

Katre Talviste

The Curious Case of Juhan Paju and a Fortunate Choice of Pop Lit over Poetry

Abstract: This essay proposes a study of the poetics and local generic context of the work of Juhan Paju (1939–2003), arguably one of the very few original Estonian crime writers emerged from the twentieth century. The focus is on five of his novels centred on investigations led by Toivo Kivistik, a small-town police detective. The series is set in the last decades of the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century. This tumultuous period in local history has provided rich material for socially relevant themes. Paju's work is original in treating this material, but also in his experiments with generic conventions, which he progressively adapts to his own talent and to the local context.

Keywords: Estonian Literature; Genre Fiction; Crime Fiction; Detective Fiction; *Roman à énigme*; *Roman noir*; Juhan Paju.

KATRE TALVISTE

University of Tartu, Estonia
katre.talviste@ut.ee

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2022.43.03

1. Juhan Paju and the Estonian crime fiction¹

At the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, a rather curious author emerged in the Estonian literary field. In 1990, Juhan Paju, born in 1939 and thus starting his literary career relatively late in life, self-published his first detective story, *Haapsalu detektiiv* ('The Haapsalu Detective'). He also entered another manuscript to a prestigious novel contest where it won the second prize. This award-winning novel, *Hiiromandi kokteil* ('The Chiro-mancer's Cocktail'), written between 1987 and 1989, could be categorized as a cross between fantasy and science fiction. Both stories are set in Haapsalu, a small coastal town in northwestern Estonia, where Paju himself had lived since mid-1980s. As he states on the covers of several novels, he was forced to retire from work and settle down there due to his deteriorating health, having previously pursued various occupations, several of them in the field of journalism.

I have been writing since my school years, but without much success. Some stories were printed in my student

days in the daily paper *Edasi*, some poems have been published here and there as well. There has never been time to work on quite a few interesting ideas. It was only when my health got bad, when I couldn't go to work any more, that I had nothing else left than to take literature seriously...

he writes on the back cover of *Hiro-mandi kokteiil*². The same idea appears on the inside front cover of his second novel in terms of writing chronology, *Kagu-pas-saat* ('Southeasterly Trade Wind', written in 1989): "Occasionally, I tried to make a breakthrough in literature with a poem or a play, but without much success. As I was turning fifty, I returned to the genre that had inspired me as a youth, and began writing adventure stories."³ Many of Paju's novels are accompanied by variations of this brief bio note reiterating the same deliberate choice, which in later works is sometimes completed by the observation that the choice turned out to be rewarding. Indeed, before his death in 2003, Paju wrote and published at a brisk pace, won a few more prizes and mentions at novel contests, found favourable reception among the enthusiasts of his chosen genres, and several of his novels were translated in Finland, where they met with "considerable success with readers and attention from critics"⁴.

Having built this rather atypical literary career, Paju eventually published, in 2001, a collection of poems, *Kuuvalge õhtulaul* ('Moonlit Evening Song'), which the publisher presents as the "first collection of poems of the writer from the Läänemaa region, who first became known for his crime fiction"⁵. The book didn't

mark Paju's return to poetry writing. It is a collection of poems mostly from his youth, that is, according to his own frequent admission, the early creations that hadn't initially convinced neither himself nor the reading public of his literary calling. Some of the poems in the book originate also from later years, but the author's musings in the afterword show his continued lack of dedicated literary ambition in this field: "It is even difficult to call poetry a literary genre. To my mind, poetry is a human spiritual state, and the feelings related to it are sometimes aptly captured in writing, sometimes less so."⁶ The book indeed feels and reads as an unambitious endeavour to document a sideline of creative work originally done for purely personal purposes. Nevertheless, it also reads as perfectly competent, if not overly original neo-romanticist and neosymbolist lyrical poetry. Its main interest here lies in the fact that, presented together, Paju's poetry written over many years shows him to have a true aptitude for lyrical perception and expression, an attentive eye for suggestive detail and a good command of the resources of his language and familiar poetic traditions. These qualities alone may suffice as a promise of a great lyrical talent, but not of a storyteller. However, it was the former road that Paju did not take, and the latter that he ended up pursuing with obvious enthusiasm and considerable popularity.

My one point of interest here is to see how this lyrical talent, undeveloped on its own, is displayed in his stories, how it complements or perhaps impedes his narrative art, and more specifically his evolution as a crime fiction writer. Two other points of interest regarding this evolution are Paju's historical originality as an Estonian crime

fiction author, and his gradual shift from one set of generic conventions to another, from puzzle mystery, or from *roman à énigme* to *roman noir*, to borrow terms from Tzvetan Todorov⁷ that apply well in this case.

As Paju himself has mentioned several times in his brief accompanying notes to his novels, genre literature, including crime fiction, was a severely underdeveloped, almost absent phenomenon in Estonian literature until the end of the twentieth century. When Paju turned to writing adventure and crime fiction at the end of the 1980s, he could consider himself something of a pioneer in the field, and a lot more original in this literary endeavour than he had been in his earlier aspirations.

The quantitative and qualitative lack of original production has had no negative impact on the popularity of crime fiction in Estonia, but it means that the readers have historically depended mostly on translated literature to fulfil their needs. The earliest attempts at original crime fiction go back as far as the nineteenth century, they continued between the two World Wars and occasionally in Soviet Estonia and in the work of writers in exile. However, the attempts were relatively rare, and almost always fell short of originality and literary accomplishment. Undoubtedly, this was partly due to the genre's relatively low prestige within the literary field and to further discouragement brought by ideologically motivated restrictions during the Soviet occupation. These tendencies are outlined by Harald Peep, an eminent twentieth-century literary scholar, whose last book, *Kolm laipa, kõik surnud ehk Kriminaalne kirjandusmaastik* ('Three Corpses, All Dead, or The Criminal Literary Landscape', 1996), is a compact monograph on Western crime

fiction, with a chapter on the history and current state of Estonian crime fiction⁸.

Peep's monograph was published after Paju's first detective stories had already become available for him to include in his corpus of study. He recognises Paju's talent, but points out several weaknesses in *Haapsalu detektiiv* from the point of view of the intended genre:

There are plenty of signs of the author's good promise. But there are also the characteristic faults of our homegrown crime fiction, which will probably always haunt our production of that type: drops in narrative tension due to nothing else than lax composition, purposeless articulation of the text (overlong paragraphs, extended narration and description at the expense of dialogue), [...], also to the author's unnecessary personal interventions in the narrative [...]. For a short text, there may be too many well-developed drinking episodes, while some important clues are passed over too fast. However, we can read this story with excitement [...]⁹

The problems that Peep sees as characteristic of Estonian original crime fiction largely result from the weakness of narrative technique and plotting. He also briefly brings up the issue of successfully uniting generic conventions and content, pointing out that crime has been a masterfully treated side-theme in a number of accomplished, even iconic Estonian novels, but attempts to make it a central theme or to focus on the investigation have remained amateurish.¹⁰

This weakness often stems from the authors having overlooked an essential characteristic of the genre since its emergence in the nineteenth century and throughout its later development. Crime fiction was born and has continued to evolve as a response to social tensions and change. The pathos, decor and generic conventions have varied a lot over time, so that at some periods and in some subgenres the sensibility to social realities has been less obvious than others. However, crime fiction always reflects the society it originates from. It can be a tacit affirmation of contemporary social norms and concerns. As Dennis Porter points out, “detective novels invariably project the image of a given social order and the implied value system that helps sustain it”¹¹, “detective fiction owes its longevity to its power of grafting contemporary fears on to an endlessly repeated formula, it brings into focus the continuity of a social *vraisemblable* as well as the persistence of touchstones for both heroic and villainous behavior”¹². Crime fiction can also take a subversive or sociocritical stance. “Even before the *roman noir* of the mid-twentieth century took on the mission of exposing social injustice, detective fiction called various social institutions into question while gaining a foothold as an apparently normative popular genre.”¹³ The realist and sociocritical tendencies that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century shaped, and were in turn shaped by various subgenres, such as the increasingly popular police procedural in the Anglo-American space¹⁴, or the French *roman noir*. A very strong tradition of sociocritical crime fiction arose in Sweden¹⁵. These generic variations of a similar thematical and ethical tendency represent the same kind

of dynamic that Porter discusses in terms of characters. “[H]eroes do not appear to be such at all times and places. On the contrary, heroes often do not travel well and find themselves in need of updating every generation or so,”¹⁶ he reflects, but also observes:

This does not mean that one national reading public is necessarily excluded from enjoying popular works produced by a different national culture. On the contrary, the worldwide success of many of the authors [...] suggests that the truly popular writers in the genre know no frontiers in spite of an apparent identification of their works with a single national culture.¹⁷

The underlying social relevance means that crime fiction doesn't travel as easily as many Estonian authors have expected when borrowing character types, situations and settings, motives for action and communication patterns for character interaction along with narrative techniques from popular foreign crime fiction writers. One of the likely reasons for Paju's success is that he didn't expect borrowed models to work in a superficially local disguise. His heroes, villains and their issues are authentically rooted in his own social environment. He really searched for protagonists and conflicts that would matter in his time and place. The title of his first crime novel, *Haapsalu detektiiv* ('The Haapsalu Detective', 1991) thus reads almost as a sort of manifesto, carried out in the following *Surm Hundikaril* ('Death at the Hundikari Isle', 1993), *Lasud kodutänaval* ('Gunshots Near Home', 1995), *Kadunud viiuldaja* ('The Vanished Violinist', 2001)

and *Mudasegaja armuke* ('The Mud-Mixer's Mistress', 2003, the title a reference to one of Haapsalu's main tourist attractions, medicinal mud). Since his crime stories appealed to the Finnish reading public as well as to his target audience in Estonia, Paju clearly had something substantial to offer to the genre besides being its sole serious practitioner in the Estonian literature at the time.¹⁸

2. Environments, Characters, Relationships

Paju's significant contribution to Estonian crime fiction was that he had a good sense of sociocultural relevance. He is clearly motivated by and attentive to what can happen to people in his contemporary social environment, how this environment shapes lives and minds, relationships and situations. This sensibility is completed by actual knowledge and insight. As his literary career developed over a period of major sociopolitical, economic and cultural upheaval in Estonia, the setting of his stories and the fate of his characters constitutes an interesting portrayal of the tumultuous times from the end of the crumbling Soviet empire to the early years of regained political independence.

In *Haapsalu detektiiv*, a lot of attention is paid to the alcoholism that plagued the society in the oppressive environment of the Soviet regime where opportunities for a healthier outlet in the form of a fulfilling career or even leisure were restricted for a variety of ideological reasons and additionally limited in small towns and rural areas. The rather unsophisticated, but pervasive drinking culture (with origins going further back than Soviet occupation) serves as

the setting for both the crimes and the investigation in the story. A man dies, apparently of excessive drinking, after a party, an ex-cop with drinking issues looks into the matter, disappears, and his body is found several months later. Superintendent¹⁹ Toivo Kivistik needs to build a case mostly on the testimonies of the initial victim's drinking companions, whose drunken recollections of the events were hazy to begin with and have faded over the months that it has taken to determine if there ever was foul play or simply too much drink behind each suspicious event.

Small-scale socioeconomical powerplays that were very characteristic of the Soviet period also feature in both early Superintendent Kivistik stories. In *Haapsalu detektiiv*, the first murder victim is a store manager, a very prestigious position in an economy dominated by constant shortage of consumer goods. During the investigation, Kivistik finds out that the victim had been in the habit of abusing his position by extracting sexual favours from young women in exchange for goods publicly not available at the store. In *Surm Hundikaril*, the investigator discovers a similar dynamic within a different network of motives and relations. That story is mostly set in a closed psychiatric clinic situated on a small fictional island off the Estonian west coast. It is a coveted institution, where patients or inmates enjoy better care and living conditions than in most other places. The chief physician, who is an art collector with tastes beyond his means, is rumoured to grant acceptance to his clinic in exchange for valuable paintings. This discovery links the investigation of deaths at Hundikari to an art theft at a mainland church, and later leads to a political sideline, as the corrupted

doctor escapes to Sweden, then Norway, and the already complex intrigue is confused even further by politically motivated delusions and actions of some patients.

The two examples show how social issues serve mainly as a device for delaying the solution. The actual crimes in the two stories are of a more personal or individually motivated nature. In the first one, the store manager with predatory sexual behaviour is murdered by his wife, pushed equally by anger and mental illness. In the second one a seemingly wheelchair-bound patient turns out to have been the mastermind behind numerous art thefts and the perpetrator or initiator of the murders of his accomplices and potential witnesses – a rather universal greed-motivated foundation for a mystery plot, although thematically linked to the head physician's schemes. Paju uses his keen eye for the environment and mentalities for creating distractions both for his investigators and his readers. The crimes themselves remain rather sketchy, the right solution at the end of the puzzle much less original, credible or emotionally captivating than the false explanations along the way.

Lasud kodutänaval brings a decisive shift in procedure and perspective. From there on, Paju does indeed build his stories on problematic or controversial social realities characteristic of this particular period. His depiction of these realities remains relatively understated and metonymical rather than didactically overdeveloped. Characters, their backgrounds and actions represent widespread and structural issues that are easily recognisable for contemporary readers and may paint for others a suggestive picture of the situation and atmosphere at the turn of the century. Paju

picks a general phenomenon, works it into the makeup of individual characters and their actions, and explores the ways for these actions to lead to criminal activity or suspicious deaths.

In *Lasud kodutänaval* two Finnish charity workers are visiting the town, delivering humanitarian aid, and one of them is unexpectedly found dead at the seashore. An important witness in the investigation is a notoriously promiscuous young woman. She is in a sort of commuting relationship with a Kazakh racketeer from the capital Tallinn, who had initially sought to take control of the emerging small-town sex trade, but then developed a personal relationship with the woman. Having accidentally learned from her about the Finns being in town carrying a lot of cash for their mission, he insists the woman set them up for robbery. The death of the man he robs of the cash is actually accidental – his attack upon the victim isn't fatal, although contributes to the confusion of the already drunken man who stumbles into the sea and drowns on his way back to his hotel. The opening of an investigation into his death, however, alarms other unrelated criminals in Finland, whose much larger operation is connected to a drug theft that had taken place in Haapsalu a while ago and remained unsolved. An impostor posing as a Finnish police detective arrives in town and shoots the Kazakh's girlfriend whom he believes to be a threatening witness in the drug case, while the Kazakh tries to shoot an elderly next-door neighbour whom he believes to be a threatening witness in the robbery case. Both women survive, the perpetrators are arrested, but the fake Finnish policeman later escapes from custody. All in all, the story is based

on a series of more or less unfortunate coincidences, as various agents in the early post-Soviet socioeconomical field go about their business in their unscrupulous, but also rather incompetent ways ranging from self-serving abuse of charity networks to all-out criminal opportunism.

In *Kadunud viiuldaja*, there are two separate storylines. One of them focuses on a group of homeless characters living in an abandoned house. This storyline is set in the context of property reform that took place in the early days of restored independence of Estonia: companies and real estate expropriated and nationalised by the Soviet regime were returned to the original owners or their heirs. While the intended goal of serving some sort of historical justice and quick-starting an economy relying on private ownership and enterprise was achieved to a reasonable degree, the process inevitably caused a lot of confusion or deterioration in the status, living situation and economic well-being of many people whose home, land or workplace suddenly changed ownership. The owners were also not necessarily prepared, or even present, for the management of their newly restored properties. *Kadunud viiuldaja* touches upon that problematic explicitly, as the characters depending on abandoned houses for shelter try to keep up with the rather volatile situation that works in their favour at times and against them at other times. *Mudasegaja armuke* depicts a similar group of characters and their living situation, also related to the difficulties of dealing with the management and upkeep of real estate – a task that had suddenly been set upon a much larger part of the population than during the Soviet period when private ownership was discouraged and

existed on a rather small scale. Lacking both previously acquired socioeconomical competence and material means, many turn-of-century new real estate owners struggled considerably with their new responsibilities. Conflicts and paradoxical situations resulting from that background have found their way into several Paju's stories.

Mudasegaja armuke, Paju's last work, draws on a number of other phenomena that emerged in the post-Soviet social and economic environment, such as the creatively opportunistic and occasionally cutthroat ways of doing business, or the eagerness to use the newfound freedom in journalism to propagate tabloid mentality and production. Paju's storytelling continues to mature in this last novel in terms of simplicity and authenticity. A small-town businessman, who has made his fortune in the early days and questionable ways of the Estonian political independence and restored capitalist economy, is found murdered in front of the apartment building where his mistress lives. As it turns out, the mistress shot him, essentially in self-defense, after a long abusive relationship. The abuse had gotten particularly bad and her situation dire after a drunken driving accident where she killed a cyclist, but had it covered up by her lover who pretended to have been at the wheel, manipulated a blood test and used his influence to have the case dismissed. A number of false leads that delay the investigators' understanding of this sequence of events emerge from a network of business conflicts, neighbours' grudges and family tensions. Essentially, the story is similar to *Lasud kodutänaval* in terms of lack of a strong, coherent agenda behind the events. The circumstances that

lead to crimes are more mundane, as most of the protagonists belong to an outwardly respectable middle class and are all part of the same small-town community.

In that respect, Paju has also matured since his first detective novel where he already refrained from bringing in out-of-town characters or motives rooted in characters' activities elsewhere. In his last novels he achieves a remarkably better depiction of the dynamic of secrecy and mystery in a small community than he did at his first attempt. It could be argued that the success of authentic detective fiction in certain sociocultural environments strongly depends on the understanding of this dynamic, and that the longtime weakness of Estonian detective fiction comes from using borrowed, culturally unconvincing patterns of communication on the character level, which results in unconvincing delaying mechanisms on the narrative level. Dalia Satkauskytė has observed the same issue in the Lithuanian literature: the attempts at authentic detective fiction not finding credible sources of conflict between essence and appearances of characters and circumstances in order to achieve enough secrecy and intrigue in the plot.²⁰

In *Haapsalu detektiiv*, Paju took the easy way out, motivating the crime by a character's well-concealed madness, which is revealed at the end in a rather *deus-ex-machina* manner. In later works, when he sets the events within a small community, he takes on the harder task of finding believable reasons why misunderstandings and mysteries may arise from an environment where everybody knows everybody and anything extraordinary rarely happens. At the beginning of *Mudasegaja armuke*, he sets the scene for the main case as follows:

According to statistics, one fight or traffic accident with grave consequences per year takes place in Haapsalu, sometimes only every two years. The more horrible crimes were perpetrated out of town. Since the constable's watchful gaze didn't cover the whole sparsely populated region of Läänemaa, quite a few thugs developed a feeling of impunity, and then most usually the victims of choice were a lone elderly couple living at a farm in the woods or at the coast. The kind that had lived there all their lives and had no intention of moving away to town despite their children's urging. Such elderly couples had regular income, and whoever went after their pension money was, for some reason, – and quite correctly –, convinced that there were also some funeral funds stashed away somewhere in the linen cupboard. Once a year, or again every two years, such a visit ended in tragedy, but generally Superintendent Kivistik of the criminal police had caught all the bad guys and brought them to justice.²¹

Routine dealing with petty crime and sordid mindless violence is often used as the initial setting in detective fiction and police procedurals, as a contrast for the exceptional case and challenging investigation that follows. In his novels, Paju progressed towards decreasing contrast between the realistic background and the case that is the focus of his story. He already had a suitable hero for that in Superintendent Kivistik. Although the first two Kivistik stories relied to some degree on the exceptional and sensational, Kivistik

himself was a happily unsensational character from the get-go. In the first novel he appears as a middle-aged bachelor well set in his ways, who leads a simple small-town life quite contentedly, except for some discreet wistful dreaming of the affections of the barmaid Varje, whom he later marries. His family life and inner thoughts get a fair share of attention in all novels, but remain constantly undramatic. Kivistik is a decent, undemanding middle-aged man who appreciates the quiet life, family time, good food, an occasional moderate drink. He also appreciates pretty women, but never forgets his commitments and priorities in tempting situations, just as he never goes rogue in his investigative work. Even with the improvised or private investigative tasks he occasionally undertakes he carefully finds a way to get things done without unduly upsetting the peace and balance in his life. Portrayed with a sympathetic humour rather than idealisation, he is the ultimate average no-nonsense guy. This incidentally explains at least to some degree Paju's success in Finland. Finnish crime fiction has been described as having a penchant for the everyday, ordinary, businesslike and family-centred qualities²², and the Finnish audience as appreciative of literature open to easy identification on the basis of familiar, everyday experiences.²³ Paju has considerable talent for that, he can provide the reading pleasure that comes from recognising something essential in familiar realities, but also in familiar wishful thinking and archetypal dreams. Arguably, a poet's sensitive attention and gift for suggestive detail and expression strongly support this capacity. Combined with a journalist's critical eye and solid knowledge, Paju had rich resources for

creating compelling fiction focusing on characters' action and interaction in various environments and circumstances.

3. From Curiosity to Suspense

Paju's fiction showcases the compatibility of such talent with the type of crime fiction that Tzvetan Todorov terms as suspense, and lesser compatibility with the other type that operates on curiosity. Todorov attributes these reader-response effects to two different fundamental narrative structures of crime fiction. The one that provokes curiosity begins with a mystery, an effect produced by an unknown cause, and the story is twofold: the "present, but insignificant" story of solving the mystery and the "absent, but real" story that initially led to the mystery. The other structure, provoking suspense, tells a single story of certain circumstances evolving in unexpected ways, the causes are revealed from the start, but their effects are initially unknown.²⁴ One fascinating aspect of Paju's work is his enthusiastic experimentation with genres and narrative models. On one hand, it is evident from his efforts how much he wanted to make the puzzle mystery model work. On the other hand, it is also apparent that he progressively realised that the suspense model worked better for him, with the kind of material he preferred and the type of talent he had.

Haapsalu detektiiv and its sequel *Surm Hundikaril* are designed as closed-room murder mysteries, a subgenre that requires a particular mastery of the twofold storytelling. On their own, they might just show some beginner's weaknesses in plotting. In the context of Paju's other novels, including those belonging to entirely other

genres, they seem to show something more interesting. Paju could plot reasonably well even at the early stages of his career, but he was much better at plotting several storylines in suspense fiction than the balance between the “present” and the “absent” story in a puzzle mystery. The two early attempts at the classical puzzle almost look as though he never had, or quickly lost, interest in the absent story of the crime, while he tells with great gusto the story of Kivistik’s life and work and describes his interactions with colleagues, witnesses and suspects, and sometimes changes vantage points in order to look into minds and lives of other characters.

In later Superintendent Kivistik stories, Paju continues to explore the possibilities of this type of narrative. In *Lasud kodutänaväl*, the investigator’s vantage point and therefore the twofold, from-effect-to-cause structure is still in use, but the fact that the “absent” story is still rather weakly developed is somewhat legitimised by the nature of its content. As explained above, the mystery here is largely a result of various accidents and coincidences, misunderstandings and mix-ups. It doesn’t make it a technically strong solution story for a mystery novel, but it’s more lifelike and relatable than the earliest ones.

Kadunud viiuldaja is a particularly interesting step in the series of Paju’s experiments with generic conventions. Not only has the novel two separate, completely unrelated storylines, but one of them is structured as a mystery, the other as suspense. The eponymous story constructed as effect-to-cause investigation revolves around the life of a musician, who has disappeared a number of years ago and whose daughter, grown to young adulthood, asks the help

of Kivistik to find out more about her father’s fate. Kivistik agrees to investigate in a private capacity, while he’s involved also in the events of the other storyline in his official capacity. The latter line is narrated mostly from the point of view of its protagonists: a group of unemployed alcoholics living in an abandoned house. The story is set during a period where their daily pursuits take a turn towards criminal, starting from vandalism, progressing to planning and executing a robbery and ending in manslaughter, as one of them is killed in a drunken quarrel between them. This narrative is not focused on the investigators, it moves between various characters’ vantage points, although these do include Kivistik’s and his colleagues’ in some brief procedural sequences that lead to discovering evidence and arresting the killers.

While this storyline could be characterised as all-out *roman noir*, the search for the vanished violinist masquerades as a *roman à énigme*. It has the basic structural characteristics: an unexplained situation, a character facing this situation seeks the help of an investigator, who eventually finds out the truth of what has happened, and there even is a rather elegant bit of investigative work, as Kivistik imagines and then tries out a scenario for disappearing at the Helsinki ferry terminal. But essentially it is a story about lives and relationships, both past and present, as the reminiscences of the violinist’s ex-wives alternate with scenes from his daughter’s present life. If in the earliest Kivistik novels Paju got carried away telling about the investigator’s life and forgot a bit about the mystery, here he gets carried away telling about the women characters who had been close to the missing musician. The investigator

remains much in the background, but so does the mystery. As the story progresses, the violinist's fate moves further away from the focus of interest, and when the man is eventually found, alive and well, it turns out there wasn't much to the absent story of his disappearance in the first place. He just disappeared – got bored with his life and relationships in Estonia, boarded a Stockholm-bound ferry in Helsinki instead of the one he was expected to return home on, and went on to make himself a new life with a new woman in Ecuador.

As mysteries progressively dissolve from Paju's novels instead of getting solved, a new motive appears. Superintendent Kivistik tends to reveal increasingly anticlimatic explanations behind extraordinary events and show that the absent story is well and truly absent, even if the author's chosen generic conventions make us expect one. However, other characters emerge who try to push narratives that would provide the unexplained events with coherent and remarkable causes. In *Kadunud viiuldaja*, the elusive musician himself presents several sensational tales to justify his sudden departure from his former life, when his daughter and Kivistik visit him in Ecuador. Kivistik unrelentingly refuses to accept these explanations and pressures the man to admit that he really doesn't have sufficient material for a dramatic story about his disappearance. In *Mudasegaja armuke*, a young ambitious newspaperwoman publishes a series of speculations about who and why murdered the Haapsalu businessman. Besides being a testament of poor professional ethics, these publications cause a number of reactions that escalate violence and create distractions, so that Kivistik understandably

discourages this practice. This whole sideline is presented almost as a caricature, discrediting the twofold narrative structure in a rather curious way, from the inside. Paju never abandoned this generic convention, but it appears that instead of insisting on making it work began to playfully explore the ways how and reasons why it didn't work for him.

The closest he came to succeeding with the twofold narrative structure was in the novel *Sammud minevikust* ('Footsteps from the Past'), which isn't a part of Superintendent Kivistik series, and is quite different in tone and theme. In this novel, events set in contemporary era stem from Stalinist terror: deportation, expropriation, abuse of power by the Soviet officials, families and relationships maimed by violence, fear and mistrust. The consequences of that past lead to a murder in the present, committed by a former Soviet agent, who first disguises it as a suicide, then successfully frames an innocent person for it, escapes prosecution himself, but is then murdered by two corrupt Russian border policemen who set out to rob him, as he's on his way to Russia. In most ways, this novel could pass for the purest *roman noir* in Paju's work, but does also fruitfully employ the device of telling a story full of questions, which leads to a story of answers, originally delayed by time and trauma that prevent the protagonist who seeks them from remembering them and understanding their relevance all at once. Here, Paju's novel mirrors a much wider tendency of crime fiction serving as a means of revisiting traumatic history. Claire Gorrara has pointed that out in connection with Holocaust themes: „[C]rime fiction offers the writer and reader a highly codified format

in which to remember the past. By means of its formal structures, its narrative perspective and thematic preoccupations, crime fiction mediates historical memories in ways that give rise to morally and politically charged interpretations.”²⁵

There is indeed a serious, morally and politically engaged side to Juhan Paju's work. There is also great playfulness, both in form and in attitude. Without that, he would doubtlessly have been unable to launch himself in a literary career in a field he knew to be underdeveloped and underappreciated. However, since he experimented with a variety of genres, these epithets apply for parts of his work more acutely than for others. The novels that won him recognition from the literary establishment belong to fantasy and science-fiction or alternative and realistic historical fiction. The latter is quite universally perceived as more prestigious than genre fiction, and in the mid-1990s Paju tried his hand at this as well. In 1996, he won a minor prize at the novel contest for *Katkenud romaan* ('An Interrupted Story'), a speculative fiction about a major shipwreck at the Baltic Sea where a cruise ship perishes because corrupt businessmen, military officers and politicians from Russia, Estonia and Sweden want to cover up a smuggling operation. In 1998, he won fourth place for the first two parts of *Vanaema mõis* ('Grandmother's Manor'), later completed by a second volume adding the third part, which is a realist novel about the war years and their consequences for a number of characters whose lives take very different paths. Not only do these novels belong to traditionally recognised genres, they also evoke traumatic events of great sociocultural impact.

The recognition began, however, with a mix of fantasy and science fiction he presented in *Hiromandi kokteil*, and continued with *Hõõguv rist* ('The Glowing Cross'), which also won a minor prize at a contest. The subtitle, *A Romance with One Dead Body and a Vampire*, gives an idea of the mixture of genres, although it's far from giving the whole picture. A humoristic cross between horror and science fiction, the novel is set in Haapsalu, like his detective stories. It also features Superintendent Kivistik as a minor character. Here, he deals matter-of-factly with an alien stuck in Haapsalu, waiting for her ride away from Earth. Paju has written also fantasy fiction that fits into clearer generic frames, but *Hõõguv rist* is the boldest example of his playful nature and his willingness to blur the lines between genres and conventions, fiction and reality. This tendency discreetly runs even through books where it may not be obvious to all readers. He uses unmistakable names of real persons for his fictional characters, he insists on the fictionality of a story of perfectly realist premise, but claims authenticity for evident fantasy. His favourable reception was undoubtedly boosted by the fact that the local literary tradition was much more open to this type of creativity. Although fantasy and science fiction had also fallen from grace in early Soviet years, this type of fiction has much stronger roots and a longer authentic tradition in Estonia than detective stories. In his monograph about Estonian fantastic fiction, Andrus Org observes that Estonian writers took interest in this kind of production already in the 1960s²⁶, the genre progressed steadily from there on and began establishing its own institutions (specialised journals, Estonian

Science Fiction Association, awards etc.) since mid-1990s²⁷. A similar, if not more powerful, emancipation and growth of prestige befell crime fiction in Sweden²⁸, along with prolific production, which did not occur in Estonia. Paju's creative diversity gained him well-deserved recognition in the more established genres that he practiced, but his detective stories held a more marginal status. This is reflected also in publication. Awards that he won at contests led to some of his works to be published by mainstream publishers. His first Superintendent Kivistik stories were self-published. Later, in mid-1990s some of his books were included in popular crime fiction series, as he gained recognition among the amateurs of the genre, but remained thereby associated with the relatively low prestige of the genre itself.

More importantly, he didn't have the advantage of a preceding tradition or peer-support in local crime fiction that was available for fantasy and science fiction. Perhaps the most outstanding thing about Paju is that he wasn't, or didn't have time to become, the most accomplished of crime writers, but he was an impressive one-man laboratory for a genre practically unexplored in his homeland, and he

single-handedly made huge progress towards establishing a new, culturally specific, yet in some ways universally relatable tradition in crime fiction. Where this progress might have led, had he had more time to pursue it, would be pointless speculation, but he obviously intended that it should continue. His last novel, and Kivistik's last case seemingly ends with all characters returning to their everyday tasks and concerns, in Kivistik's case a few months of peaceful paperwork and harvesting potatoes at his summer place at the country. And then, in the final paragraph, it actually ends with a promise that, unfortunately unfulfilled by the author, reads as an invitation and challenge for others to pursue matters further:

It was only at the end of October, on a Sunday, when he got a phone call in Nõva. The superintendent didn't like to be disturbed on weekends, but it was the prefect himself and besides, he didn't have much to say. A pastor had apparently been missing for several days, the prefect himself needed to travel to the capital the next day, so maybe Kivistik could look into the matter, if he happened to have some time.²⁹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aho, Merja, "Juhan Paju – Haapsalun saunamurhat", in <https://www.tuglas.fi/haapsalun-saunamurhat>, 2010, last accessed: 8 August 2022.
- Gorrara, Claire, "Reflections on Crime and Punishment: Memories of the Holocaust in Recent French Crime Fiction", in *Yale French Studies*, no. 108, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 131-145, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4149303>.
- Goulet, Andrea, Lee, Susanna, "Editor's Preface: Crime Fictions", in *Yale French Studies*, no. 108, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4149293>.
- Knight, Stephen, *Crime Fiction since 1800. Detection, Death, Diversity*, 2nd edition, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

- Nestingén, Andrew, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia. Fiction, Film and Social Change*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press / Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008.
- Org, Andrus, *Eesti ulmekirjanduse žanrid ja nende poeetika*, Tartu, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2017.
- Paju, Juhan, *Haapsalu detektiiv*, Vormsi, Nastiku Kirjastustalu, 1990.
- , *Kagu-passaat*, Haapsalu, Velle, 1991.
- , *Hiromandi kokteil*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1991.
- , *Surm Hundikaril*, Haapsalu, Lääne Elu, 1993.
- , “Lasud kodutänaval”, in Juhan Paju, *Lasud kodutänaval*, Tallinn, Kupar, 1995, p. 5-159.
- , “Sammud minevikust”, in Juhan Paju, *Lasud kodutänaval*, Tallinn, Kupar, 1995, p. 203-304.
- , *Hõõguv rist*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1997.
- , *Katkenud romaan*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1997.
- , *Vanaema mõis*, Tallinn, Varrak, 1999.
- , *Vanaema mõis: III osa*, Tallinn, Varrak, 2000.
- , *Kadunud viiuldaja*, Tallinn, Vastus, 2001.
- , *Kuuvolge õhtulaul*, Haapsalu, Anamnesia, 2001.
- , *Mudasegaja armuke*, Tallinn, Ersen, 2003.
- Pilter, Lauri, “Juhan Paju”, in Jüri Talvet, Arne Merilai, Sven-Hannes Vabar (eds.), *Estonian Writers Online Dictionary*, <https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/p/paju>, last accessed: 8 August 2022.
- Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime. Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1981.
- Ruuhonen, Voitto, *Kadum varjoisalla puolella. Rikoskirjallisuuden ja yhteiskuntatutkimuksen dialoogeja*, Helsinki, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008.
- Satkauskytė, Dalia, “The Model of Society in Contemporary Lithuanian Crime Fiction”, talk given in the panel “Scandinavian and Baltic Crime Fiction: Baltic Societies”, AABS-SASS Baltic-Scandinavian Studies Conference, New Haven, Yale University, March 14, 2014.
- Todorov, Tzvetan, “Typologie du roman policier”, in Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, Kindle Edition, 2014.

NOTES

1. This study was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1106, and by the European Union European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies).
2. Juhan Paju, *Hiromandi kokteil*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1991, back cover. Quotes and book titles translated by me, K.T.
3. Juhan Paju, *Kagu-passaat*, Haapsalu, Velle, 1991, inside front cover.
4. Lauri Pilter, “Juhan Paju”, in Jüri Talvet, Arne Merilai, Sven-Hannes Vabar (eds.), *Estonian Writers Online Dictionary*, <https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/p/paju>. Besides that brief bio-note provided by the *Estonian Writers Online Dictionary* edited at the University of Tartu, little solid information on Paju is available online, some of it provided by Finnish critics, further confirming Paju’s popularity in Finland (see Merja Aho, “Juhan Paju – Haapsalun saunamurhat”, in <https://www.tuglas.fi/haapsalun-saunamurhat>, 2010). A number of reviews, posts in readers’ blogs and the occasional commemorative note in regional newspapers or on social media shows the continued presence of an appreciative audience Estonia. No scholarly research specifically into his work has been undertaken so far, but it has been studied in the context of Estonian genre fiction, notably by Harald Peep and Andrus Org.
5. Juhan Paju, *Kuuvolge õhtulaul*, Haapsalu, Anamnesia, 2001, publisher’s annotation, p. 4.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 69.
7. Tzvetan Todorov, “Typologie du roman policier”, in Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, Kindle, 2014 [first edition 1971].

8. Harald Peep, *Kolm laipa, kõik surnud ehk kriminaalne kirjandusmaastik*, Tartu, Ilmamaa, p. 126-148.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 144, my translation.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 136, 141.
11. Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime. Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1981, p. 121.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 127.
13. Andrea Goulet, Susanna Lee, "Editor's Preface: Crime Fictions", in *Yale French Studies*, no. 108, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 4.
14. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800. Detection, Death, Diversity*, 2nd edition, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 136, 161.
15. Voitto Ruuhonen, *Kadun varjoisalla puolella. Rikoskirjallisuuden ja yhteiskuntatutkimuksen dialogeja*, Helsinki, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008, p. 159.
16. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 217.
18. When Harald Peep reviewed the situation in the 1990s, Paju stood out both with his clear intent to practice the genre and with the decent quality of his production. When I reviewed the situation in 2013, in preparation for the talk that I gave at the Yale Conference on Baltic and Scandinavian Studies in the panel "Scandinavian and Baltic Crime Fiction: Baltic Societies" (March 14, 2014), it was obvious that it was in the process of changing, with a number of dedicated authors appearing both in literature and television, but quality-wise still very few matched Paju, except for some rather specific subgenres like historic crime fiction (represented by Indrek Hargla) and children's crime fiction (represented for example by Mika Keränen and Ilmar Tomusk). Since then, the genre has considerably evolved and prospered, but these recent developments will have to be mapped in a future study.
19. The rank I have attributed to him serves mostly to situate him among other fictional police detectives known to the international audience. *Superintendent* is the English equivalent for the rank of *komissar* in the Estonian Police today. When the character of Kivistik first appeared in two stories set before 1991, he held the rank of major in the Soviet police (*miilits*) and in later stories, set in the independent Republic of Estonia, he appears as a *komissar* in the initial hierarchy of the Estonian police. As the transition from one system to another has not been thematized in the books in any way and his status and responsibilities are similar in all stories, I refer to him always as Superintendent.
20. Dalia Satkauskytė, "The Model of Society in Contemporary Lithuanian Crime Fiction", talk given in the panel "Scandinavian and Baltic Crime Fiction: Baltic Societies", AABS-SASS Baltic-Scandinavian Studies Conference, New Haven, Yale University, March 14, 2014.
21. Juhan Paju, *Mudasegaja armuke*, Tallinn, Ersen, 2003, p. 6.
22. Ruuhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 175.
24. Todorov, *op. cit.*, 228-256.
25. Claire Gorrara, "Reflections on Crime and Punishment: Memories of the Holocaust in Recent French Crime Fiction", in *Yale French Studies*, no. 108, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 134.
26. Andrus Org, *Eesti ulmekirjanduse žanrid ja nende poeetika*, Tartu, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2017, p. 64.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 68.
28. Andrew Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia. Fiction, Film and Social Change*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press / Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008, p. 204-205.
29. Juhan Paju, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 173.