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Meet the Author: Iida Turpeinen



Photo credit: Susanna Kekkonen

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Iida Turpeinen is a Helsinki-based literary scholar. Her debut novel, *Beasts of the Sea*, has become a literary phenomenon in its home country. The first print run sold out within a week of publication. The race to buy rights to the book took over international publishing around the Frankfurt Book Fair. It has also won the Helsingin Sanomat Literature Prize, the Thank You For the Book Prize, and was nominated for the Finlandia Prize and the Torch-bearer Prize in Finland and the Premio Strega Europeo in Italy, among others. The UK translation is now available published by MacLehose Press on 23rd October.

You can find *Beasts of the Sea* on the [Suffolk Community Libraries catalogue](#).

What was your first introduction to books and reading? Were you surrounded by books as a child or did you visit a library?

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by literature and words, and our local library quickly became a cherished place for me. One of my most vivid library memories, however, comes from the bookmobile. We spent our summers in the countryside, where every Friday the bookmobile would stop in the yard of a farm a few kilometers away. My brother and I would cycle there well in advance and wait with great anticipation for the bus to appear at the end of the road.

The books we borrowed from it felt like a precious treasure, and Friday evenings were spent in the attic, reading through our spoils. Even today, libraries remain an essential part of my life, and

whenever I move to a new place, one of my key criteria is that there must be a library within walking distance.

What was your journey to publication?

My path to becoming a writer was far from straightforward. In 2014, I won a prestigious writing competition for young authors, and the expectation was that I would publish the awarded texts. I began working on them with a respected publisher, but at some point in the process I realized I wasn't entirely sure what I was writing about—or why. I had a strong sense that this was not the book I truly wanted to write. So, I made the difficult decision to withdraw from the process, even though it was far from easy to explain to everyone that the book would not, after all, be appearing.

I spent the following years developing ideas and searching for the story I wanted to tell. I eventually found it quite by chance at the Natural History Museum. Even then, the process from first draft to finished volume was anything but quick: it took seven years of work before the book reached publication. I spent weeks on end delving into various archives and had the opportunity to explore an extraordinary range of historical materials — letters, diaries, drawings, maps, paintings, and scientific treatises.

In addition, I read background research widely across both the humanities and the natural sciences. The research process behind the book was demanding but immensely rewarding. It surprised me many times along the way and led the story in directions I hadn't initially imagined. I was writing about an expedition — but in many ways, writing this book became a journey of discovery in its own right.

Once I had completed the first draft, I began working on it with a brilliant editor. I was lucky enough to find exactly the right person for this manuscript, and from the very beginning of our collaboration I knew that this time I would be able to create the kind of book I had dreamed of writing.

What is your writing routine?

I am still in the process of developing a routine for myself! When I was writing my debut novel, I was working full time and raising small children, so I wrote a little here and a little there—whenever I could find the time. From time to time, I arranged a few days for more concentrated work and attended residencies at University of Helsinki's biological research stations, which proved invaluable for the development of the text.

Now, as I write my second novel for the first time as a full-time author, I find myself in new territory. To my delight, I have been invited to work on my next novel as writer-in-residence at the Natural History Museum in Helsinki. This feels like a tremendous gift, as I enjoy working as a part of a community—a circumstance not always easy for a writer to find. Here, however, I am surrounded by excellent colleagues who share my interests.

I try to approach writing much like any other job: I arrive at the office in the morning, share a cup of coffee with my colleagues, and then settle at my desk to devote myself either to background research or to the work of writing itself. One important realization I have made is that the best writing rarely happens while I am seated at the keyboard. For this reason, I always try to make space in my day for a walk in the nearby forest. As I walk, my thoughts seem to fall into place of their own accord, and when I return to my desk, I once again have something to say.

***Beasts of the Sea* is an amazing achievement. Can you tell us a little about it and how you came to write it? When did you first become aware of Steller's sea cow?**

I had long dreamed of writing a novel that would explore our relationship with nature through the lens of the history of science. But I lacked a perspective, a way in. The theme was this vast, sprawling constellation of ideas, but I had no story to anchor it. Then, in the spring of 2016, I found it by chance during a visit to the

Natural History Museum in Helsinki. I was wandering through the hall of skeletons when one animal caught my eye, a large, unfamiliar frame that I couldn't identify.

I stopped before the massive, bulky skeleton and read the small plaque placed in front of it. It stated that the specimen belonged to *Hydrodamalis gigas*, a Steller's sea cow, a species that had gone extinct only 27 years after it was first described by science and that only a handful of complete skeletons remained in the world.

Together, these sparse details stirred a cascade of questions: Why had this enormous marine mammal vanished so quickly after encountering humans? And how had one of the few surviving skeletons ended up here, in our small northern city? The urgency of these questions was so overwhelming that I rushed straight to the National Library and borrowed every available document on the animal. I began to read and soon realized that the story of this creature was the story I had been searching for.

Over the course of the writing process, however, I gradually realized that the book was becoming not only a story about the sea cow but also a story about how the very concept of extinction emerged, and how it transformed our understanding of our place in the world and our relationship to nature. To grasp such sweeping intellectual and historical shifts, I felt the narrative had to span several centuries—though for the writer, of course, that meant facing considerable challenges and undertaking a daunting amount of background research. Luckily, I'm the kind of person that loves to dig about in the archives.

As a debut author how have you coped with the runaway success of your first book? It had big publishing houses fighting over it and it's won a host of prizes.

This was the first book I had ever written, and I truly didn't know what to expect. The day before its release, Finland's largest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published a glowing review, calling it "a significant European novel." Within a couple of months, the translation rights had been sold in over 20 language territories. The

translated editions have also been met with an incredibly warm reception, which I'm both deeply grateful for and, perhaps, a little relieved — as a debut author, it's quite daunting to be thrust onto such large stages from the very beginning.

For someone with a background in literary scholarship, it is an extraordinary experience to see my own work so fully enter literary conversation. It has also been fascinating to observe the different ways in which the book has been received in various countries: in the Nordic countries, for example, the environmental themes have taken centre stage; in Germany, the focus has been on the intellectual and scientific history underpinning the novel; and in Italy, reviews have paid particular attention to the book's style and language.

Balancing all of this with the everyday life of a family with small children has not always been the easiest of tasks. At the same time, I think it has made it far simpler to keep my feet on the ground amid all the commotion: no matter what great or exciting things may happen in the literary world, at home a caterpillar spotted in the yard is always way more important news than some literary prize.

***Beasts of the Sea* is a call to protect what is irreplaceable in the world before it vanishes. I'm sure that we're going to have book groups discussing it for many years to come. What is the key message you would like your readers to take away?**

Typically, I prefer not to give readers too many instructions on how to approach my text as I didn't set out to write with some ready answers or lessons in mind; rather, my intention was to ask big questions about our relationship to the more-than-human world that kept puzzling myself.

Perhaps I could hope that the reader could come away with a renewed sense of curiosity and wonder toward the natural world. For me, *Beasts of the Sea* is not only about the past and the vanished creatures we can no longer meet, but also about how deeply human lives are entangled with those of other species. If the book encourages someone to look differently at the animals around

them, or to reflect on the richness of connections between humans and the more-than-human world, I would be quite content.

What's next for you?

I am deep into the work on my next novel, which takes as its starting point one of the most bizarre scientific hoaxes of the nineteenth century. At its heart lies a question that feels more urgent than ever: what truly makes knowledge trustworthy? The hoax itself revolved around animals, giving me the chance to return to one of my abiding fascinations—the intricate, often uneasy relationship between humans, science, and the animal world.

I have only just begun my background research, and while I cannot yet know where this journey will lead, I am certain it will be a fascinating one. Already I have encountered such extraordinary figures and stories in the archives that I can scarcely believe my luck.

One book that everyone should read?

Ha! I absolutely must take this opportunity to recommend a Finnish classic! One of the books I always return to is Tove Jansson's *Taikatalvi* ([*Moominland Midwinter*](#)). It is a book I would recommend to everyone, regardless of age—not only because it is a children's classic, but because it captures something profoundly human about change, solitude, and renewal.

In the story, Moomintroll wakes from hibernation to find himself alone in a silent, snowbound valley, forced to navigate a world that feels at once unfamiliar and wondrous. For an adult reader, the novel resonates as a quiet meditation on what it means to encounter the unknown, to endure the darkness of winter, and to discover new forms of companionship and courage.

For me, this is a work whose atmosphere and world are so powerful that the reading experience stays with the reader long

after the last page. Even years later, a single image, place, or feeling from the novel may resurface with striking clarity, and I believe that only the very best works of literature can create such a lasting experience.

Can you tell us one thing about yourself that your readers may not know?

When I was young, my mother worked at a nature center on an island called Harakka just off the coast of Helsinki. I spent a great deal of time there, which gave me the chance to observe up close the work of biologists, chemists, and other natural scientists—a fascinating window into the world of science. When the time came to decide what to study, I wavered for a long while between the natural sciences and literature.

The decision was ultimately sealed by the entrance exam book: that year, the required reading for comparative literature was Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The moment I opened it I knew the choice was made: no geological publication could ever draw me in or speak to me as powerfully as that novel did.

Yet my interest in the natural sciences remained, and when I reached the stage in my studies where I could choose my own research topics, I turned to exploring the impact of the sciences on literature. I also knew early on that I wanted to approach the world of science through fiction as well. When I began writing *Beasts of the Sea*, the circle, in a way, closed: I was able to inhabit both the world of fiction and the world of science.

Best of all, I wrote the first draft on Harakka Island, in an old telegraph building that happened to stand empty one summer and was thus given to me as a workspace. There, the presence of science and nature was quite tangible: next to my desk stood a deep freezer where the island's staff stored every dead animal they found from the shores to await further study. Once, for example, my writing was interrupted when a familiar biologist came in carrying an entire seal to be placed inside the freezer.