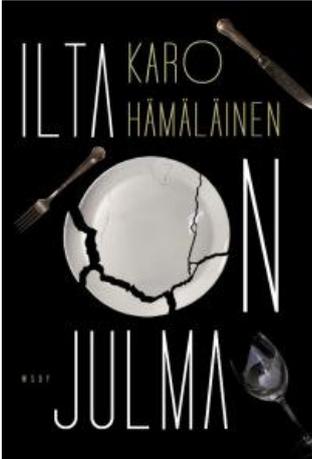


ELINA AHLBACK  
LITERARY AGENCY



*Cruel is the Night*  
By Karo Hämäläinen

Publisher: WSOY, 2013  
Original title: *Ilta on julma*  
Extent: 346 pages

**Q & A with the author**

Translation by Owen F. Witesman

**Q & A with the author**

When Karo Hämäläinen (b. 1976) was 12, he started reading Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle from the shelves of the Mikkeli City Library in Central Finland. Not until he was 14 did his Finnish teacher point out that there were also authors who wrote about crime whose names started with D (since the librarians had filed Arthur Conan Doyle under “C”), and Karo cast his gaze forward to Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

**Your previous two novels were financial thrillers, *The Bailout* and *The Buyout*. *Cruel is the Night* isn’t a financial thriller though. What is it?**

*Cruel is the Night* combines elements from classic whodunits, relationship dramas, and thrillers, but if I had to define it in one word, that word would be “tragedy.” I haven’t completely abandoned the world of financial thrillers though, since one of the main characters is a disgraced banker.

**Your publisher describes the book as starting like Agatha Christie, turning into Alfred Hitchcock, and ending up with pure Quentin Tarantino. What do you think of that description?**

I think it’s very apt, since I play with elements of the mystery genre picked from different stages of the genre’s development. What kind of murder mystery would Christie write today? She wouldn’t set it in a manor, she’d put the characters in a modern luxury flat. The structure of *Cruel is the Night* is a sort of locked room mystery similar to Hitchcock’s *Rope*. *Rope* is constructed around one single idea, which is one of Hitchcock’s classic insights: instead of setting up bombs to explode suddenly, sometimes it’s better to show the bomb sitting next to a chair leg while the characters sit around chatting idly. And Tarantino, yes! I had a lot of fun writing the last hundred pages!

**The book occurs over only a few hours.**

It seems like I keep compressing time in my books. Ten years ago I wrote a book about President Urho Kekkonen that covered 106 years, but *The Bailout* only took 6.5 days, *The Buyout* 23 hours, and *Cruel is the Night* less than half a day.

**Where did the book start?**

With Robert, the host. Last July I was in Spain giving interviews after the Spanish edition of *The Bailout* appeared. I was waiting for a reporter from *La Vanguardia* in the lower lobby of a Barcelona hotel reading the *Financial Times*. The lead story was about Bob Diamond, who had been forced to resign from Barclays after it came out that the bank had participated in LIBOR rate manipulation. I started thinking about what was going on in Diamond's head. What I imagined ended up as Robert's thoughts in *Cruel is the Night*.

**Robert is a disgraced banker, but Mikko is his opposite, a right-minded journalist.**

At first blush Mikko and Robert look like opposites, but I think they have a lot in common. Both of them think a lot about money, for example. Mikko knows the value of money because he's so stingy. But at the same time he envies Robert, who has the courage to enjoy his money. Mikko, on the other hand, seems to enjoy how little money he uses.

**What your writing process like for *Cruel is the Night*?**

Writing this book was pretty typical for me in the sense that I didn't really understand what I was doing until halfway through. I have a bad habit of writing novels in very different styles, so the whole time I'm writing I'm afraid because I don't know how the material will fit with the style or whether anyone will be interested in the end result. I was ready to give up on *Cruel is the Night* at one point, but then on a morning jog in Tokyo after a sleepless night, I finally understood the book's structure. I wrote the Prologue at Narita Airport waiting for a flight.

**Do you write a lot abroad?**

I was on a work trip in Tokyo, not writing, but yes, about half of this book was written abroad. That's a little funny considering that the book mainly takes place in a single flat, not jumping around the world. The original idea really did come to me in Barcelona, after which I continued developing the novel at home in Tampere and then during a rainy week at a cottage in Ikaalinen. I did my first big bout of writing last autumn in Budapest. I finished up the first full draft in Berlin in February, and I did the final editing in Edinburgh where I spent the month of May doing a residency sponsored by the WSOY Literature Foundation. Getting some distance from everyday life makes it possible to really concentrate on a manuscript and feeds the senses and the brain.

**What is the message of the book?**

I don't do messages. If I could condense a novel down into one sentence, I would write that sentence and not a novel—that would be more practical for me and my readers. If we have to shake some sort of motto out of it, we could use Juice Leskinen's rhyme about Estonia: Friendship is best, it don't depend on politics. Well, it rhymes in Finnish anyway.

**ELINA AHLBACK**  
**LITERARY AGENCY**

**The novel is set in the tallest building in Western Europe, The Shard. Are the facts in the book about that correct?**

I visited the Shard in early May and spent about two and a half hours 250 metres up. I sketched the layout of the rooms and looked at the views from various “flats.” The building is mainly Qatari-owned and has ten luxury flats, some of which are one entire floor and some of which are two floors. Their prices are estimated to run in the tens of millions of euros. There hasn’t been any public word about the sale of any of them, but there is some information about their amenities. For example, the rooms really do have direct dumbwaiter connections to the kitchen of a five-star hotel located lower down in the building. Some things I had to make up though. I don’t think any of the flats has a sauna, for instance, but a Finn could build a sauna on the top of a relay tower if he had to.

**Which of the characters in the novel reminds you most of yourself?**

All of the characters have at least a dash of me in them, but I guess Mikko is the one most like an ironic self-portrait. Maybe that’s why I have the most sympathy for him, even though none of the four of them are particularly loveable. Some readers of my previous books have asked why I write about “bad people.” I don’t feel like I write about bad people but rather about real people. I’m not interested in glossy pictures. Real people are conflicted and have good and bad qualities. When I look at the characters in my books, I find that the ones who seem strong turn out weak and the ones who seem the most unpleasant often turn out to be the most genial.