girls' book, girls' story or girls' fiction. Westin defines girls' literature (girls' books¹¹) as stories about girls for girls, written mainly by women authors.¹² Girls' literature includes girls' developmental stories, which are usually coming-of-age stories of the main character who is a girl. Myry Voipio (2017, 25) has pointed out that girls' literature has its roots in many genres and it has evolved from youth novels, guidebooks and developmental novels for female readers, including the *bildungsroman* ("educational novel"). Dawn Sardella-Ayers and Ashley Reese (2020) have recently defined girls' literature based on the subgenre of the girl's *bildungsroman*. They explored North American girls' literature, classic American and Canadian novels for girls. According to Sardella-Ayres and Reese, the girl's *bildungsroman* is often basis of a series that emphasizes the long, structured girl's journey to womanhood. The heroine's maturation encompasses her physical, psychological and moral coming of age.¹³

All girls' literature is not developmental by nature. Series books often differ from the girls' coming-of-age stories because the girl protagonist does not age much during the series or does not grow to womanhood like in the girl's *bildungsroman*. Both scholars Sherrie A. Innes (1997) and Emily Hamilton-Honey (2013) have studied American girls' series fiction. Innes problematizes the concept of series book. She distinguishes terms series books and books in a series in which there are some stylistic differences between them. In series books such as *Nancy Drew*, the characters never grow any older in a timeless world, plots are formulaic, and the characters are fully developed in contrast to the characters in books in a series like *Anne of Green Gables*. However, both styles do influence one another, and it is more reasonable to study how they interplay and intermingle.¹⁴ In turn, Hamilton-Honey thinks that both series books and books in a series are part of the same genre and publishing tradition for girl readers. In the nineteenth century, characters aged over the course of a series, whereas in the middle of the twentieth century, girls' series followed the series books guideline that had the characters aging very little or not at all.¹⁵

Girls' literature studies seem to be very lively today, and their previously marginal position in the literary research has been diminished.¹⁶ Girls' literature has been explored enthusiastically in the Nordic Countries like Sweden and Finland. Voipio (2015) has studied the development of Finnish girls' literature from early novels to contemporary books in her dissertation. According to Voipio, Finnish girls' literature follows the international development, but the collision of didacticism and

emancipation is built into the genre. It produces contradictory features in novels and girl characters.¹⁷ Literary scholar Päivi Lappalainen has written several articles about Finnish girls' literature. According to Lappalainen, didacticism decreased in time during the twentieth century, but didactic stories did not completely vanish in girls' literature.¹⁸ Hamilton-Honey has made the same observation about American girls' series. Twentieth century series avoided didacticism and favoured more action and excitement.¹⁹

In addition to the history and development of girls' literature, researchers are often interested in the depictions of the girls in these books. However, the readers of the girls' literature have received much less attention from scholars. The popularity of L. M. Montgomery's classic girls' books has been the object of reception studies in the Nordic Countries, at first in Finland in 2003, and later in Sweden in 2008. The Finnish Literature Society announced it will collect the reading experiences on Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* series and as a result received 222 letters from Finnish readers. Suvi Ahola and Satu Koskimies edited the anthology that comprised about 57 readers' responses, called *Uuden kuun ja Vihervaaran tytöt* [The Girls of New Moon and Green Gables], which was published in 2005.²⁰ The book inspired a similar survey in Sweden a few years later, when Åsa Warnqvist collected reading experiences of *Anne of Green Gables*. Warnqvist received 303 responses from the Swedish readers and edited an anthology of about 65 responses, called *Besläktade Själur* [Kindred Spirits] and published in 2009. Catherine Sheldrick Ross studied avid Canadian Montgomery readers by interviewing. She published the article about the results together with Åsa Warnqvist (2020).²¹ Vappu Kannas had also analysed Finnish readers' responses from the viewpoint of the affective dimension of reading (2018).²² What is common to these reception studies of Finland, Sweden and Canada is that the respondents were mainly girls and women. Most of the readers had read Montgomery's girls' books in their youth and many of them had re-read books as adults, too. The studies demonstrate the enormous impact and attachment to Montgomery's books over the lifetime and the significance of reading girls' literature at the same time.

Methodology and research material

The primary material of my study consists of the empirical reading survey on Finnish girls' literature. Inspired by the earlier collection of Finnish reader-responses to Montgomery's girls' books and subsequent research, I collected written reading experiences about Finnish girls' books using a similar method (see previous section). The reading survey was carried out by publishing an open invitation, in which I asked readers to write about their favourite Finnish girls' books. The invitation was published in two magazines and disseminated on different channels of the social media in 2013. Altogether, 81 respondents participated in the survey. The readers

of various ages responded to my request and wrote about several Finnish girls' books which had had an influence on their childhoods and later in life. The length of the responses varied from short sentences to long texts, from 66 words to 1540 words. That same year, I edited and published a book about the readers' responses.²³

In this study, I analyse only the reading experiences concerning Tiina books. The Tiina series was the most popular Finnish girls' series in readers' responses. The books were mentioned in 32 readers' responses. My theoretical framework and methodology are multidisciplinary, consisting of girls' literature studies and reader-response theorists. The reader-response theorists share a common idea about the reader's engagement in the text, but they differ in how this engagement is constituted.²⁴ In contrast to these theoretical approaches, for example, Wolfgang Iser's concept of implied reader in the text, I explore the actual readers and their literary experiences. According to the pioneering reader-response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1938), literary experience is a transaction between an active reader and an author's text. Reading is, thus, a two-way reciprocal relation in which the reader and the text are essential to the transactional process – the making of meaning.²⁵ As Rosenblatt puts, "[t]hereader brings to the text his past experience and present personality."²⁶ The same text has a different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances. Without an understanding of the reader, one cannot predict what particular book may be significant to him or her and what may be the special feature of his or hers experience of it.²⁷

Reading literature usually evokes emotions in us as readers. According to Niklas Salmose, emotions can be expressed through responses to fictional characters.²⁸ In this study, I was particularly interested in readers' emotional engagement with the books and the protagonist. Furthermore, I scrutinized the readers' depictions of this favourite girl character. I conducted the analysis as a qualitative content analysis (e.g. Short).²⁹ At first, I closely read the materials of readers' responses. Secondly, I organized the themes about reading of the books that emerged from the texts. Thirdly, I identified the depictions of the girl character and expressions of emotions. I made interpretations and inferences from the texts within context of reading researches and girls' literature studies. In analysis of readers' responses, I use the respondents' own voice by taking the quotations of their written accounts.

My secondary material consists of Tiina books. In order to understand readers' responses and perspective, close reading and immersion in the world of the books is necessary. Content analysis also reflects the reader-response-oriented research stance, while meaning is in the reading event, which is a transaction between an analyst and texts.³⁰ As a researcher I have taken the re-reader's stance and used the critical lens by re-reading the Tiina books, which were familiar to me from my own childhood reading. Before exploring the readers' responses in more detail, I next look

at the context of Tiina books and the reception of girls' series in the field of Finnish children's and juvenile literature.

The context of Tiina books

Author Anni Polva (1915-2003) wrote twenty-nine Tiina books in thirty years in the manner of series books. Each book is one independent entity, and the series can be read in any order. Typical of girls' literature, Tiina books consist of episodic structure³¹ : starting school, spending summer holidays, making friends, beginning new hobbies and having adventures. The series begins when Tiina moves to a new home and makes friends with the children who live in the same house. The children characters represent different social classes, from the upper-middle class to the working class. The class distinctions between Tiina and her friends emerge especially in children's talk and behaviour as well as in clothing and spending money.³² The protagonist's background differs from the mainstream girls' literature, which has been upper- or middleclass-centered. Tiina comes from a nuclear family, including mother, father and brother. Her family represents the lower middle class and they always have been financially restricted. Tiina's mother is a housewife, and her father supports the family by working in the office. The gender roles are traditional throughout the series.

Tiina's character has the classical elements of a tomboy. She climbs up trees, fights boys, is very athletic and competitive. Her masculine traits are valued, especially by the boy characters. Tiina's clothes always tear or get dirty in the wild games as the famous tomboy protagonists in the early girls' literature.³³ Although Tiina's tomboyish features are dominating, she has her feminine side. She likes beautiful dresses, plays princess with her female friends and is always worried about her appearance concerning her weight. Through the whole series, gender differences are emphasized between boys and girls. Tiina encounters prejudices against her gender and underestimation as a girl. Stereotyped attitudes about the girls are expressed by boy characters, especially Tiina's best friend Juha. However, Tiina is represented as a brave and capable heroine who breaks the expected gender norms recurrently and her action is admired by both girl and boy characters.

Tiina series resembles other formula stories, such as its counterparts, American girls' series fiction. The books are formulaic, repetitive and characters remain pretty much the same. At the beginning of the series, Tiina is a ten-year-old child, and at the end, she is a teenager about fourteen years old. The psychological and physical development of the girl protagonist is not much described during the series. The maturation of the character, growth from child to adolescent, is shown occasionally and at the end. Otherwise, Tiina is a fully developed character with her moral standpoint. Honesty and helpfulness are central traits of the protagonist, like other heroines in the girls' books. She helps and protects weaker or poor people, such as children and the elderly. Tiina's inner life is

shown when she has a guilty conscience of doing something wrong. Tiina represents the ideal girl with her good and decent qualities according to the conventions of the classic girls' literature.

The world of Tiina books is old-fashioned from the perspective of a modern reader. The series began in the 1950s and ended in the 1980s. Although, the society was changing radically at that time, it did not show much in the timeline of the books. The events take place mainly in static time and place. There were reflections of the popular culture in the books from the 1960s, when Tiina got her first jeans, went to the rock concert or watched colour TV with her friends. Tiina uses mainly skirts from decade to decade and despite her mother's objection Tiina's hem was shortened to a miniskirt in the 1960s. Tiina is always a pupil of a grammar school even though Finnish school system was reformed in the 1970s. The milieu of the girls' series is generally the hometown of the author's childhood or countryside where the protagonist travels on holidays.

Anni Polva told in the interviews that Tiina series was based on her own experiences of childhood and the books had some autobiographical background. The author was well-known for her romantic and entertainment novels for women before the popular girls' series. The first Tiina book received rave literature reviews, but after that, her books ran in a serial format and were labelled as light reading, unrealistic and naive.³⁴ Scholar Päivi Heikkilä-Halttunen argues that literary critique, which disdained the author, was due to the generalized hostility towards series books in Finland.³⁵ Literary critique had been similarly disdainful towards girls' series books, for example, in the United States.³⁶ Tiina books were recommended as suitable for libraries by The Reviewing Book Catalogue at first, but the tone of the reviews changed to harder criticism and even disapproval in the 1960s.³⁷ Later, the reviews of the book catalogue changed to more a favorable tone to Tiina books and mentioned their popularity among young people. According to Kaisu Rättyä, who has studied Finnish series books, Anni Polva was not included in the canon of juvenile literature.³⁸ It was not until at the end of 1990s when Polva got recognition as an author.

How readers responded to Tiina books

Reading of girls' literature is naturally very bound to the female gender. The readers of Tiina books were all women of various ages, the oldest one was 69 years old and the youngest one 13 years old. Reminiscence played the greatest part in readers' written accounts of their favourite girls' books. The reading experiences were written by adult women mostly, with the exception of two thirteen-year-old girls. Their reading experiences were naturally different from those whose reading of the books took place many decades ago. Adult readers reminisced about their girlhood reading experiences with the Tiina books. Fifty-five-year-old Tanja realised in her reader response that there were not so many parts of Tiina that have appeared in her youth in comparison with nowadays. The girls' series was

published over a long period of thirty years in addition to the reprints. Tiina books reached young readers from different decades. Females over the age of 30 wrote mostly about their past reading experiences, but among the writers there were 60-, 50-, 40-, and 20-year-olds. Memories of favourite childhood books bring out some degree of nostalgia, which was visible in readers' accounts.

20-year-old Maria writes:

I still remember the wonderful feeling when I returned from the library with a new Tiina book that I had not yet read tucked under my arm. On weekend mornings, it was a luxury to wake up early and head to the living room couch with my Tiina book to read in peace and quiet while the rest of my family was still asleep.

As Allison Waller says, "all reading activity takes place in time and space". In lifelong reading the reader and the text are temporal entities existing within certain sociocultural and geographical contexts.³⁹ Maria remembered specific places, surroundings and circumstances from her childhood in where she was acquiring a new Tiina book and where and when she was reading it. As Rosenblatt states, the reading event becomes part of the ongoing stream of the reader's life experience.⁴⁰ In Maria's experience reading was emphasized as a private pursuit in a silent place away from others. Yet simultaneously, reading was a social activity in that Maria's reading was linked to both the context of home environment and the external world of her childhood. Libraries were important places where the girls' books were borrowed for reading in many of the readers' responses. Reading is a collective and social activity, for the reader always belongs to some social group, as shown in the following Marjaana's quotation.

Ever since I was a child, I frequented the bookmobile that visited our remote village. The bookmobile backed into the branch of my home road, where a carload of avid borrowers waited to enter. The girls rushed to the back of the bookmobile, wishfully sought out the children's book shelves, and hurriedly gathered a pile of Tiina books to borrow. The Tiina books were popular, so we were happy about the ones we got our hands on. The selection of girls' books was relatively broad despite that the shelves of the bookmobile were searched thoroughly already at the previous stop outside the school. Buying books was fairly uncommon, so our reading relied on the library. I got new books for my own bookshelf very infrequently, only at Christmas and on my birthday, but I was bought the last instalment of the Tiina series soon after its release in 1986. It was strange and wonderful to suddenly get a book of my own when it was not even my birthday. At the age of nine, I was completely swept away by the enchanting world of girls' books.

Marjaana had common experiences of reading Tiina books and other girls' books together with the peers, enthusiastic girl readers. What connected Marjaana's and Maria's and other respondents' responses, were the expressions of emotions. According to Niklas Salmose, an emotional experience can be triggered either by the text itself or extra-textual aspects such as actual context of the experience. A whole spectrum of emotions

and feelings, even moods can arise in the experience of reading the book.⁴¹ Reading Tiina series evoked mainly enjoyment and pleasure in readers' girlhood experiences. Some of the readers had read the same books several times in their childhood and some of them returned to the books again in adulthood. J.A. Appleyard, who has studied readers' roles of the psychological development perspective, uses the term repetitive reading related to children's reading. Repetitive reading of series books is a part of their attraction and an even addictive act in school-age children. Repetition may be a transitory phase that serves the positive function of reassuring young readers of the stability of the world.⁴² Generally, the serial format and related repetition play a role in generating reading pleasure for both children and adults.⁴³

Another repetitive reading habit is rereading childhood books as an adult. The familiarity of the fictional world and familiar characters are part of fascination in rereading books. Rereading may let you notice different things and new details in the books than before as a young reader. Waller views remembering and rereading function as emotional processes, bound to feelings inside and outside of texts. Individual reading histories are also histories of affect, telling about the intimate relationships that exist between ageing readers, their earlier selves, and the text that bind together.⁴⁴ One reason why mature readers reread, returned to their favourite girls' books, is the evoked nostalgia and longing for their own childhood. As 46-year-old Päivi writes:

I am still reading Tiina-books for my own pleasure when I want to go back to the old good time when life was different from today. The books may be slightly naive from the adult point of view, but I relax with them and then the book has made its task.

Salmose points out that, nostalgia is an experience, which often includes several basic emotions such as joy and sadness.⁴⁵

Longing for a certain time or eras is strongly associated with nostalgia. Respondents felt also nostalgic experiences when they had read books from the young reader's point of view. As 23-year-old Anu writes:

The world of the Tiina books described some kind of idyllic Finland that no longer existed [...], but at the same time the themes were the same as in my own life (friendships, family, crushes etc.).

Many respondents were united by the fact that their mothers had recommended Tiina books for reading. The mothers had read the books themselves in their childhood. As 34-year-old Anni writes:

It was also funny that my own mother had read the Tiina books in her youth and the books brought us closer.

Kaisa's mother had read aloud the books to her daughter before Kaisa learned to read herself. Saara believed that the books gave a perspective on the world of her parent's childhood and were reliable when her own mother recommended them. Respondents' mothers were supporting their daughters in reading and they were role models by reading themselves. Several studies have demonstrated that the model provided at home plays a role in the development of good literacy. Parents'

own reading hobby impacts on how they manage to encourage their child to read.⁴⁶ Reading as a social activity was emphasized when the mothers recommended or bought Tiina books as gifts for their daughters who read them and shared common literary experiences. Ross and Warnqvist call this connection the link among generations. In their study of Canadian and Swedish readers, Montgomery's books were read from one generation to the next. When they belong to the same family, readers create a bond shared by even several generations by reading Montgomery.⁴⁷ Reading girls' books similar to Montgomery's in the same family between different generations, from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters, can also be seen in Finnish reader responses.⁴⁸ Do the links among generations continue by reading Finnish Tiina books in the future? Anu responds as follows: "I hope, if I have a daughter or daughters in the future, they will read the Tiina books."

How readers responded to Tiina's character

Many of the respondents were connected emotionally to Tiina books and the girl protagonist of the books. Readers had a close relationship with Tiina's character. According to Keith Oatley, in character-based stories people form relations with characters and these relations can be intimate and important to readers. Oatley calls such relations parasocial because they are one-way: characters cannot interact with a reader. Nevertheless, it fosters the emotional understanding of others.⁴⁹ Suzanne Keen, who has studied the empathy of the reader, states that readers feel empathy with fictional characters and other aspects of fictional worlds.⁵⁰ According to Salmose, our emotions towards characters are directed most commonly in terms of sympathy or empathy.⁵¹ Readers experienced empathy with the fictional character of Tiina and other aspects of her fictional life. As Saara mentions: "Tiina got my sympathy when she was so genuine a human being." Kaisa similarly notes: "I also remember feeling sympathy with Tiina when her mother forced her to eat porridge in the mornings or drink currant juice when she was sick." Respondents wrote about Tiina vividly and with affection as if the character was an actual and living person. The girl figure was described by many personal attributes. Negative feelings towards Tiina books were demonstrated only by a few readers. Although the character was liked, some readers felt even envy or were irritated towards Tiina's superior characteristics. Fictional characters representing people are simply the pattern of black marks on a page, but reading and interpreting literary texts bring them to life. Their existence continues in readers' life after reading, in people's minds, thoughts and memories.

In order to understand the character's deep impact on readers, we look at the next three quotations by the respondents:

Tiina was a wonderful girl, because she was honest, genuinely cared about others and stood up for those who were weaker than she was. I value these characteristics in people. Tiina also tried to adjust to

her environment, but her loud behaviour sometimes caused adults to disapprove. I felt that these kinds of limitations expressed in the books were unfair, but I admired Tiina, who had the courage to challenge the limitations.⁵² Tiina's aspiration to treat everybody honestly and fairly and the constant gnawing conscience caused by even small offences were attributes which followed to my own thinking subconsciously.⁵³ [...] Tiina was fair and honourable and had the courage to intervene when she saw injustice happen. I wish there were more people like Tiina in real life.⁵⁴

Readers described Tiina's literary character with many adjectives which praise her personal qualities and her action. Courage and honesty were highlighted in several readers' responses' to Tiina's impressive characteristics. The powerful girl character had influenced the young readers and even the readers who had grown up. According to Keen, "fictional characters can become mental companions to last a lifetime, and relationships across generations can be built around affection for a character or a fictional world."⁵⁵ The findings are similar with the previous reception studies made by Kannas (2018), Ross and Warnqvist (2020), concerning Montgomery's books. The girls' books had had an emotional impact on readers and readers had a close and long relationship with the books.⁵⁶

Our capacity to identify or empathize with the experiences of others is a human attribute.⁵⁷ Readers identify in one way or another with the literary works. Keen points out that "character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways." Some of the respondents felt a strong sense of solidarity to Tiina's character. As Marjaana writes:

I was not myself a tomboy like Tiina, but more like a quiet bookworm. I didn't mess up at school like Tiina, but I was the hard-working and precise pupil. Depictions of knitting were comforting because I didn't like handicrafts either. I was able to identify with Tiina even though there were character differences in us.

Readers can identify and imaginatively share fictional character's experiences or situations. The realism of the protagonist's conditions was emphasized in readers' responses. Some of the respondents identified strongly Tiina's home environment which was similar to their own. Young girl readers can also compare themselves to the character of same age or search for peer support. As Helena writes:

Like Tiina, I have climbed ladders and run on roofs. [...] In Tiina, I think I found another slightly different girl, and thus did maybe not suffer from my own personality. I did have many female friends, but I was one of the most boyish girls. [...] I believe the girl role model I found in the Tiina books strengthened my own identity.

According to Paulette Rothbauer, reading can be ally in the construction of identity at a crucial time in a young person's life. "The relationships readers create with fictional characters and worlds allow readers to test and explore various identities."⁵⁸

In reader responses, Tiina was considered a good role model and heroine who was still admired after years of reading Tiina books. Hans Robert Jauss's interactional pattern of identification with the hero applies to describe readers' of Tiina books identification with the girl heroine. In admiring identification, the heroine (hero) is perfect and her action is exemplary whereas in sympathetic identification, the everyday heroine is imperfect whom the reader can recognize in her own actions and feel sympathy.⁵⁹ Tiina's character combines both levels of identification: on the one hand, readers admired the ideal girl character and her exemplary behaviour. On the other hand, readers identified with the imperfect heroine, taking her perspective and feeling compassion for her. As Anu writes:

I remember admiring Tiina and somehow I wanted to be like her, decent, brisk, honest and brave. [...] I had an ideal from a decent girl and indeed I was a fairly 'decent girl'. And nowadays I am a fairly 'decent woman'.

Keen emphasizes that the spontaneous empathy for character's feelings opens the way for character identification.⁶⁰ As Rosenblatt points out, although we may see some characters as outside ourselves – we may not identify with them as completely, but we are nevertheless able to enter into their behaviour and their emotions.⁶¹

Concluding discussion

This article examined the reading and reception of popular Tiina series in the context of Finnish and international girls' literature and reading research. The participants of the empirical study representing various ages reported a strong emotional engagement with Tiina books and the girl protagonist. Reading the girls' books together with peers in childhood strengthened readers' engagement with the books and provided a social dimension of reading. The engagement increased when some of the respondents shared the literary experiences of Tiina books with their mothers, creating a link between generations. Tiina was found an appealing girl protagonist in readers' responses because of her characteristics, such as courage and honesty. These personal attributes appealed to readers' as young girls and continued to do so in adulthood. The quoted examples illustrating the reading experiences of Tiina books were very positive and showed that the books and the protagonist had a deep influence on readers in their girlhood as well as later in life. The fictional girl character became the role model to the girl readers who were able to identify with her or felt empathy.

The books about Tiina have been favourite and beloved among young readers of the Finnish girls' literature. For a long time, Tiina series was almost the only one that represented Finnish girls' series literature in Finland.⁶² Although, Tiina books were not included in the official canon of Finnish children and juvenile literature at the time of their publication, we can confirm that the books belonged to paracanon or as paracanonical texts. Paracanon is called readers' alternative canon of books.⁶³ The concept of paracanon, created by Catharina Stimpson, means texts that

people have loved and do love and texts having a number of loving readers. Affection with the book begins when the reader is young and text is often children's literature. The re-readings of the beloved book support an adult paracanon; consequently, "paracanon can be a conserving and preserving force."⁶⁴ Nowadays, Tiina books can be considered as classic girls' books; regardless of canonical or non-canonical status, these books are still paracanonical texts in Finnish children and juvenile literature.

Tiina is undeniably a subversive character in the history of Finnish girls' literature. The strong and fearless girl protagonist has appealed to the readers from different decades. In due course Tiina has broken the conventional norms and expectations of girlhood, showing that girls can fare equally well as boys. She has empowered female readers with her courage. Girls' series can offer their readers a greater independence or freedom and sense of power.⁶⁵ Tiina's character has freedom to wander around outside or travel independently. She is an active agent who learns how to negotiate with her parents about her autonomy. Tiina represents an honest and brave heroine who is superior to other girls in fiction as well as in real life. Girl readers have adored her good qualities and unshaken moral. However, what makes the protagonist a contradictory heroine?

The theme of romance in heterosexual context is a typical trait in traditional girls' literature as well as in Tiina series. Tiina has a close relationship with her best friend, a boy who lives in the same house. Their interaction always has tensions. The friendship turns into love and series ends with a romantic closure in the last book of series. The protagonist must give up many things, such as vocational dreams as an actress, because of the boy's jealousy and domineering attitude during the series. Although Tiina's character is represented seemingly independent and rebelling against gender norms, she is socialized into a girlfriend's role at the end of book series. After the character is adapted into a narrow young woman's model, Tiina's options become limited in the society, sending the contradictory message to readers about the gender roles. Thus, girls' literature can sustain static gender relationships and stereotypes despite the emancipatory features of the books. As previously discussed, the background of girls' literature is didactic. The pedagogical function of Tiina books to young readers is emphasized as underlying messages about honesty and helping others. In readers' responses, these moral qualities of the protagonist have emerged as memorable and impressive. It seems evident that the popular girls' series was socializing young readers to follow certain behaviour norms, such as honesty.

The impact of the Tiina series shows us the culture of avid and devoted girlhood reading. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the significance of the reading culture of girls' literature. The girls' books have touched many young readers' lives and different generations have read the Tiina books. Some of the readers have returned to books of girlhood again, re-reading them as adult women. The beloved and favourite girls' books are read for enjoyment and pleasure. As Oatley has stated, people who read fiction and become involved in it emotionally improve their empathy and social understanding of others.⁶⁶

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