

Mysterious, Spoiled, Rotten in Finland

Women's bodies and crimes line Maile Chapman's first novel

Thank you, science, for antibiotics and the birth control pill. Thank you, feminism and a terrible economy that demands two salaries per family, for women's careers. These things have saved many a life, emotionally and literally.

Maile Chapman's haunting, viscerally intense new novel *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* (Graywolf Press, \$23) gives the lie to any idea that life at the turn of the 20th century was somehow better or easier than life at the turn of the 21st. Politics—Russian, Swedish, Finnish, and how in the world wealthy U.S. wives could sort them all out—suffuse the grimly intimate walls of the novel's setting. The eerie tale takes place in rural Finland at a hospital called Suvanto, where seriously ill patients occupy many wards, but not the one where American nurse Sunny Taylor has made her living for the past year.

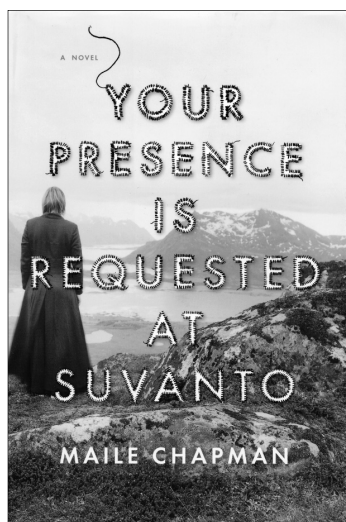
Those politics, and the recent WWI, rarely make an overt entry into the lives of the women living on the “up-ward.” Chapman feints one way and then another about these patients: Are the women simply “hysterical,” whiners and complainers who have been coddled and who choose to be sick and taken care by the staff of Suvanto, or are they truly suffering from diseases like syphilis, gonorrhea and tumors of the

uterus? Or perhaps a bit of both?

The author gives her readers the honor of making that sort of choice. Is the Finnish summer or winter more alarming; would insomnia hit harder in the endless light of June or the endless darkness of December? Is the up-ward more of a sanatorium, a spa or a clinic? And, all right: Who commits the crimes that speed up the last quarter of the book—if those crimes exist at all?

The women on the up-ward form loose coalitions of constantly shifting alliances, and a new woman, Julia Dey, seems to confound everyone, from nurses to ward staff to the other patients. She's malicious and unkind at random times, stressed by an illness that her husband probably passed on to her and by a painful personal problem that Sunny promises can easily be fixed. Also, she's not a very nice person.

Chapman spent a year in Finland on a Fulbright grant looking at just the kind of building that Suvanto occupies, and the



research and time she spent in the country come through, without overwhelming the book, in the smallest of details about Sunny's adjustment to the climate and the light (or lack thereof). Julia and her husband, dance instructors and immigrants from Denmark to Finland, also demonstrate Chapman's research without straining the bonds of fiction.

The hospital's architecture, modern and austere Nordic, hints at a new Finland, one without the angst of the centuries spent thrashing under Sweden's thumb and then serving as Russian nobility's summer land. Into the newly 100 percent Finnish space enters the American timber company that financially supports Suvanto, and the wives of the men in that company (along with American nurses like Sunny) upset the quiet, internally focused Finns.

The novel, which I described in a few Twitter and Facebook updates as “creepy” as I read it, has an ominous ring from its

epigrams about the Bacchae (in Euripedes and Greek myth in general, women who worshipped Dionysius and, when fits of worship were upon them, ripped animals and men apart with their bare hands) and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* to its last, lushly written but deeply disturbing final page. The slow beat of horror, of something being off, couples with the narrative whimsy of the first-person plural, used sparingly but enough to hint that the tale's being told by one of the women in the up-ward. Perhaps the close third-person portions about Sunny and other characters simply don't reveal their actual first-person plural source, perhaps Chapman switched voices for these portions or perhaps that is simply another mystery of this intricately plotted book. The author ends the book by undermining, possibly, much of what readers think, by that time, they know. She turns a sympathetic, trustworthy character into a suspicious and potentially criminal conspirator, but she also undercuts the undermining by setting some of it as a dreams or confused memories or an afterlife in hell—that is to say, in Suvanto, the threads of which will keep all of the characters bound for years. **EW**

Maile Chapman reads from Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto at 1 pm Sunday, May 16, at the Eugene Public Library.

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