

## Disabled Heroine in a Finnish Book Series

### **Background**

Ms Kaisa Viitala (b. In Finland 1974) published her first book at the age of 13. About the same time, she read a comic magazine *Classic Illustrated* based on Sir Walter Scott's novel *Rob Roy* and fell head over heels in love with Scotland. During the 1990s she became one of Finland's youngest and most popular youth writers (with her maiden name Ikola), publishing among others *The Highland Trilogy* in 1993–95.

In the early 2020s, she started to write a new story, remembering the rejection letter she had received as a young writer from a publishing house: "write about your own circle of life". Now in her 50s she finally started to follow that instruction. She decided to write – as she tells – “an ordinary historical romance novel, but with the heroine who has physical disability”.

Kaisa Viitala's congenital brittle bone disease osteogenesis imperfecta has followed her more or less visibly throughout her life. For decades she could move without any aid, but with the latest fractures, her walking got worse. Ms Viitala experienced that the world has been made especially tough for a disabled person who walks but not perfectly. A person using a wheelchair is perhaps already a little taken into consideration, but no one really cares about the needs of a person with crutches.

So now Ms Viitala started to write about what it is like to be a disabled person in the world planned for the non-disabled. But being a teller of historical stories, she set her experiences into early 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, her favourite place and era to write of.

### **Agnes is Born**

The series *Nummien kutsu (The Call of the Moors)* introduces Agnes Hunter, crippled since birth. Living in the 1720's, she ends up from her safe home near London first to Edinburgh and then to the Highlands. She befriends the sister of a Highland clan chief – and eventually the chieftain himself. Agnes is not the only lame duck in the story, although her disability is the most visible. The longing to be accepted, the fear of being rejected, taking on a role just to survive were real before and unfortunately still are. In the sequels, the themes of childlessness and the right to parenthood for a disabled person come to the fore.

Agnes's disability is deliberately not diagnosed. It is obvious that she doesn't have osteogenesis imperfecta, though Ms Viitala describes a lot of her own experiences and people's attitude to her disability through Agnes' eyes. For example, all the comments Agnes receives about her disability are really made by real people, though not in the 18<sup>th</sup> but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ms Viitala says that she wanted to “help the medicine go down with a spoonful of sugar”, and this is why she smuggled the attitude lesson into a compelling story in a genre that is widely read. The series can also be enjoyed purely as a historical adventure, and that is exactly what shows the reader that there is not any separate “disabled life”, but persons with disabilities live and love like any other people.

### **Reception of the Series**

This four-part series, the first volume being released in 2024 and the last one coming in 2027, has become an instant bestseller in Finland. It has been awarded by Finnish disability society Kynnys, it has won twice the Storytel Awards prize as the year's best romantic audio book, and the first novel was chosen as audio

book of the month in Finland's largest newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. The series has already sold 40,000, which is a great number in Finnish language.

The series has also received great reviews. The Storytel Awards jury described it as "Historical romance on an international level, Bridgerton meets Braveheart. The winner combined a wonderfully good story, interesting and multidimensional main characters, a fascinating setting and history we didn't know we wanted to learn more about."

The author has been widely in Finnish media, more than is in any means common for a feelgood author. For the first time, a disabled main character is seen in a Finnish historical romance, actually written by a disabled person herself. In the interviews Ms Viitala has been able to talk about the status of disabled people.

### ***What Do Readers Say***

Readers with disabilities or even with age-related challenges have found Agnes's character credible and felt that now even they can identify with a heroine of a romantic novel. A Finnish disability activist Pinja Eskola wrote in her blog, "[Kaisa Viitala] can also write about the negative sides of disability without falling into clichés: the disabled person was not bitter, she did not die, and she was not portrayed as a curiosity to the reader, but instead the belittling attitude of the environment was portrayed as pointless."

Most non-disabled readers have told how they have learned to understand more the challenges disabled people face. "They behaved so terribly 300 years ago," they exclaim about the comments Agnes gets about her disability, and become even more horrified when told that the unkind words are from our modern times and modern, "open-minded" people.

Some readers however have been triggered by the series, criticizing it unconvincing – because, they say, a disabled person cannot have such a romantic relationship – or having "too much disability" in the story. Some readers think Agnes complains too much.

In the best scenario, these types of comments can lead to a fruitful discussion that opens the eyes of both non-disabled and disabled people. Unless we talk about things, disabled person can understand the mindset of a non-disabled person just as little as the other way around. And when the topic of conversation is a mutual friend, Agnes, it is hopefully easier to understand the other person's perspective.

Anyhow, Ms Viitala jokes that every time she reads a comment about "too much disability", she decides to write another book about a disabled main character. In fact, she has already signed a publishing contract for a new book trilogy combining the common 18<sup>th</sup> century history of Finland and Scotland – and introducing a new disabled heroine.