

Johanna Sinisalo's novel burns with gloom and power

Johanna Sinisalo creates a dystopia where women are *bred* into two breeds

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Johanna Sinisalo: The Core of the Sun

The Core of the Sun is Johanna Sinisalo's (b.1958) best novel since the Finlandia Prize-winning *Not Before Sundown* (2000).

The intervening books were by no means bad. The biggest flaw in her latest novel, *The Blood of Angels* (2011) was that it slipped into moralizing.

This time around, Sinisalo doesn't wag a finger, she clenches a fist. Her literary punch in the guts is delivered with skill and force.

After finishing the book, I needed to catch my breath: I sat there holding the volume, thinking "What a trip!"

The story inhabits the same sphere as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) by Margaret Atwood, who figured in last week's Nobel Prize speculations.

Both authors build a dystopia where women's rights have been shorn to a minimum. In practical terms, women have been turned into walking wombs and instruments for men's pleasure.

Atwood's society was created by Christian fundamentalists, while in Sinisalo's book, the Eusistocratic Republic of Finland is the result of a nanny state gone mad.

In Finland, the place of women in society was recently explored by Pauliina Rauhala in her debut *Taivaslaulu* (Song of Heaven), set in a conservative Laestadian Lutheran community.

Whereas Atwood creates a detailed world in the style of Tolkien, Sinisalo paints her nightmare vision with quick cuts and fictional text fragments.

In *The Core of the Sun*, the story unfolds through controlled torrents of precisely delineated scenes, images, and differing registers. Sinisalo demonstrates her mastery of rhythm, which she has honed writing scripts for television and cinema.

The Eusistocratic Republic of Finland strives to maximise the well-being of its citizens. Because “men are ruled by innate and compulsive sexual drive uncontrollable by reason” and “instead of sexual satisfaction, women yearn for the joys of motherhood”, the government has given men the right to play the field while women stay at home, curling their eyelashes.

Women have been bred into two breeds, the Eloi and the Morlocks, names derived from *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells.

The Eloi are pleasure machines for men, while the Morlock are infertile workers.

Alpha males are called Maskoes. Minus males are such runts that they hardly figure in the book.

The sole goal of an Eloi is to marry a Masko and give him children. Sinisalo draws a chilling parallel to dog training: using little treats, a Masko guides an Eloi’s behaviour in the desired direction.

The reader is bound to be amused by the “docility test for young women”, in which an Eloi has to choose the correct alternative out of four options for the most willing behavioural model when approached by a Masko with “matrimonial intentions”.

Aulikki, a septuagenarian closet rebel, is raising two young relatives, Manna and Vanna, in rural Finland. The state has classified both girls as Elois even though in reality Vanna is a Morlock and, with Aulikki’s assistance, acts the part of a pink-loving airhead.

As is expected of her, Manna gets married but disappears soon after. Vanna starts investigating her sister’s fate.

The novel features a subplot about an illegal substance, chilli, with Vanna getting involved in its trade. She also becomes addicted to capsaicin, the pungent compound of this hot spice.

Enter a group of hippies breeding a chilli variety so hot it hits you like a volcanic eruption, blowing your mind, and all of the story’s building blocks are in place.

Sinisalo is the only writer in Finland who can compile these ingredients into a story that is far from cringe-worthy.

First and foremost, she has a real talent for combining various texts with three aptly chosen verses from the Finnish national anthem, offering an unnerving little extra in this context.