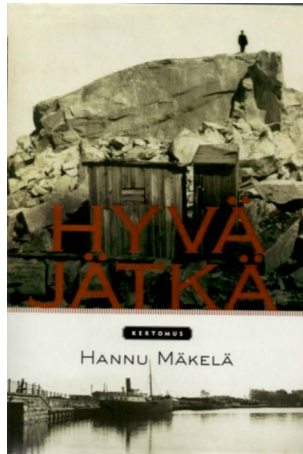# Genre

1. Definition

Literary genre is a type of literature defined by a distinct form, style, and aims. Genre can either mean a historical genre (such as the 1930s-50s hard-boiled detective novel), or a more general category, such as the genres of poetry, prose, and drama. Genres act as important "storehouses of cultural knowledge and possibility" and as "frameworks of expectation"; as such, they are crucial for guiding the reader's expectations and interpretations.[27] Textual genres also include non-fictional genres, such as the travel novel, the diary entry, or the memoir. The explanatory sections of urban plans can be seen as one textual genre with relatively rigid features in terms of form, style and aim, with specific genre conventions dependent on local and legal context.

2. Example

In 2009, the city of Helsinki published a literary novel it had commissioned from the author Hannu Mäkelä to promote Jätkäsaari, a post-industrial harbour development that was then under construction. The novel, entitled *Hyvä jätkä* (literally, 'good chap'), is distributed to all new inhabitants of the area. It describes a young working-class man's coming-of-age story in Helsinki around the turn of the twentieth century, and is a typical example of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development (see fig. 5). At the centre of the *Bildungsroman* is a young man (or woman) from provincial

backgrounds who moves to the city to fulfil their potential and to achieve maturity. After inevitable setbacks and disappointments, the protagonist achieves their aims and is (re)integrated into society. Drawing its name from the German word for education ("Bildung"), the *Bildungsroman* is about bourgeois education, in which both the protagonist and the civil society benefit from upwardly mobile processes of integration. The reader, too, is part of these processes: in its prototypical form, the *Bildungsroman* is a literary genre that is meant to educate the reader.

Fig. 5: Cover of Hannu Mäkelä's novel 'Hyvä jätkä'

In *Hyvä jätkä*, all these elements of the literary genre are visibly present: the protagonist, Johannes, achieves a slow development from a poor fisherman's son to becoming a self-taught construction worker and baker's boy, capacities in which he literally constructs and feeds the rapidly modernizing Finnish capital. The development of Johannes goes hand in hand with that of Helsinki, until both achieve a degree of independence: the novel ends just before 1917, when Finland became independent. And with the help of the book,

the reader is educated on the historical development of the area of Jätkäsaari, which was transformed in the early decades of the twentieth century from a small community of fishers and holidaymakers, on the fringes of the city, to an industrial harbour. In its epilogue, the book connects this history to the future of the area, and educates the reader not only about the past but also on how the city planners are shaping the future of the city.

Perhaps surprisingly, the planning texts that describe urban plans for Jätkäsaari (more specifically, the partial local master plans) and that were published around the same time as *Hyvä jätkä*, contain several features of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Most importantly, they project the development of the area as the integration of a marginalized character into the natural urban fold of the city centre, in a process of mutually beneficial development. The urban development, planning documents claim, will not only sustain the existing urban balance; it will reverse a negative evolution, countering the earlier decline in numbers of inhabitants in the Helsinki peninsula during the preceding decades, and "increase the vitality of the city centre and improve the conditions for the development of the city".[28] And like the *Bildungsroman*, these planning texts aim not only to describe development, but to actively educate the reader. The lengthy explanatory sections of the planning documents can be seen as texts written to transform the reader towards a more responsible, cosmopolitan citizen with a better understanding of urbanity and urban development.

3. Explanation

The history of urban planning is closely interconnected with the history of particular literary genres. One literary genre with relevance is that of utopia, especially in the case of nineteenth-century utopias such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) and E. Everett Hale's *Sybaris* (1869), books that proposed future urban forms to tackle the problems of industrialization and modernization, and that were influential also in planning circles.[29] There is a fascinating

relationship between the development of urban planning as a discipline in this period and the spread of literary utopia.

It is important to note that specific genres come with specific expectations and with ideological baggage. The *Bildungsroman*, for example, has been seen as the "'symbolic form' of modernity"[30], and it has a special relation to optimistic views towards rationality, progress, the development of the middle class, and accelerating processes of modernization and industrialization. It is a genre that envisions a wholesome individual in harmony with a wholesome society, a vision that was reflected in enlightenment visions of a harmonious spatial environment that could lead to a well-educated citizen able to maximize his or her contribution to society.[31] After a promising start in the late eighteenth century, the prototypical *Bildungsroman* quickly fell out of fashion in the course of the nineteenth century, with literature instead focusing on characters that failed in their aims to integrate into society. In the course of the twentieth century, decolonizing movements also targeted the *Bildungsroman* as a quintessentially Eurocentric text form, and new genres such as the Black Bildungsroman draw on the genre features of the novel of development to move in new directions. In this context, it is remarkable that urban planners continue to use features borrowed (wittingly or not) from the genre of the *Bildungsroman* to describe and legitimate plans, with such features including the integration of a marginal entity into the larger urban fold, and the gradual development of a wholesome society, in which also the reader of the document finds education.

4. Applications

Consciously or unconsciously, all longer narrative texts make use of scripts and narrative genres to organize their material into a meaningful form. For planners, an awareness of genre opens up multiple opportunities. Genre is important in guiding readerly expectations, and a conscious use of genre features can be a powerful rhetorical and communicative strategy. Citizens and stakeholders can also be made more aware of the generic properties of planning texts, which

are often (for practical as well as legal reasons) very rigid in their structure, style and narrative progression. Since many genres from literature and popular culture are instantly recognizable and may evoke powerful associations, literary genres could also be used to invite stakeholder feedback or to organize collaborative workshops – would it be possible to invite written feedback or citizens' input concerning urban development in the form of a haiku, a sonnet, a diary entry; and what kind of place-based knowledge would be generated in this way? More generally, a greater awareness of the genre of planning texts, and how these communicate with other kinds of textual genres, may be helpful in moving to more complex, more multi-voiced, and more open-ended forms of narrative planning.

Related entries: Narrative, Narrativity, Path-Dependency, Scenario

Further Reading

Ameel, Lieven. "A *bildungsroman* for a Waterfront Development: Literary Genre and the Planning Narratives of Jätkäsaari, Helsinki." *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 167–187.

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