

Exploring the Reality Boundary of Esa Kero

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“BANGKOK” was to me truthful fiction. If one picks up the mere facts from the story, as “facts” are generally understood, the result would pale in comparison with Peter’s draught of fish. I do remember that I didn’t use any notes when I was writing the story. I had taken notes, of course, but I didn’t use them. And, more importantly, I had two tapes of voices. Recollections. I wrote the whole story at once, and changed nothing afterwards, just corrected a few words. Spelling and grammar are something I’ve never wanted to learn.—A good fact can be changed into fiction with a comma.—The most essential thing is, though, that fiction must never intentionally run over fact.¹

Such is how the Finnish journalist Esa Kero thinks back about writing the article “Bangkok” twenty-five years ago. It raises several questions. What is “truthful fiction” and how does it relate to the “reality boundary” Norman Sims asked for in the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* when it comes to the writing of literary journalism?² And why does Kero play down the journalistic credibility of his story by claiming that there are not too many facts in it? If Kero calls “Bangkok” a truthful fiction, can we even call it a piece of literary journalism? Yes, I would suggest, because, on closer examination what we discover is that he is playing mischief with our expectations. While he may appear to engage in fiction in the conventional sense—if we mean by fiction scene-by-scene description, for example—he then is very much a practitioner of the literature of fact. And when it comes

to the shortage of facts, that only refers to Kero's view of facts; he sees them as statistics, numbers, and other hard data, undeniable and unambiguous details, something that he gives less value to than does traditional news journalism. Part of understanding his mischievous and ironic nature is to also to understand that he was, in his time, whether witting or not, very much a postmodern journalist, the kind that would be unlikely today in Finland.

In order to understand such stories like "Bangkok" by Kero it is first important to look at the context in which he wrote them. The 1980s were "the wild decade" in Finnish journalism; the cultural atmosphere was free and liberated after the narrow-minded 1970s. There was an upswing in the economy, and urban culture was making its way to Helsinki, the capital. Gonzo had landed in Finland, and some wild journalistic experiments can be found in, for instance, the numerous little punk magazines that were published all around the country at the time.

For thirty years, from 1977 to 2007, Kero worked for *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest newspaper in the Nordic countries. It is fair to say that when he published "Bangkok," he introduced a whole new world to many of the readers of the *Monthly Supplement of Helsingin Sanomat*. As he says at the beginning of the story, he along with the photographer Tapio Vanhatalo wanted to go to India but had not been able to get press visas. Bangkok sounded fascinating as well, so that ended up as their destination. At that time Thailand was not even mentioned in the charts that presented the most popular holiday destinations among Finns.³ Things have changed since then; databases by Statistics Finland show that Thailand has been the most popular long-distance holiday destination for several years now, and among the ten most popular vacation destinations in total. Back in 1985, however, the story "Bangkok" did not depict an environment that was familiar to its readers, but one that was rather exotic and strange.

Prostitution was something exotic to Finnish readers as well. At the end of the twentieth century many Finns believed that there was hardly any prostitution in Finland.⁴ This was not really the case; prostitution existed, but it was well hidden. Street prostitution increased significantly at the beginning of the 1990s, due to, among other reasons, the deep recession and the collapse of the neighboring Soviet Union and its consequences.⁵ But in 1985 prostitution was very much a hidden phenomenon in Finland. Yet Bangkok has long been well-known for prostitution and sex tourism; research from the 1990s shows that 70 percent of tourists who travelled to Thailand were men, and many of them travelled with the intent to buy sex.⁶

One would imagine that a story that tells about a man who travels to Bangkok to engage the services of prostitutes would have at least a slightly swagging tone to his voice. As Kero writes: "Upon first coming here, Finn-

ish men are full of illusions, and this is the place where those illusions are dispelled. But we don't talk about that back in macho Finland. In Finland people talk about prices and sex." Certainly sex and prices for sex are two of the ultimate measures for objectifying women. In "Bangkok," however, Kero does not do that. He writes a story that is so bluntly honest it may leave readers—male and female—uncomfortable with his subjective revelations: Since when were men supposed to have feelings for prostitutes? This becomes the ultimate cultural revelation.

His strength as a journalist at the time lay in his capacity to assimilate into his topic; he has identified himself effortlessly as an expert of Russian street fashion, or a member of a Finnish pensioner group on its spa trip to Romania. He would adopt the language and report the way of thinking of those he wrote about in a style that would create humorous insights and yet remain respectful of those he depicted. "Bangkok," however, goes even beyond these because Kero concentrates more on his inner thoughts than his perceptions of others, or rather on how *he* feels about others. In this sense the story is perched between literary journalism and memoir, the boundaries between which are often porous anyway.⁷ Most important for the literary journalism side, it becomes a revelation of a Finnish man's sexual desires and sensitivities.

There is a related reason why Kero's story is an important one in the context of Finnish literary journalism. I would claim that "Bangkok" could not be found in a Finnish magazine today. The narration is far too subjective. As a reflection of that, Kero engages in free association, which can be detected in the fact that "Bangkok" is not written in chronological order. But it does reveal a great deal about Finnish literary journalism in the 1980s.

A heightened subjectivity has long been noted as a ubiquitous feature of literary journalism. Kero does not try to disguise this in "Bangkok," nor for that matter in many of his other stories. On the contrary, he often emphasizes it. He makes sure that the reader realizes that his story is merely one interpretation of the reality he describes. One consequence is that Kero poses a challenging case when it comes to the reality boundary of literary journalism. He is probably the most obvious example of a postmodern journalist in Finland, should one be named—and analogies have long been drawn between late twentieth-century literary nonfiction and postmodernist writing.⁸ "Bangkok" includes several features that have been identified as characteristics of postmodernist writing. First of all, it is a fragmentary text by nature. Again, it does not present the events of the journey in chronological order, but "in an order in which they bubble into his mind," as he writes. The same section shows a hint of self-reflexive or meta-factual⁹ nonfiction that tells the story of its own becoming: "Allow me to vent these matters in some semblance

of an order.” When the narrator addresses the readers in the second-person plural, he is addressing them directly, and makes clear that he recognizes the act of “telling a story” and his own role as the narrator who has the power as well as the responsibility to choose those events to share with his readers and in which order. These examples demonstrate the idea that no narrative can be a natural “master” or omniscient narrative, and that all narratives are constructions, and thereby inherently limited interpretations of the world.¹⁰

One could even argue that Kero’s stories approach a panfictional point of view towards the world; in other words, it’s as if he thought that all representations of the world were equally fictional, which is still another post-modern feature.¹¹ However, as Kero himself stated in the citation at the beginning, “fiction must never intentionally run over fact.” Thus, by his own acknowledgment he does intend to separate fact from fiction.

Kero also questions the genre the story represents—journalism and its conventions—which is another typical feature of postmodernism as well. For instance, when he says that “the state is doing its best—how on earth do I know this?—to get rid of the slums,” he makes ironic an expression that is typical of a faux omniscient narrator used in foreign correspondents’ stories, as well as one that emphasizes that journalists depend on their “official” sources, and in many cases have no choice but to trust them—regardless of whether they are trustworthy or not. This further example of self-reflexivity unveils the journalistic work process and thereby emphasizes the artefactual nature of the text—in other words, it shows that the text, as well as all other texts, is a result of numerous choices made by the author. Stories don’t write themselves; instead, they are always constructions, made by people. There is another kind of an example of an “official” source in “a certain missionary” who described the slum of Khlong Toei as something very different from what Kero saw and experienced. It is mentioned in the text that Kero and the missionary have had a conversation, but the missionary is left anonymous, the anonymity only pushing both of them further away from the subjectivities of men who hire prostitutes, as well as of the prostitutes themselves.

It could also be argued that Kero’s reluctance towards obeying grammar is another postmodernist expression, one that gets to the nature of post-modernist thinking in which language is fluid. Kero’s description of his work process in “Bangkok” seems rather amateurish from today’s point of view, knowing that the *Monthly Supplement of Helsingin Sanomat* has one of the highest editing standards in Finnish press, and that the story processes are much more complicated.¹² Then again, Kero is a distinguished journalist and most likely well aware of the grammar and the ways he is breaking the rules—is this yet another example of his mischievous nature? Kero relates an anecdote to this effect. He recalls one of his teachers, in what is the Finnish equivalent of high school, making a remark on one of his youthful essays: “Esa, you

have your own punctuation rules. Some kind of a logic there is to them. I'm going to correct them here just because the Matriculation Examination Board doesn't understand cuneiform, either." In the translation of "Bangkok," such problematic grammar has been left intact. If it is confusing to the reader in English, it was equally confusing to the Finnish as well.

Still, Kero will insist we have to respect the "reality boundary" of the facts of phenomenal experience. This is another place where the mischief-maker in him is revealed, and it can be detected in another text by him. In a work of reportage, "On the Way to the Land of Bars!," published in 1991, he tells the reader at the beginning that the story is not going to be truthful:

Most of us take our annual vacation in the summer when the lakes glitter and thousands of flowers display their color . . . oh, well. We did our test trip in April, so that You, Dear Readers, would have a pretty trip package ready in time before the holidays begin. The circumstances were lousy, sleet and cold. It really took imagination to see the sea looming through the sixty centimeter thick ice. Therefore, a part of this story was necessarily stimulated and imagined to correspond with the summery settings. Or do you think that one single motorist would take the Road of Poem and Border¹³ on a summer day if I told everything the way it really happened?¹⁴

How should the reader interpret this? If the narrator starts the story by admitting that it is not true, what does this do to the story's credibility? Readers could be forgiven at this point if they stopped reading because they thought they were going to read journalism. But then readers discover the point of the journey is to stop at every bar along the way and drink beer. This is the "test" trip the author is taking on behalf of the reader. Where the narrator does use his imagination is, moreover, easy to detect. And here one can see that he does not violate the reality boundary because he engages in a judicious choice of description. For example: "At Purnujärvi we stop. We take a swim in the bright waters of the public beach of Hiidenjärvi lake." A careful reader realizes that what they see is thick ice instead of bright water, since they are travelling in April, and therefore they definitely don't take a swim. But that is as far as the narrator goes in fabricating; he has not, for instance, placed bikini-clad young women on the beach. Alongside the text there are several pictures that reveal the real circumstances; there is snow on the ground, and people wear warm clothes. Kero, of course, is playing the ironist again by playing with and upsetting our expectations.

There is a difference between a story like this that openly pretends not to be true (because the reader can decipher the fabricated parts), and a story that claims to be true but on later occasion proves to be false, such as any number of fictionalized articles revealed to be fakes in the United States like those of Jayson Blair of *The New York Times* in 2003.

When discussing the reality boundary in “Bangkok,” one should also take into account whether the narrator is or is not engaging in free indirect discourse, or rather is serving as a ventriloquist for actors, as in the case of fiction. Dorrit Cohn notes that one of the crucial differences between factual and fictional representation is that in factual stories the discourses of the narrator and the actors of the story are conducted separately and can be identified as such. Her claim is that free indirect discourse cannot be used in nonfiction.¹⁵ Even the distinguished scholar Phyllis Frus has noted that “free indirect discourse is always imagined, whether by a fictional character or a historical one,”¹⁶ but as Markku Lehtimäki reminds us, imagining and speculating on other people’s thoughts is a common and human way of interpreting and making sense of life.¹⁷ Moreover, according to Lehtimäki, there should be a distinction between free indirect speech, which can indeed be reported in a nonfictional text, and free indirect thoughts, which are far more problematic when it comes to the epistemological nature of nonfiction.¹⁸ Those problematic free indirect thoughts can be found in, for instance, several sections of Norman Mailer’s book *The Executioner’s Song* where the narrator presents people’s thoughts.¹⁹ Mailer later admitted to the partial fabrication of those scenes.²⁰ Kero is revealing in this regard: “The youngest of the girls is wearing a white skirt; she is the prettiest and the most obviously nervous. Perhaps she senses that, if anyone is selected, it will be her. And if the man doesn’t understand properly, it’ll hurt.”

The first sentence is clearly an interpretation made by the narrator. It is “his opinion” that the youngest girl is the prettiest and looks the most nervous. In the next sentence “perhaps” is the key qualifier. It demonstrates that what follows is a matter of speculation instead of claimed fact. But in being forthright about his speculation, Kero remains factual. That is the paradox.

At the heart of Kero lies linguistic and existential ambiguity, or the willingness to let such ambiguities tease us with possibilities of meaning. This can be detected in the last sentence of “Bangkok”: “Woe, the scorpion in me!” According to Kero, the editor of the story had asked if he could leave it out because he couldn’t understand it. “Take it or leave it,” he had responded to the editor. Apparently the editor left it, but what the scorpion refers to remains a mystery.

While still working at *Helsingin Sanomat*, Kero took up writing books. He has written several books for the publishing house Building Information, Ltd. about nostalgic Finnish buildings, such as, barns, guest houses, playhouses, outhouses, and village schools. Lately, Kero has also written about birds. The books consist of photographs and Kero’s texts in which nonfiction and fiction intertwine. In leaving daily journalism behind, he has retreated to the region of his childhood home, living just a few kilometers away

from the place that he mentions in the beginning of “Bangkok,” the Turvala estate in Punkaharju.

Things have changed at *Helsingin Sanomat* as well. It is still Finland's major newspaper today, and its monthly supplement includes remarkable examples of Finnish narrative journalism. But as a journalist who works there stated, although the 1980s were a time of narcissistic first-person narrators and other features that he today finds rather amusing and unprofessional, he said he misses the spontaneity of the processes and the roughness of the texts. He mentioned Esa Kero as an example of what was missed most.²¹ Nor is he the only one. Although only anecdotal, a pseudonymous “Willa” has written in a web conversation what might capture best Kero's influence and impact: “Esa Kero was for decades the one journalist in *Helsingin Sanomat* whose stories you just had to read, and they often made women (and men too, a couple have confessed) cry. He just has his own way of writing.”²²

In today's *Monthly Supplement* of *Helsingin Sanomat*, it is unlikely that a journalist could get away with the kind of reporting Kero did, his unconventional use of language, the subjective style, and the ambiguities that begged for interpretation. It is not worth a story nowadays if someone goes someplace and experiences things from his or her strongly affirmed subjective point of view. Whereas the outcome may be polished and richer with facts, something gets lost in the process, the authenticity of contingency, of those experiences in life that tease us with possibilities of meaning. That's what makes such writing literary. And if anything, the reader is likely to feel that such ambiguities are never entirely decipherable, and for that reason are extremely honest and factual.

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Endnotes

¹Esa Kero, email message to author, 15 January 2010.

²Norman Sims, "The Problem and the Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1(2009), 11.

³*Suomalaisten lomatoimukset ja lomamatkailu vuonna 1985*. (Finnish holiday customs and holiday travelling.) A report. Finnish Tourist Board A55(1986), 43.

⁴Anne-Maria Marttila, *Tavoitteena tasa-arvo. Suomalainen keskustelu rajat ylittävstä prostituutiosta*. (Aiming at gender equality. The Finnish debate on transnational prostitution.) Reports of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2009), 37.

⁵The rapid passage from communism to a market economy resulted in, e.g., high unemployment rates, increases in prices and weaker social security. That led Russians to search for new means for survival, one of which was prostitution. Travelling abroad was easier after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and prostitutes extended their area of operation to Finland, among other neighboring countries. Anne-Maria Marttila, 11.

⁶Erik Cohen, *Thai Tourism: Hill Tribes, Islands and Open-Ended Prostitution*. Studies in Contemporary Thailand No. 4. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996), 297.

⁷John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 162.

⁸See John Hellmann, "Postmodern Journalism", in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Larry McCaffery (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 53; and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1976), 227.

⁹Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, 123.

¹⁰Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge 1988), 13.

¹¹See, e.g., Marie-Laure Ryan, "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality," *Narrative* 5 (1997): 165-67.

¹²Maria Lassila-Merisalo, "Faktaan ja fiktion rajamailla. Kaunokirjallisen journalismin poetiikka suomalaisissa aikakauslehdissä" ("On the borderline of fact and fiction. The poetics of literary journalism in Finnish magazines"). (Ph.D. diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2009), 12.

¹³The "Road of Poem and Border" is the oldest sightseeing road in Finland. It follows the Russian border in eastern Finland, and refers to the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, the poems of which were collected in Carelia in the areas where the road runs.

¹⁴Esa Kero, "Matkalle baarien maahan!" ("On the way to the land of bars!"), *The Monthly Supplement of Helsingin Sanomat*, May 1991, 18.

¹⁵Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 25.

¹⁶Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

¹⁷Markku Lehtimäki, "Elämäkertamuodon itsereflektio: fiktiiviset ja visuaaliset keinot Edmund Morrisin Reagan-biografiassa *Dutch*" ("The Self-reflection of the Biography Form: The Fictional and the Visual Devices in the Reagan-Biography *Dutch* by Edmund Morris," in *Merkkejä ja symboleja. Esseitä kirjallisuudesta ja sen tutkimuksesta*, ed. Markku Lehtimäki (Tampere: Tampere University Press 2002), 258.

¹⁸Markku Lehtimäki, *The Poetics of Norman Mailer's Nonfiction: Self-Reflexivity, Literary Form and the Rhetoric of Narrative* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2005), 273.

¹⁹For instance, in a section where the narrator describes in detail the thoughts of April, Nicole Baker's sister; Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (New York, Vintage 1998 [1979]), 220.

²⁰Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 210.

²¹Jouni K. Kemppainen, interview, 7 February 2008.

²²Willa (pseudonym), comment on "Juice Leskinen," Eppu-keskustelu, comment posted October 10, 2007, <http://www.eppunormaali.net/keskustelu/YaBB.pl?num=1164445720/45> (accessed 1 February 2010).