

# The Characteristics of the Finnish Book Publishing Business

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The book publishing business in Finland is young, but has a steady standing. The first modern-style publishing houses emerged only a hundred and fifty years ago from a base of private entrepreneurs. Today the industry is spearheaded by the “three big ones”; WSOY, Otava and Tammi, and followed by a host of smaller publishers. For its size, the Finnish publishing field is well populated.

Books have also traditionally enjoyed a healthy demand rate. Finns are highly educated, a fact which usually coincides with high readership figures, and indeed they are avid readers as well as appreciative of domestic products. At the same time, from the perspective of the entire global publishing field, Finland is a modest market.

This paper will aim to explore some of the defining characteristics of the Finnish publishing business. Beginning with an overview of the history of the Finnish book and moving on to account for the early days of publishing activity in Finland, it will attempt to give an understanding of the foundations of the book business. There will be a section on the economic features of the industry today from the side of the producers as well as the consumers in the form of reading and literacy statistics. Lastly, the three most prominent publishing houses will be introduced in short profiles.

## Early history of the book in Finland

Literary life in Finland had humble beginnings – in the rural and remote Eastern part of Sweden, there was little need or desire for literacy, not to mention active interest in the consumption of literature. What demand there was for printed works before the 17<sup>th</sup> century could be satisfied in the motherland and shipped over. Such documents would almost exclusively have been religious texts in either Latin or Swedish, and specially ordered for the purpose. They were also usually communal in nature, being manufactured for the needs of organisations and communities rather than individuals. (Häggman 40, 42-43)

Finnish publishing history is often said to have begun with the *Missale Aboense*, a 1488 prayer book written for the needs of the church in Turku (Ekholm 30). Its identity as the first example of a Finnish work of literature is, however, somewhat misleading, since it was written in Latin by a Hungarian and, in the absence of actual printing presses in Finland, printed in Poland (Häggman 39). The first printing press on Finnish soil was founded in Turku in 1642 (ibid 40), and the appearance of the first real publishing house would take a further 200 years.

In these early decades of Finnish literary tradition, books were published almost entirely for religious or educational uses, their intended users being officials of the church or other authority

figures. Literacy levels among the people were low and there was an established culture of being read to rather than reading oneself – books had audiences instead of readers (ibid 33, 35). The first steps towards the education of the masses were advocated the Bishop of Turku, Johannes Gezelius Sr, who thought that learning dogma by heart was not the same as true understanding. He was appointed in his office the 1660's, but the literacy campaign inspired by him bore fruit very slowly and laboriously. It is estimated that by the First World War, two thirds of the population could read and write. (ibid 41, 52)<sup>1</sup>

Since there was such a restricted market for books, most of the trading before the 1800's took place in small circles, where much of the same people were involved in the writing, printing and selling of the books. There were no publishing houses in the modern sense of the word, rather, printing presses operated more or less independently, and not very actively at that. Texts were published, but the industry depended on the patronage of private investors or religious and educational institutions rather than companies set up for the purpose. (ibid 24)

### **The time of the autonomy: nationalistic motives**

In 1809, Finland became an autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire, which gave the publishing industry a final kick start. Indicative of the *status quo* that year is the fact that there were only two printing presses and one bookshop in Finland (Häggman 59). A considerable portion of all literature that did get published were also reprints of hundreds of years old texts: the 1701 Hymn Book for instance was still a household name in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid 45). Finally, the culture of the previous power-holders had so far dominated Finnish literary life to an extent where only a fraction of publications were in Finnish – understandable when one considers the fact that even in the 1860's, St Petersburg had more Finnish-speakers than Helsinki or Turku and, bewilderingly, thus hosted the largest Finnish-language community in the world (ibid 109). Swedish was the language of the reading population and kept its hold for a long time, and in the language issue, even the tradeover of 1809 did not usher in an immediate change.

Fennomania, the desire to promote and nourish Finnish culture, however, did begin to gain popularity among both the Finnish and the Swedish-speakers. It seemed to manifest especially as support for the arts. Like-minded individuals started coming together to form different kinds of alliances, which led to the establishment of organisations such as the Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, or Finnish Literature Society, FLS, in 1831. (Stockmann 22) The FLS remain an important upholder, researcher and publisher of classic Finnish oral tradition, folklore and literature (Finnish Literature Society).

An even more important event for the future of Finnish publishing took place in 1858, when a group of prominent literary figures founded the Suomen Kustannusyhdistys, or The Finnish Book

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<sup>1</sup> Officially, a staggering 97,6% of the population could read in 1880, which has given rise to the deep-rooted belief of Finland having been among the first nations to reach such an admirable degree of basic education. However, it is nowadays surmised that the real percentage was likely the exact opposite. (Häggman 32-33, 38)

Publishers Association, FBPA. The founding members represented various branches of the book business: authors, including Zacharias Topelius, "Finland's H. C. Andersen"; paper manufacturers, printers, bookshop owners, journalists, one librarian and, of course, publishers. (Häggman 95-96)

The association followed the example of the equivalent organisation in Sweden, which had been in existence for some fifteen years (ibid 101). It was the first domestic attempt at structure in the field of literature, which at the time was a haphazard and scattered affair. It seemed that the same rules of commerce that applied in other fields were not being applied to books – publishers were obliged to sell their books to a very mismatched collection of retailers from bookshop owners to travelling salesmen, usually on credit and with a resell or return policy. This combined with the relatively low demand, long distances and poor communications caused book publishers to be constantly losing money. The FBPA established rules about debt repayment as well as a nationwide network of commissioners to oversee their fulfilment, which proved an important support for the emerging industry. (ibid 102-103)

There was, however, still not a single publishing house in the country.

The first Finnish publishing house still in existence, Suomen Piiplaseura, was founded in 1812 in order to publish the Finnish Bible. Edita, a publisher of textbooks, followed much later in 1859. The first general-fiction publishing houses, Gummerus and Weilin+Göös, were both established in 1872, followed soon after by the Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, or WSOY for short, in 1878, and Otava in 1890. (Finnish Book Publishers Association). All of these houses are still in operation at the time of writing, although Weilin+Göös is now a part of WSOY.

Out of the major companies of the present day, only Tammi was established after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1943.

### **Finland as a market for book publishing**

Finland makes for an interesting market for books because of several inherent features. Firstly, as a small nation of 5 million, Finns have restricted purchasing power compared to the rest of the world. Finland's remote location and long distances within its own borders also amount to elevated import and distribution costs. These factors accompanied by high taxation make books expensive. On the other hand, Finns are well-educated and have a reputation for being enthusiastic readers. The book market, like all markets in Finland, is small, but strong.

A further challenge inherent to Finland is the language issue. Unlike for example the United Kingdom, whose publishing industry can easily buy and sell products abroad on account of English being such a widely spoken and translated language, Finland does not enjoy the same luxury. Finnish and Swedish, Finland's two official languages, are minority languages even in Europe and thus books written originally in one of them must always be translated when sold abroad. Swedish is spoken in one other country; Finnish in none, but nevertheless it is the latter that takes the vast

majority of all published literature. While this is not an insurmountable object in getting foreign rights sold, it does make them less attractive prospects for potential buyers on account of the extra work. Even then, Finnish books are unlikely to be sold abroad in great quantities. Therefore in practice, books published in Finnish need to be consumed in Finland (Brunila 8).

However, books are imported in large numbers. Finland has long been more than adequately equipped to translate important languages into Finnish, as not to be so would in practice have meant linguistic isolation from the rest of the world. Thus because of the language barrier, original Finnish works have a much longer way to getting sold abroad than vice versa, and the domestic book industry is quite heavily dependent on import works. The last point is also explained by the fact that the country has a writing force proportionate to its general population and there exists something of an undersupply for the demand.

### **The book industry in numbers**

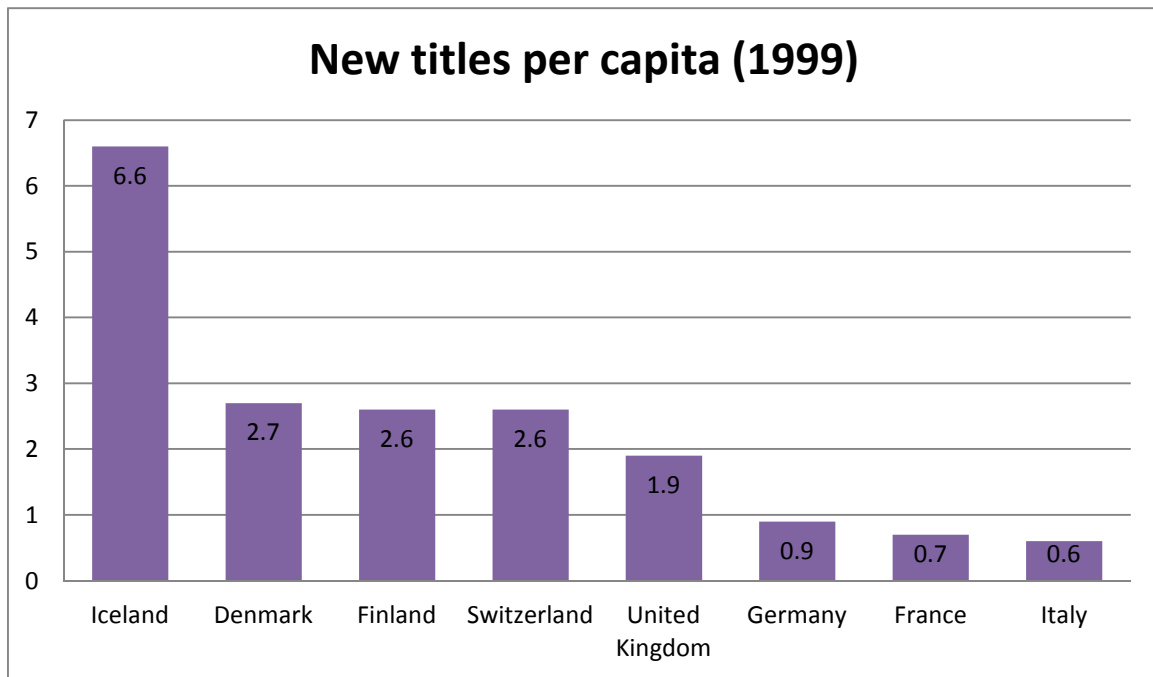
In terms of sales figures, the Finnish book industry has for the most part mirrored international developments. Despite the fears about the new media and the e-book especially hailing the death of the traditional book, the number of sales, new titles, new authors and new publishers entering the field have been steadily rising for decades. Only in recent years, approximately from the turn of the millennium, have the numbers turned into a slow decline. This has also been the case in Finland, although more slowly and on a smaller scale.

The number of new titles published every year is a useful indicator of the industry's viability. The size of a publisher's backlist used to perform the same duty, but as books now have a shorter lifespan, publishers have been forced to cut their backlists and instead churn out as many new titles as they can (Epstein 22). For Finland, according to the most recent statistics compiled by the Finnish National Library, a total of 12,714 new titles were published in 2009 (The National Library of Finland). The development in this statistic has been upward for the last two decades – since 1988, there has been a 50% increase.

As an international comparison, in 2009 the largest output of new titles in Europe was by the United Kingdom, where the total reached 133,224 titles (Federation of European Publishers). A more revealing statistic, however, is the number of new titles per capita<sup>2</sup> – Finland fares well in this regard despite the hard figures being smaller:

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<sup>2</sup> The statistics have not been made public after 1999.

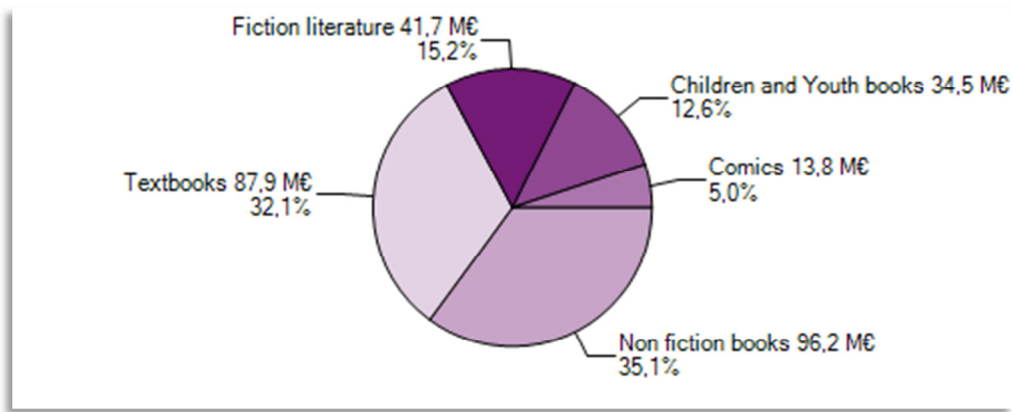


**Figure 1.** The top three scores are shared between the four countries from the left; the rest are not included in direct order of descendancy.

In 2009, the new titles, printed into some 30 million copies, hauled in a profit of 523 million Euros (Ekholm 63). Continent-wide statistics of book sales exist only for the members of The Federation of European Publishers: in 2008, their combined turnover was 23.8 billion Euros. It translates into 52€ worth of book purchases per capita, which is a little lower than the corresponding figure for Finland (again only accounting for FBPA members), 55€ per capita. Finns had also dedicated a growing proportion of their income to reading, as the figure was almost 2% higher than in the previous year, whereas Europeans as a whole were spending 3.1% less on books (ibid 79).

All of the numbers discussed so far consider the books produced and sold in a certain year in a single file, the various genres of fiction and non-fiction bundled together. Although one tends to associate the word ‘book’ with novels, in reality most of a year’s books are non-fiction. In 2009, the proportion of fiction – general fiction, children’s and youth literature, comics – out of the 12,714 new titles published in Finland was just over 2,600, that is, about 20% (The National Library of Finland). A newer statistic from 2010 has fiction topping the 46% mark (Finnish Book Publishers Association), but as this figure is supplied by the FBPA, the lower percentage of non-fiction, including textbooks, will be a result of many independent non-fiction publishers rather than a drastic change in the make-up of the market.

As for differences in sales between genres, fiction is again trumped by non-fiction. In 2010, members of the FBPA reported the following:



**Figure 2.** Breakdown of sales by type of literature 2010 (Finnish Book Publishers Association)

Were statistics about non-FBPA sales available, the dominance of non-fiction sales would likely be even more prominent. Several factors go into it; non-fiction literature being more expensive because of the research and materials that are often required and the steady demand for textbooks by educational organisations are among them.

### **Finns as book readers**

While reports of the Finns' astounding level of literacy may have been exaggerated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is certainly true that in modern-day Finland, reading is one of the most common hobbies. In keeping with most other Western countries, Finland's adult literacy level is around the 99% mark (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) and it consistently performs very well in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, which measure different aspects of education. There seems to be a very clear link between education and reading habits: the more highly educated a person is, the more active readers they are. For Finland, high literacy levels have indeed come to mean that reading is a viable way to gain information and spend leisure time for virtually everyone, making books more popular.

Popular they certainly seem to be: 3 out of 4 Finns professed to read books in 2009, allaying fears of a breakdown in reading culture similar to that of the United States, where the percentage of readers went from 57% to 47% in just 20 years (Ekholm 5). Finnish readers spend 45 minutes a day reading, whether books or magazines, and this number has stayed level for the last two decades. Even young people are avid readers, although as it is suspected, they are gravitating more towards e-readers and other non-traditional ways of reading, of which detailed statistics are not yet available (ibid 55).

Finland also boasts one of the world's most sophisticated and multi-faceted library institutions. Councils are required by law to provide a public library service to their inhabitants, which makes for an extensive network of local libraries. In 2009, there were 863 public libraries spread around the country, as well as 155 libraries on wheels and one library boat. They were visited 54.3 million

times, roughly 10 times per person. (ibid 43, 48) The Finns' activity and enthusiasm as library-goers attests to their viability as a market, even though public library services are free of charge.

In conclusion, Finland with its long history of literacy is generally speaking book-positive and reading-oriented, a culture that values the written word both as a source of education as well as a leisure activity. In terms of employment or economic importance, book publishing does not rank very high among all the domestic industries; however, it has a social significance much beyond its technical value (Brunila 8). The Finnish language has a history of being downtrodden in favour of Swedish or Russian, and being able to publish books in it is still regarded as a privilege and a matter of pride, certainly an institution worth protecting, promoting and investing in.

### **Structure of the field**

It has been suggested that the book publishing business in Finland has a dualistic structure, that is, divided in two tiers. Tier one publishers, or the core group, would be the three major houses, WSOY, Otava and Tammi. They are so called general trade publishers, having a wide range of titles in fiction and non-fiction alike, aimed at children, adults, students and everyone in between. Tier two publishers, or the peripheral group, would consist of all the rest: smaller, more specialised publishing firms with niche target audiences. (Brunila 11) This section will look at the core publishers and the reasons all three have stayed afloat despite competing for the same markets.

The oldest of the three is Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö (WSOY), which was established as a trading company in 1878 following the long careers as private publishers of the founding members, father and son Söderström (Häggman 117). WSOY has experienced steady economic growth all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, publishing such prestigious authors as Mika Waltari and Väinö Linna. From early on, the publisher has been profiled as a promoter of conservative-leaning material that often also has religious or nationalistic themes. In the late 1990s, WSOY participated in the founding of the SanomaWSOY Group, but was bought in the spring of 2011 by the Swedish publishing giant Bonnier (WSOY).

With the sale of WSOY, Bonnier now owns two out of three of the largest Finnish publishing houses: Tammi joined its ranks in 1996. Tammi is the youngest of the three market leaders. Founded in 1943 in the midst of the Second World War to offer an alternative to the type of nationalistic publishing that was at the time typical and indeed practised by WSOY among others. Tammi endeavoured to import new ideas to the Finnish reading public and did so largely by focusing on translated literature from abroad. Their series of world classics, the Keltainen kirjasto, or the 'Yellow Library', has never gone out of print since its launch in 1954. (Tammi)

The third great Finnish publishing house is Otava, which was founded in 1890. Otava have found their greatest successes in publishing controversial domestic literature, among others Maria Jotuni and Hannu Salama, the latter of whom was the subject of perhaps the most epic censorship war in Finnish book history. On the other hand, Otava have also gathered many of the more mainstream

domestic authors, who for one reason or another did not associate themselves with WSOY. The publisher boasts a long list of Finlandia Prize winners, foreign Nobel Prize winners and Finland's own, one and only, Nobel prize winner F. E. Sillanpää. (Otava)

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