



The Iron Age

Arja Kajermo , Susanna Kajermo-Torner (Illustrator)

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Iron Age

Arja Kajermo , Susanna Kajermo-Torner (Illustrator)

The Iron Age Arja Kajermo , Susanna Kajermo-Torner (Illustrator)

I went up to the teacher and held out my hand and told her my name. She took a step back and tilted her head and looked at me without offering her hand. I pulled my hand back and hid it behind my back. She smiled the way grown ups smile at someone else's ugly baby and then she spoke. 'That is a strange name, we are not called names like that in Sweden.'

Arja Kajermo's debut *The Iron Age* is part coming-of-age novel, and part fairy-tale told from the perspective of a young girl growing up in the poverty of post-war Finland. On her family's austere farm, the Girl learns stories and fables of the world around her – of Miina, their sleeping neighbour; that you should never turn a witch away at the door; how people get depressed if pine trees grow too close to the house; and why her father was unlucky not to have died in the war.

Then, when she is little more than six years only, the family crosses from Finland to Sweden, from a familiar language to a strange one, from one unfriendly home to another. The Girl, mute but watchful, weaves a picture of her volatile father, resilient mother and strangely resourceful brothers.

The Iron Age, which grew out of the story shortlisted for the 2014 Davy Byrne's Award, is disarming in its unadorned simplicity and unsentimental account of hard times and hard people. In Kajermo's darkly funny debut, with illustrations throughout, folk tales and traditional custom clash with economic reality, from rural Finland to urban Sweden.

'This is a short tale, simply and richly told, which feels as though it's the culmination of a lifetime's work. An instant classic.' Jon McGregor

'Deceptively simple yet with cutting insight and devastating humor, *The Iron Age* proves that the most surreal dwells in reality, and history is the darkest fairytale' Yiyun Li

The Iron Age Details

Date : Published May 4th 2017 by Tramp Press

ISBN : 9780993459238

Author : Arja Kajermo , Susanna Kajermo-Torner (Illustrator)

Format : Paperback 128 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

 [Download The Iron Age ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Iron Age ...pdf](#)



Download and Read Free Online The Iron Age Arja Kajermo , Susanna Kajermo-Torner (Illustrator)

From Reader Review The Iron Age for online ebook

Jayne Catherine pinkett says

I was not expecting this short story of a childhood in Finland to be so impactful. Narrated from a child's perspective, it offers a humorous yet important account of her childhood living with a father who is still traumatised from war time memories. Beautifully illustrated too.

Rachel says

Set in the 1950s, The Iron Age follows the life of 'the Girl', the only daughter on a small farm in rural Finland. A beautiful mix of fairytales and coming-of-age style narration, it follows the protagonist on her journey from Finland to Sweden, with beautifully dark illustrations that accompany the story scattered throughout the novel.

I loved the style of writing in The Iron Age. Arja Kajermo gives you just enough detail to set the scene, but allows your own imagination to fill in the blanks as she paints a picture of post-war Finland and the more affluent Sweden. The Girl deals with the reality of her situations in interesting ways, at times adding in her own narrative to help her conquer difficult moments, and I found her silence often spoke volumes more than heavily detailed descriptions ever could. It fights the assumption that a novel must feel like it was written with a thesaurus in hand and dotted with weighty language in order to be considered 'literature'. On the surface, The Iron Age appears a simple tale but it is filled with clever insights into human action and the lens we view it through, that of 'the Girl', is likely more perceptive than that of an adult narrator.

I found myself laughing at times, though the book is quite dark, and enjoying the bleakness of Kajermo's humor. The illustrations, there are about twenty in the novel itself, complement the story and it is easy to linger on them, finding small details of the story hidden in their pencil edges. Normally, I dislike illustrations depicting the scenes or characters of the story I'm readings as I often find they clash with the image I have in my mind, but Susanna Kajermo Törner's drawings only add to Arja Kajermo's words. Part of me wonders are there illustrations that didn't make it into the finished work, and I'm already hoping that they'll make it into another of Kajermo's future books.

My only complaint is that the book wasn't long enough, as I could happily have read another 500 pages of Kajermo's world!

Liv J Hooper says

3.5??

Gumble's Yard says

RE-READ DUE TO ITS LONGLISTING FOR THE REPUBLIC OF CONSCIOUSNESS PRIZE

Tramp Press is a small Irish publisher which aims “to find, nurture and publish exceptional literary talent and ... is committed to finding only the best and most deserving books, by new and established writers”. Its greatest success has been Mike McCormack’s 2016 Goldsmith Prize winning *Solar Bones* (which was Booker longlisted on its subsequent publication by a UK publisher), and more recently Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking* has been shortlisted for the 2017 Goldsmith Prize, following on from her wonderful debut novel.

Arja Kajermo is a cartoonist (born in Finland, raised in Sweden, and living in Ireland. “The Iron Age”, her debut novel was based on notes for a graphic novel, and was then written as a short story which was a finalist for the 2014 Davy Byrnes Short Story Award (won by Sara Baume) before being developed into this short novel/novella.

The book is narrated by a girl, growing up in the first half of the book in rural poverty in Finland in the 1950, the youngest in a family of four – her father, injured in the defeat in the Continuation War of 1941-1944 and seemingly suffering from PTSD (“It’s the war” [her mother] said *father’s nerves are shot. It was from all the bad things he had seen and been through*) struggles to find employment to feed and clothe his family and ends up returning repeatedly to the family farm where he struggles with his widowed mother who owns it (*Grandmother was an angry woman. She was angry with father most days But most of all she was angry with Grandfather because he was dead*) and in an increasingly bitter marriage (*Father was always telling mother to shut up. He had married her for her good looks and plucky attitude. Then he set to trying his damndest to destroy both the looks and the attitude*).

Eventually he decides that his family (minus his oldest son, who he unsuccessfully plans to inherit the family farm on the death of his other relatives) should move to Sweden.

But we bought our war with us. The shrapnel that had gone into Father’s legs, in 1944 in the painful retreat when the war was lost, had somehow worked its way into his children. Each of us carried a shard of that iron in our hearts. We would never be at peace. Not in Sweden. Not anywhere.

The second half of the book chronicles the start of the family’s life in Sweden – which in many ways takes an even darker turn. The family struggle between Father’s insistence that they assimilate and yet that they also keep their proud martial Finnish identity amongst the peace loving socialist Swedes, further it is often their Father who draws the most attention to their foreignness (for example his Finnish dress making him look like a Nazi).

I felt that the family’s struggles to maintain this dual identity while also not drawing attention to themselves could serve as a metaphor for the difficult path of neutrality that Finland navigated after the World War.

They struggle even more with language

We were now what mother called ummikko. We were people who could only speak our own language and we could not understand the language around us. And the people around us could not understand us. It was a terrible fate to be ummikko. It was like being deaf and dumb mother said. Outside our own home we were like cows that could only stand and stare.

The narrator's reaction both to her father's continuing anger and the ummikko issue is a two fold withdrawal. She stops speaking altogether and draws into herself (*There was a strange safety net in not saying anything. It was like being very small inside a big bomb shelter and looking out through narrow slits that were my own eyes.*) and further escapes into the world of books (*I did not just read books. I lived the stories in the books*). In particular she escapes into the world of the Little Mermaid – identifying with the sacrifices that the Mermaid made to live with her prince (*If you leave your true home you have to give something up. I had traded in my tongue too but I had got nothing for it*) but ultimately rejecting the Mermaid's choice and instead fantasising that she stays underwater in a mer-Kingdom where the bitterness of her father, the choices and sacrifices her family have made, the long lasting effects of war, all play no part, and are replaced by calmness, peace and togetherness (*Under the water everyone can stay together and nobody has to go away*).

In a devastating ending to the book she opens her eyes during one such fantasy and realises *I had no tail*.

The book is atmospherically illustrated by the author's niece – Susanna Kajermo - in a series of atmospheric black and white pencil drawings.

The illustrator Susanna has commented that

I had heard several of the anecdotes in it, told in various ways, by my Dad when I grew up. I have always been interested in the way people tell or remember things my art often relates to childhood and storytelling Arja gave me some old photographs for inspiration, and I also had my Dad's, rather thin photo album to look at ... I tried to make illustrations that would work with the text but also as separate pictures that could somehow tell a story of their own ... I appreciate pictures that have both seriousness or a sort of darkness, combined with humour or absurdity in them. That is something I strive for in my art. Arja's novel has all of those components and so I had a really good time working with it

And this quote picks up many of the themes of the book: its concentration on storytelling and remembrance – family stories and legends, the war stories that the narrator's Father uses to draw on his lessons for life, the interpretation of dreams, constant reminiscing on those that fell in the Wars, Finnish folklore particularly around a witch like figure, the stories in which the narrator increasingly takes refuge; the illustrations which while clearly relating to the story often have a deeper dark fairy tale element (for example - a dinosaur skull buried under the roots of a tree, a ghost figure on a sled); the juxtaposition of the darkness of much of the life of the narrator with the absurd incidents that occur and the dry humour with which she relates them.

Overall this is a simple book but one with surprising depth.

My thanks to Tramp Press for a review copy.

Simon Fay says

A war veteran who suffers from PTSD is at the heart of The Iron Age. His daughter loses her childhood as a result.

I've often thought that the world is such a terrible place because of all the millions of soldiers who bring

their wars home with them. PTSD has only come to be recognised as a disorder in the past few decades. Even in a wealthy country a soldier will have a difficult time finding proper rehabilitation. The damage they experience can be violent, and it's passed along to their closest loved ones, who in turn must suffer the shellshock of living under the threat of a ticking time bomb.

The Iron Age doesn't take the broad view on this topic. Outside Finland, the wars that break the girl's father are mostly forgotten in the midst of greater conflicts, so relating it to history you're already familiar with is not a crutch most readers will have to lean on. However, the overall effect this has is that of making the problem a universal one – it doesn't matter what battlefield the soldier lost his marbles on because it could have been any of them.

The spartan prose with which Arja Kajermo tackles the subject matter allows for some scalpel-like precision in the tale. It's rare that you feel any sentimental feelings for the poverty that the girl and her family live in, but that doesn't mean it's a difficult read. In fact, if you ask anybody who enjoys this story what main attribute leaps off the page, I'm almost certain it would be the wicked sense of humour. Not one anecdote of impoverishment or domestic abuse goes by without a wry comment or brutal joke.

It might not be everybody's cup of tea, but if it's yours then I'm sure we'd get along.

Jaanaki says

This book is precious. This is a story of a little girl who grows up in poverty in postwar Finland. She lives with two brothers who are already hardened smokers at ages six and seven, a father who is suffering from PTSD after returning from a lost war with a shrapnel in his leg, a mother who has been silenced by a bitter marriage to an uncompromising man and a grandmother who hates her only son. The second half chronicles the family's migration to Sweden, a country which has never seen war in a hundred years and how will they ever understand the Finns?

Arja Kajermo is a cartoonist of Finnish origin who lives in Ireland and this is her debut novel. The writing is deceptively simple and yet packs powerful emotions in simple sentences. Sample this :

"Father was always telling mother to shut up. He had married her for her good looks and plucky attitude. Then he set to trying his damndest to destroy both the looks and the attitude".

The book talks about the trauma of being poor, of feeling alien in another country and the humiliations faced in trying to fit in, the power of language and the trauma of living with a damaged father. The girl becomes invincible towards the end and drowns in her world of imagination which offers her a shelter from the real world. Her mother tries to offer excuses for her husband's behavior:

"It's the war" [her mother] said father's nerves are shot. It was from all the bad things he had seen and been through".

This is a very powerful story told with reference to Finnish fables and myths, beautifully illustrated? (every image in the cover is significant to the story) and narrated in the simple and innocent voice of a young girl. Thanks to @trampress, independent publishers for bringing out a gem like this.

Paul Fulcher says

Re-read following its inclusion on the outstanding longlist for the 2017 Republic of Consciousness Prize for 'gorgeous prose and hardcore literary fiction' from small, independent presses.

Sweden, a country that has been at peace for well over a hundred years, where nobody knew anybody who had been in a war, where people looked prosperous and healthy, where people seemed at ease with themselves and the world. But we brought our war with us. The shrapnel that had gone into Father's legs in 1944 in the painful retreat when the war was lost, had somehow worked its way into his children. Each of us carried that shard of iron in our hearts.

We would never be at peace. Not in Sweden. Not anywhere.

Tramp Press is a small independent press from Ireland, whose "aim is to find, nurture and publish exceptional literary talent. Tramp Press is committed to finding only the best and most deserving books, by new and established writers."

They are perhaps best known for their 2016 Goldsmiths Prize winning *Solar Bones* and for the very strong candidate for the 2017 Prize, Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking*.

Baume herself first achieved prominence by winning the 2014 Davy Byrne's Short Story Award (Davy Byrnes Stories 2014), a quinquennial Irish prize, and also shortlisted for the prize was Arja Kajermo, born in Finland, bought up in Sweden and now living in Ireland, for her short-story *The Iron Age*, which she later developed into this novel.

The Iron Age is a tale of our unnamed narrator telling of her childhood (from age 4 when the novel starts) growing up on the family farm in Finland, and then later moving to and starting school in Sweden (she is c.6 when the novel ends).

It is a short novel – more a novella – and simply written: when the book arrived my primary-school age assumed it was for her and polished it off in less than an hour. And it is beautifully illustrated with cartoon-like sketches from Susanna Kajermo Törner (her niece). It begins:

It was Finland, it was the 1950s but on our farm it could have been the Iron Age. We had a horse to take us places, the dirt track allowed no cars near us. I was four and had never seen a car, but I had seen a picture of one. We had heard of electricity but we didn't have it. Time moved slowly then and things did not change much. The winters were colder and the summers were hotter.

One such hot day Grandmother took me with her to visit her niece Miina. My hair was plaited tight till it hurt. My eyes were pulled into slits. If I had dared I would have sobbed. The boots hurt too. They were hand-me-downs from my older brother, made for him by Mother's father, who was a shoemaker.

Grandmother moved uphill along the dirt road at a steady pace like a Russian tank. It was hard to keep up.

The dirt road was only wide enough for a horse and cart but the trees around it had been cut down to the width of a boulevard in Helsinki. Miina's husband Aleksis had cut the fir trees down when Miina had started crying, shortly after their wedding.

Word got around. When word gets around, help is on the way. at was the way it was in our parish. Married men came to give advice to Aleksis. They told him what all married men knew. Women get depressed if the pine trees grow too close to the house.

Which is accompanied by the first illustration:

The illustrator explained her approach in *The Irish Times*:

"I tried to make illustrations that would work together with the text but also as separate pictures that could somehow tell a story of their own. An example of this is the drawing of the girl and the grandmother walking to their sleepy neighbour Miina. I liked the absurd description of how all the pine trees had been chopped down to prevent depression, so I put in the tree stubs in my illustration. But I also added the underground view with the roots and the skull of a dinosaur. This is something that a child could be fantasising about while walking and it puts in an extra dimension to the illustration - something that isn't in the text."

(<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/bo...>)

The story consists in the same childrens' fable like tone, but as the story continues it takes on slightly darker hues and the apparent simplicity becomes more a young child's naive gloss on some troubling events.

The narrator's father is haunted, as is the whole country of Finland, by the bitter experience of defeat in the 1939-1940 Winter War and, after a brief 15 month interim peace, the 1941-44 Continuation War. Life in post-war Finland is tough, not least due to the need to make reparations to the Soviets, and her Father, counting the days until their Grandmother dies so he can inherit the modest family farm, takes out his frustration, via his belt, on the girl, her elder brothers and their mother.

The deadlock between Grandmother and Father remained. The anger festered in the air. When I was born three years later that angry air was my first breath. That air was so thick with rage that it hurt. I learnt to hold my breath, to take only small sips of bitter air. I learnt to hold my hands over my ears not to hear the rage. I learnt to close my eyes not to see the beatings. I learnt to hide behind Grandmother or the huge stone oven. Because both the stone oven and Grandmother stood firm against Father, rant and roar as he might.

Her Mother, trying to explain her Father's behaviour, can only justify him by relation to the greater devil: *Could I not see that we were better off with Father than the Russians.*

Eventually the Grandmother throws them out, and the girl's Father becomes an itinerant worker, first in Finland then in the more prosperous Sweden, leaving her mother to cope with the four children, including a new baby: *I began to miss Father because with him around we at least knew why Mother was crying.*

In the second half of the book the family, minus the eldest son who is sent to live on the family farm as the Father still holds hope that the inheritance may pass to him, moves to Sweden. There the language barrier - *like being deaf and dumb* - presents a strong barrier to communication, and the girl takes refuge in silence, even from her own family:

There was a strange safety in not saying anything. It was like being very small inside a very big bomb shelter and looking out through narrow slits that were my eyes. I realised I was safe inside, looking out at a very angry man.

And she instead takes her solace in books – including whatever is to hand:

In our first years in Sweden we had no books at home, apart from the Bible and later a phone book. I read the latter sometimes when I had run out of library books. I read the names and addresses and wondered what kinds of lives they led.

The novel ends with her fantasising that she is the Little Mermaid in Hans Christian Andersen, only to

resurface from her reverie to realise that nothing has changed.

Overall: beautifully written and illustrated, a quick but enjoyable read with arguably more depth than first appears.

Thanks to Tramp Press for the review copy.

Jackie Law says

The Iron Age, by Arja Kajermo (illustrated by Susanna Kajermo Törner), is a story of a childhood. It begins in 1950s Finland when the narrator is four years old. She lives on a small farm with her war damaged father, stoic mother, angry grandmother and two older brothers. Neighbouring farms are owned by wider family, some more well off than others but all reliant on the land. Properties are connected by dirt tracks and a lake. The log cabins lack running water and electricity. The people raise, grow or make the bulk of what they need. Life is hard, made moreso for the unnamed child by her father's volatility.

Of course, the child knows of no other way. She observes the behaviour of those around her, the anger and resentments the adults feel. Her language is simple yet conveys the tradition and attitudes under which they all live. Told with a dry, dark humour, day to day life passes and the seasons turn.

Money is tight so Father travels to distant towns after harvest has been gathered to find work. He returns with gifts and dreams for a future which he berates his country for failing to provide. This future he talks of appears a myth to the child, much like his stories from the past which he shares repeatedly with local visitors. She listens avidly but with a lack of understanding, shown to effect by her literal interpretations.

Eventually there is a row so bitter the family must move away. Father takes them to a distant town and then onwards to Sweden where everything changes. They do not speak the language, the child must attend school. Books become a solace, her voice a hindrance.

Mother strikes out for a degree of independence of which Father disapproves. His traditional attitudes are now as anachronistic as the clothes he chose to impress, viewed askance by the Swedish.

The child has little control over the detail of her existence yet she harbours her secrets, survives by living inside her head. The denouement felt sudden, perhaps because I didn't want the story to end.

Told in sparse, droll language this is a beautifully painted portrayal of the transience of time and place when young. The illustrations work perfectly with the text, adding an extra dimension. A fable like depiction of unbelonging that I recommend you read.

Alanna says

This heartbreaking novella was so complete in a way I didn't think 118 pages could be. The book begins with the brokenness and shallow materialism of a husband-wife relationship, then that wife to her son, then from that son to his wife. Ultimately, we reach a story of learned harsh fathering (heightened by WWII PTSD) seen through the eyes of a six year old narrator. A family that has never learned or been taught true

love and gentleness. A family that is pressured by a status-seeking father to lose their identity as Finnish immigrants in neutral Sweden. This is somehow billed as a dark comedy—but I see it as a perseverance story from the young narrator who maintains her imagination and vigor for learning and creating stories despite emotional and physical abuse and being told to always be less, do less, and say less.

Eric Anderson says

It's compelling how debut novelist Arja Kajermo handles the challenge of writing about a child's mostly bleak and bare external life in relation to her rich inner life. "The Iron Age" presents a coming of age tale about a girl growing up in post-war Finland, first on a rural farm without electricity or indoor plumbing and then in urban Sweden with its foreign language and more cosmopolitan ways. Since children have a natural tendency toward make-believe and dreaming it's tricky to negotiate the relationship between real life and the imagination within narrative. As a cartoonist by trade, Kajermo creatively manages this by showing her girl protagonist's accounts of early life heavily infused with local folklore and her family's mythology. Later when the girl discovers a love of reading she creatively fuses her experience with fairy tales and the stories she finds in books. This is all accompanied by sketches by Susanna Katermo Torner which reflect this fusion of fantasy and reality. It's a creative way of presenting a particular childhood not just as narrative, but as an immersive experience.

Read my full review of *The Iron Age* by Arja Kajermo on LonesomeReader

Barbara McEwen says

Oh my God! Simple and painful and beautiful. Pick it up people!

It's about a young girl growing up in rural Finland following the war and her family's move to urban Sweden to make a living. (Think: Finland, poverty, family, marriage, PTSD, Sweden, culture shock, changing times) Ok, I know that may not sound riveting but I am not a writer.

I was completely drawn in. The writing is simple and straightforward but endearing and sort of magical? Not literally magical but the blurb does make references to fairy tales and folk tales so other people are getting this vibe too. Each chapter feels complete somehow and there are perfect little illustrations throughout. Just do it.

Karen Mace says

This is a simple but stunningly powerful little book that came to my attention through being part of a recent MothBox subscription.

It tells the story through the eyes of a girl who is extremely observant and watches as her family struggle in Finland in the 1950's and they end up moving to Sweden in search of a better life for themselves. Her family life is extremely bleak and she is adept at noticing changes in moods and behaviour and tries to understand what makes her family behave the way they do.

There are also some beautifully simple illustrations throughout the book, and this really helps capture the mood of the story - which is mostly bleak but there are also flashes of humour and fairytale as the little girl finds her escape in books, imagining herself as the characters and how she'd react to various storylines. It gives her hope as she sees things around her proving more difficult to deal with

Emma Robertson says

I was so excited getting to this book and it definitely was an easy book to read, based on a Finnish farming family drama which meant a disjointed but fresh start for the family in a new country.

The prose was well written and it had the tinge of dark humour to it. Although I do feel at times the story was lacking in both character development and direction for me.

I really wanted to know if the little girl ever spoke again, how her mother dealt with the fathers nature once she achieved some personal freedom.

I know it was originally a short story but it did one thing I dislike most. That is a story with no conclusion, some books do it in such a clever way you dont always notice but for me, this book just stopped. The ending tried to be beautifully finished but it didnt lay a path for us to imagine what becomes of the family and for that I was left feeling disappointed.

Margaret Madden says

4.5 stars.

A young girl commences the story of her harsh childhood in 1950s Finland. Living in poverty, the girl and her family battle through extreme weather and with the bare essentials. No electricity, hand-me-down clothes and the sharp tongue and temper of their veteran father. Local folklore and legend add a new dimension to the children's lives and they hover halfway between fear and hope. The family are forced to leave their small holding, when they are disinherited. "Mother and the baby and me were put on the train. Father went in the hired lorry from the village with Tuomas and Tapio, two cows and three piglets." The boys are bullied in school and a disastrous night sees their new life abruptly halted. Once again, the family move, this time to Sweden, leaving one child behind. "a country that had been at peace for well over a hundred years, where nobody knew anyone who had been in a war, where people look prosperous and healthy, where people seemed at ease with themselves and at peace with the world". For a girl who is coming-of-age, this brings temporary hope. But it is short-lived: "But we brought our war with us. The shrapnel that had gone into Father's legs, in 1944 in the painful retreat when the war was lost, had somehow worked its way into his children. Each one of us carried a shard of that iron in our hearts."

As with all immigrants, school is problematic. Language; culture; attitudes. The girl soon tires of her incomprehensible surroundings. "We were now what Mother called ummikko. We were people who could only speak our own language and we could not understand the language around us. And the people around us could not understand us. It was a terrible fate to be ummikko. It was like being deaf and dumb Mother said." She misses the brother they have left behind and in an act of defiance, chooses to stop speaking, instead, escaping into the world of books. From fairytales to Enid Blyton; Pippi Longstocking to The Little Mermaid; Robinson Crusoe to Anna Karinina. "I did not just read the books. I lived the stories in the books."

This is a small, yet perfectly formed examination of a child with longing. Longing for love and respect; for equality and acceptance; for a brighter future. She is sharp and sassy beyond her years and despite her abusive upbringing, she continues to look toward the light. She uses her imagination to escape the realities of her situation and her story is inspiring, heartwarming and full of magical release. There are stunning illustrations (by Susanna Kajermo Torner) dotted throughout the book, depicting the thoughts of the unnamed girl and they are a delightful bonus. An abrupt ending leaves the reader gasping for more but also signifies the reaching of age. *The Iron Age* is a captivating read. Short in length but loaded with depth. It is at times difficult, but the young narrator lifts the tale to its inspiring stature. A fine debut from a distinctive new literary voice.

Neil says

NOW RE-READ AFTER ITS INCLUSION ON THE REPUBLIC OF CONSCIOUSNESS LONG LIST

But we brought our war with us. The shrapnel that had gone into Father's legs, in 1944 in the painful retreat when the war was lost, had somehow worked its way into his children. Each one of us carried a shard of that iron in our hearts. We would never be at peace.

The Iron Age is published by Tramp Press who brought us, amongst other books, *Solar Bones* which won the Goldsmiths Prize in 2016 and *A Line Made by Walking* which is nominated for the Goldsmiths Prize in 2017. Tramp Press says on its website that

Our aim is to find, nurture and publish exceptional literary talent. Tramp Press is committed to finding only the best and most deserving books, by new and established writers.

All three of the books mentioned above suggest they are doing remarkably well at finding literary talent.

The Iron Age is a short book, probably best classed as a novella, written in very simple language from the viewpoint of a young (never named) Finnish girl. It is illustrated (more on this later) by a series of pictures that pick up on the themes discussed in the narrative.

The book opens with

It was Finland, it was the 1950s but on our farm it could have been the Iron Age.

That's such a simple sentence, but it immediately pulls the reader into the context of the book. What we read after that is a mixture of a growing-up story, myth and fable.

The unnamed narrator's family endures poverty in Finland. Her father suffers from what appears to be PTSD caused by his experiences in the war

'It's the war,' she said, 'Father's nerves are shot.' It was from all the bad things he had seen and been through.

Her father's illness means that he is given to sudden outbreaks of violence but also mixed with extravagant generosity. All the rest of the family struggle in their relationships with the father. Our narrator's brothers

have formed a relationship that excludes her but which seems to help them cope with a difficult family life, but this leaves our narrator with only her imagination for company a lot of the time. Gradually, that imagination begins to dominate more and more.

We follow the family through life in Finland and then Sweden. In Sweden, our narrator struggles with the language and decides to stop talking altogether. But she continues to observe. As they move to Sweden, she notes

Everything we wore was new from the skin out because Father did not want us to look like some kind of failures. Even though we were because we were Finns and we had lost the war. Or was it Father who had lost the war? No, we all had. Even those of us who were born after the defeat.

But what about those illustrations? The biggest frustration in reading this book is that it is not long enough (except it actually is, it's just that you want more). The narrator is a character it is impossible (in my view) not to warm to and want to hear more about and from. What we get is a series of short chapters containing condensed scenes: this works well but leaves the reader hungry for more. It would, however, be a very different book if it were fleshed out to a full length novel and whilst I ended up keen to know more, I am not sure I want the book to be any different. My understanding is that one of the reasons for this style and brevity is that the book was originally intended as a graphic novel and much of what we read as the story grew out of the notes for that. The illustrations themselves are very distinctive in style (the front cover of the book is a good example of that style) but what struck me the most about them was that they seemed to gradually become more surreal as the book progresses. There are several illustrations that I paused at for a while wondering how much of the detail was style and how much was communicating more of the story to us. As an example, which I don't think will be a spoiler, there's a sledging scene in the book (it's set in Finland and Sweden, so that can hardly be a surprise!) and the associated illustration shows a child pulling a sledge but, on closer examination, the passenger on the sledge appears to be a ghost. This is not part of the narrative, though. I'd be very keen to hear others' views on these illustrations. I am keen to think more about the relationship between the growing importance of the narrator's imagination and the gradual change in mood of the illustrations.

It is short, it is written in very simple language. This means it takes, of you want it to, very little time to read. But it is worth reading slowly and pausing at the illustrations. Even though it is a sad story, it is a beautiful book to read.

My thanks to Tramp Press for a review copy of this book.
