

Directions of Desire: Reading the Adolescent Body

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*In Queer Phenomenology, Sara Ahmed discusses the spatial dimensions of orientation, asking not only ‘What does it mean to be oriented?’ but also ‘What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented? What difference does it make what or who we are oriented toward in the very direction of our desire?’ (1). This article uses Ahmed’s idea of sexual orientation as a form of way-finding to consider how masturbation might be considered a form of orientation that is particularly relevant for teenagers learning to understand their pubescent bodies and their desires. The concept is developed through an analysis of how Emilia – the teenage protagonist of the Finnish novel *Huhtikuun Puutarha* [April garden] by Leena Leskinen – uses her desire to find her way. The novel contains several erotic descriptions of sexual acts, designed to titillate the readers of the novel. Drawing on research within the field of embodied cognition, the article concludes with an examination of how the written word stimulates the body. The aim is to see how onanistic reading is promoted in Finnish YA fiction and to suggest that erotica for teens has many benefits.*

Key words: embodied cognition, sexual orientation, way-finding, Finnish YA, masturbation

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It just *is* embarrassing to talk about the sexiness of sex across a generation divide. The nuts and bolts of what might go where and what might happen as a result are easy to explain, but describing how to produce sexual pleasure and/or intimacy is embarrassing, in part, because it reveals so much about one’s own preferences. This awkwardness may well be biologically driven: it reduces the potential of sexual relationships with low fertility prospects from forming. However, it is deeply problematic in today’s information-saturated environments, where teenagers have easier access to pornography than to more realistic information about how sexual encounters might lead to satisfying experiences for all parties involved. And whilst no work of fiction should be /end page 16

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expected to function as an instruction manual for sexual encounters, literature can produce excellent communication across the generations, allowing adults to describe the sexiness of sex in absentia. By adopting the voice of the adolescent or focalising through adolescent characters, authors can provide experiential accounts that might be experienced as an invasion of privacy in real life. Sex-positive fiction can help adolescents to understand and enjoy their desiring bodies without shame, witness relationships where boundaries are respected, and recognise the difference between desire and love. Fiction can also be a stimulant for masturbation and consequent self-knowledge.

None of the above is intended to suggest that book knowledge and carnal knowledge are the same. As Elizabeth Grosz beautifully notes ‘the intensity of pleasure, the sensations of voluptuousness, the ache of desire have to be revived in order to be recalled’ (195). Grosz implies that memories held in the body are separate from memories that can be articulated in language, and I shall return to this idea shortly. Grosz also assumes the person she describes is sexually experienced, whereas adolescents reading YA fiction may well be virgins, which is not to suggest that they lack experience of desire. For teenage readers, erotic fiction has the potential to both stimulate desire and provide guidance on how desires might be satisfied.

In this article, I examine a Finnish novel intended for teenage readers, *Huhtikuun Puutarha* [April garden] by Leena Leskinen, that contains erotic descriptions of both sexual encounters between the protagonist, Emilia, and her male partners, as well as erotic descriptions of her masturbation. Myrri Voipio observes that ‘Emilia’s openly described desire is something new in the genre as well as in society that even today has contradictory attitudes towards the sexuality of adolescents and young women’ (‘New Wave’, 124). However, *Huhtikuun Puutarha* has not generated any public debate, either positively in the form of prizes or negatively in the form of complaints on social media or from parents. Films tend not to sensationalise sexual desire, and children are granted considerable autonomy. (For instance, children from the age of ten onwards can request that their parents cannot see their medical records.) Leena Leskinen is well-known in Finland, but not beyond its borders. The novel is not a work of erotica *per se*, but is decidedly sex-positive.

My aim in analysing *Huhtikuun Puutarha* is to suggest that fiction encouraging onanistic desire may enable teenage readers to orient themselves towards their own pleasure, which might be more valuable than orienting themselves towards a sexual partner. To support this claim, I combine theorisations drawn from queer theory with an embodied learning approach to analyse the portrayal of desire and sexual acts, especially female masturbation. I use queer theory to posit the idea that onanistic desire – the desire to masturbate – might also be understood as a form of sexual orientation, and perhaps one that is particularly relevant for teenagers. Using an embodied learning approach to examine the way the erotic descriptions promote desire in the reader, I downplay sexual *identity* to focus on *sexuality* (c.f. Sedgwick, ‘Jane Austen’ 822). This sets aside the ever-expanding list of rainbow identities (LGBTQIAPK) and the genitalia of the love interest to focus /end page 17

on the individual experiencing desire. I begin by contextualising the issue in the broader context of the somatic society, and then propose that desire functions as a form of way-finding with this society.

THE DISTURBING BODY: SOMATOPHOBIA

In *The Body and Society*, Bryan Turner identifies the emergence of a 'somatic' society, that is, 'a society within which our major political and moral problems are expressed through the conduit of the human body' (6). Labour, leisure, and consumption are central features of the somatic society, and our value system is heavily derived from making these visible through the body. For instance, wealth and freedom from manual labour may be expressed through manicured and/or decorated fingernails. However, in a somatic society, some bodies appear threatening: the key to identifying them is control. Compare the control one can have over one's fingernails with the lack of control one has over ageing, sickness, menstruation and menopause. These perfectly natural changes in the body are, in a somatic society, disturbing. They reveal how little control can be exerted. Women's bodies, with their regular fluctuations around the menstrual cycle as well as during pregnancy and menopause, appear to be uncontrolled and thus inspire fear. Adolescents experiencing desire for the first time may also appear to be uncontrolled.

If, as researchers of YA literature, we are to take the adolescent reader seriously, then we need to acknowledge the role of puberty in reading. Embodied cognition is a field of study that seeks to understand how our whole bodies contribute to meaning-making. Cognitive approaches to the study of literature have expanded dramatically in the last decade, starting with the pioneering work of Maria Nikolajeva in *Reading for Learning*, John Stephens, and Roberta Seelinger Trites (*Conceptions of Growth*). A special issue of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (Kokkola and van den Bossche) and a forthcoming collection of papers on emotions edited by Karen Coats and Gretchen Papazian indicate that the field is expanding rapidly. However, the impact of puberty and the onset of desire has not, to my knowledge, been considered in relation to adolescent fiction.

There are several different schools of thought concerning the relationship between the changes in the body we experience, emotions, and feelings. The appraisal school of thought, deriving from William James, suggests that emotions are felt – they are experienced in the body – prior to the cerebral interpretation of the sensations. If, as Jesse Prinz explains, the sensation can be labelled, it becomes a 'feeling':

emotions are perceptions of patterned changes in the body. When such perceptions are conscious, they qualify as feelings. But the bodily perceptions constituting emotions can occur unconsciously. When that occurs, emotions are unfelt. Thus emotions are feelings when conscious, and they are not feelings when conscious. ('Are Emotions Feelings?' 9)

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Prinz's article is primarily philosophical and, although the tidiness of his categories is attractive, it does not capture reality. For instance, irritability may be experienced and labelled before the underlying issue of hunger or arousal is recognised. But labelling this emotion as the 'feeling of irritation' might well be accurate: the irritation might be genuine, but the low blood-sugar level or sexual frustration may reduce the person's capacity to express their irritation in a socially acceptable way. An embodied approach allows us to set aside the topic of how conscious the degree of knowledge might be and embraces the body as a sense-making organ.

Cognitive approaches to literature vary as to whether they adopt an appraisal approach, like Prinz, or a more blended approach to emotion and cognition. However, they all undermine both the Cartesian mind-body split and the distinction between cognition and emotion (embodied emotions). This results in studies of affects such as shame (Thorgeirsdóttir), anger and the desire for retribution (Oatley), and guilt (Nikolajeva, 'Guilt'). But very little attention has been paid to the literature that is most explicitly about arousing feelings: erotica. Desire has been studied but, especially in the context of literature for children and youth, 'desire' tends to be treated as though it were simply a longing for a love interest, even though young people obviously read to become aroused. School library copies of even the very worst examples of literature in this genre tend to fall open on the specific pages where the couples are 'doing it'. As Milla, a character in *Huhtikuun Puutarha* explains: 'No, nainen tarttee runkata, silloin ku tarttee, that's it. Ei siihen miestä tarvita' [Well, a woman needs to jerk off when she needs to, that's it. You don't need a man for that] (*Huhtikuun Puutarha* 57). Masturbating to fiction is one of the safest ways for teenagers to explore their sexual desires, making descriptions of onanistic desire highly relevant for teenage fiction.

THE DESIRING BODY: THE MASTURBATING GIRL AND ONANISTIC READINGS

In 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', Sedgwick uses humour to make an important theoretical point about moving our understanding of human sexuality away from explorations of the love object to understanding desire as something that resides in the self or, adopting embodied cognition, within the body. Sedgwick sets quotations from *Sense and Sensibility* describing the restlessness of Marianne Dashwood in conversation with extracts from a nineteenth-century case study of two masturbating girls. The similarities are pronounced: they showcase what I can only term a 'pathology' of behaviours, such as pacing, irritability, and an inability to concentrate. The girls in the medical text long to touch themselves or rub themselves against furniture, whereas Marianne is relieved by riding horseback or sitting beside her object of desire in a

jolting carriage. Whilst Sedgwick acknowledges the ease with which Marianne's behaviour can be read as desire for Willoughby, she also notes that Willoughby

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is absent in the scenes where Marianne is exhibiting sexual desire most strongly. In these scenes, readers are positioned to watch Marianne's behaviour through the loving, concerned gaze of another woman, Elinor.

Sedgwick's aim is not to force a queer reading on these scenes. Soon after publishing 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', she drew on the work of Melanie Klein to distinguish between 'paranoid' readings in which the reader expects to take issue with the text and 'reparative' readings which allow the reader to be surprised (Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading'). Coming to an Austen novel pre-determined to resist heteronormative assumptions would constitute paranoid behaviour. Allowing ourselves to be surprised by the text might open up queer insights, but Sedgwick's main point is not to propose incestuous desire but simply to muddy the waters of the most obvious reading. In doing so, Sedgwick shows how Marianne's desiring body becomes an object of fascination both within the fictional world and within the reader. Although Marianne's desiring body evokes condemnation and reproval within her own social circle, readers are positioned beside Elinor to be loving-kind. By the end of the novel, Marianne no longer thinks of love as 'a sacrifice to an irresistible passion' and enjoys married life to the full, as she 'could never love by halves' (chapter 50).

Sedgwick dubs Marianne 'the masturbating girl', but surely the problem is that Marianne has no such outlet for her desires? Her calmness once married is, perhaps, less due to her station in life and more due to her enjoyment of the marriage bed. Although I quibble with the term 'masturbating girl', I appreciate the way Sedgwick uses the category of the masturbatory girl to unpick the idea that desire can fit on a scale between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Instead of situating desire outside the body and within the genitalia of the person who is being desired, Sedgwick's 'masturbating girl' recognises that people are sexual beings even when they are not desiring another person. This is particularly relevant when considering adolescent readers who are experiencing the onset of desire, but are not necessarily ready for or even interested in a partner. I use the term 'self-erotic' to describe the body in the state of heightened desire Sedgwick describes, without trying to indicate what kind of outlet is envisaged, and reserve terms stemming from 'masturbation' and 'onanism' for the literal actions.

For Austen's readers, Marianne is a far more interesting character prior to her marriage, when her self-erotic passions are still trapped within her body. In this respect, she closely resembles a contemporary fictional girl who inspires similar fascination: Bella Swan. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* quartet has been called 'abstinence porn', and as many people including Sara Day have noted, the books have spawned a great deal of highly erotic fan fiction, the most famous being E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels. Both series are examined in *Mas(s)turbatory Reading: A Queer Analysis of Popular Romance* by the Swedish scholar Elin Abrahamsson. A literal translation of the Swedish would render the first part of the title 'one-handed reading', thereby highlighting the simultaneity of reading and masturbation, whilst her English title highlights the mass production and consumption of erotic fiction for women. Abrahamsson takes criticism of the women who read these romances as a starting point for

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investigating social condemnation of female desire. Abrahamsson shows how texts intended to prepare the female body for masturbation are treated with incredulity or dismissed as laughable. I suggest that the same is true for desiring adolescents.

Abrahamsson draws on Sedgwick to note the liberatory potential of masturbation and onanistic reading. Sedgwick celebrates self-eroticism, noting that 'To have a powerful form of *sexuality* run so fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual *identities* whose meaning and outlines we always insist on thinking we know [sic!], is only part of the revelatory power of the Muse of masturbation' (822). Combining the ideas of Sedgwick and Abrahamsson, I claim that YA fiction is primarily concerned with pushing the adolescent characters towards understanding their desires as an identity issue. This identity, as Bruhm and Hurley point out, is assumed to be heterosexual, which explains my observation that queer characters only need to have experienced same-sex desire to transition into adulthood, whereas straight characters need to lose their virginity (Kokkola, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* 95-136). But if we set aside *sexual identities* to recognise *sexualities* – such as the unleashed desires of Marianne Dashwood and Bella Swan prior to their marriages, and the masturbatory desires of those reading the books—we might arrive at more useful ways of understanding adolescents and their fiction.

The notion of 'orientation' is still useful for understanding auto-eroticism. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed discusses the spatial dimensions of orientation, looking at not only the person who is desired, but also the objects and spaces related to desire.

What does it mean to be oriented? [. . .] If we know where we are, when we turn this way or that, then we are oriented. We have our bearings. [. . .] To be oriented is also to be oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way. [. . .] What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented? What difference does it make what or who we are oriented toward in the very direction of our desire? If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with. (1)

I want to adopt Ahmed's idea of sexual orientation as a form of way-finding, asking not *who* does Emilia, the teenage protagonist of *Huhtikuun Puutarha*, desire, but *how* does desire orient her towards her world?

HUHTIKUUN PUUTARHA [APRIL GARDEN] AND DESIRE AS WAY-FINDING

The protagonist of *Huhtikuun Puutarha* is a sexually active seventeen-year-old, Emilia, who studies French whilst in her second year of high school. She is in a stable long-term relationship with Tero, who is in his final year. Tero is 'Varsinainen isikandidaatti' [an excellent candidate for a dad] (12) but unexciting. The main plot concerns Emilia's affair with her French teacher,

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Kristian, whom she refers to as 'K.' Emilia is the youngest of four generations of women. The three generations above her are all widowed; nevertheless, they provide much better parenting than her friend Milla receives from her conventionally married, wealthy parents. Milla takes drugs, self-harms, and has real problems (unlike Emilia, who creates her own problems). The generational plotline demonstrates that life as a single woman can be fulfilling and meaningful. Emilia's mother's only frustration is that she has not been able to complete her master's thesis and so works as a cleaner.

Emilia is associated with a specific space: a garden in April. In Finland, April is not a time of flowering and flourishing; it is the time when the snow melts and the earth becomes visible again. Some small shoots may appear, but the grass will appear to be dead and there is no colour. The garden in the title is a *siirtolapuutarha* that belongs to Emilia's grandmother. It's a culturally specific kind of garden that is not located next to her home. If I use the English term 'allotment' it gives the totally wrong impression. Allotments also exist, but a *siirtolapuutarha* has a little cottage where one can socialise, sleep overnight in the summer, and be part of a community. Emilia feels most at home in this space. For most of the novel, there is too much snow for her to visit, but she frequently asks Tero and Kristian to drive past, as just gazing at the space makes her feel calm. Most of the novel depicts Emilia in a state of heightened self-eroticism, constantly checking her phone, fantasising, moving restlessly, and generally unable to settle or concentrate. In contrast, her time in the garden roots her and provides her with opportunities to grow. Sexual desire is part of that: in the garden Emilia thinks through her choices carefully, but when she is away from that space she is typically in a self-erotic state, which leads to poor decision-making.

Emilia takes Kristian to the garden after their first trip to the movies. This is the description just before she kisses Kristian for the first time:

Vaikka olikin talvi, paikassa oli jotain levollisen kaunista, varsinkin kun tien toisella puolella häämöitti järvenselkää eikä vastarantaa näkynyt. Lisäksi paikalle antoi omaa tunnelmaansa yliopiston kasvitieteellinen puutarha, jonka lasisessa rakennuksessa paloi yötä päivää kauniiväriset valot. (68)

[Although it was winter, the place was beautiful in its calmness, especially as the lake was visible on the other side of the road, but the shoreline was hidden. The atmosphere of the place also came from the beautiful, coloured lights shining through the glass buildings of the university's botanical gardens.]

The description of the garden is more poetic than my translation would suggest. If, following Ahmed, we regard sexual orientation as way-finding, Emilia's desire brings her to a place where she feels nurtured. The simplest way to interpret the mention of the light from the greenhouses is to note that the story is set in Joensuu, a town in Eastern Finland. However, the light is also symbolic. It literally comes from a source of knowledge: the university's botanical gardens. The garden is the place where Emilia gains knowledge and fosters conscious intent and purpose.

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By April, Emilia and Kristian have an established sexual relationship. In April, Emilia turns eighteen and dreams of going to Paris with Kristian. Kristian does go to Paris, but he goes with his partner, Stina, with whom he is expecting his first child. On Emilia's birthday, Kristian receives a phone call from Stina who is in hospital over fears she may be having a miscarriage. They are at the *siirtolapuutarha* and Kristian goes into the garden to take the call. Although Emilia does not learn what the phone call was about until the end of the novel, she feels jealous. However, Emilia's recognition that Stina is more important to Kristian than she is does not last: as soon as she leaves the cottage she returns to her self-erotic state. As they leave the garden, Tero sees them and ends his relationship with Emilia via text message. The garden is a site of knowledge: knowledge of desire, jealousy, and betrayal.

The novel ends in the garden in late summer. Emilia spends all her earnings from her summer job as a cleaner on buying a flight ticket to Helsinki to visit Kristian. (She doesn't want to take the train because she is in such a hurry. In reality, the train would only take a couple of hours longer than a flight and check-in.) Emilia plans to pretend that she is pregnant to trick Kristian into resuming their affair. However, she is greeted at the door by Stina, who is heavily pregnant. Kristian returns Emilia to the airport immediately. In the final scene, Emilia and her grandmother plant pansies in the garden, and her grandmother explains that in the language of flowers the wild pansy means 'Hellää muistoa' [tender memories] (207).

The trope of gardens as a place of growth and change is hardly original. *Huhtikuun Puutarha* makes many overt references to other literary works where the characters are closely attached to a place, most notably L. M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* after which Emilia was named. However, if we think of desire as form of way-finding, Emilia's spatial practices become more meaningful. Much of the novel is devoted to descriptions of the spaces Emilia inhabits, with lengthy passages devoted to descriptions of her routes to school, cafés, and friends' houses. Again, it would be easy to simply read these in terms of the practicalities of meeting people, but I would like to examine her movements in relation to desire.

At the start of the novel, Emilia is deeply connected to the people around her: her circle of friends at school, Tero and his friends, her younger brother, as well as three generations of mothers. In the first chapter (October) Emilia has her first lesson with Kristian, and in the second chapter (November) she fantasises about him whilst masturbating. The description focuses on her bodily sensations:

K. täytti taas ajatukseni, paine haarojeni välissä kasvoi, sirisi kuin vettä olisi tulvinut pienen pienestä aukosta jonnekin, kaikki vyötäröistä alaspäin oli lämmintä, melkein kuumaa, ja minun oli painettava käteni reisien väliin, paineltava keskisormella tykyttävää ydintä niin pitkään että tunsin olevani avattu simpukka, ja kaikki ajatukset hulahtivat simpukan kosteuteen, sen keskelle, siihen helmeen, joka äkkiä löytyi, ja kaikki sen ympärillä sirisi ja sykki, puski lämpöä ja ihmeellistä hohdetta, kuin auringonsäteitä lapsuusajan piirustuksissa. Ja silmäluomieni alla näin mustuuden keskellä oranssinpunaisia salamoita, hentoja kuin huissuonet.

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Sitten kosketus teki kipeää ja olin kuin nesteensä vuodattanut kasvi; olin soikkovuorenkilpi, syssädekukka, rönsyleimu, samettilehti. Nukahdin raukeana. (30)

[K. filled my mind again, the pressure between my legs increased, moaning as though water were flooding out of a small hole somewhere, everything down from the waist was warm, almost hot, and I had to squeeze my hand between my thighs, squeeze the throbbing core with my middle finger until I felt like an open clam, and all thoughts drifted into the moisture of the seashell in the midst of it, into the pearl that was suddenly found, and all around it moaned and throbbed, pushing warmth and a wonderful glow, like the rays of the sun in the drawings I made as a child. And under my eyelids I saw orange-red lightning in the middle of the blackness, as delicate as the veins.

Then the touch hurt and I was like a plant that had spilled its sap; I was a *Bergenina*, *Gaillardia*, creeping phlox, *Gynura*. I fell asleep totally spent.]

Note how the floral images at the end of the sequence connect her back to the garden, a site of self-knowledge. The more obviously erotic section depicting the orgasm itself combines touch, sound, and sight; it uses metaphors for the aura experience that are comprehensible for those who have not explored their bodies in this way either alone or with another person.

I will return to this depiction when I discuss the embodied nature of reading, but first I want to focus on how Emilia's desire orients her to her world. The sequence starts with a reference to Kristian, so one can read the sequence simply as a heterosexual fantasy, thereby focusing on the object of desire rather than Emilia herself. However, Emilia's desire for Kristian is initiated as part of a collective experience during her French class: she situates herself beside the other girls who blush and lick their lips. Emilia's masturbation, although it takes place in private, is also an extension of this group response to Kristian's appearance. She is part of a community. When she orients her desire towards understanding her body and its desires, she is neither restless nor self-harming; she relaxes and falls asleep.

The masturbation sequence is the most erotic moment in the novel. The descriptions of Emilia's sexual encounters with men range from the 'ikävä, inhottava' [unpleasant, disgusting] (47, with a Spanish exchange student) to the disappointing (with Tero) to the poetical (with Kristian). Some of the descriptions of sex with Kristian are detailed, but none are as overtly erotic. Emilia recalls having sex for the first time at the age of fifteen. She was drunk at a party and had sex with an exchange student. Emilia clarifies that the sex was not consensual, but dismisses Tero's claim that she was raped, noting that she remembers very consciously deciding earlier in the evening 'että halusin sen nyt, tänä iltana. Halusin että minua pantaisiin' [that I wanted it now, tonight. I wanted to get laid] (47). She even checked that she was in a low fertility phase of her menstrual cycle before she going to the party. It would be easy to read this as a punishment for being sexual, as Roberta Seelinger Trites does in *Disturbing the Universe* (84–116) and I affirmed in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* (51–94), or as part of the xenophobia evident elsewhere in Leskinen's novel. Reading this non-consensual encounter as way-finding opens up the text further. Arriving at

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the party determined to get laid means that Emilia was no longer directing her desire inwards to her own body, its desires and needs. Her self-erotic behaviour disoriented her from her world and exposed her to harm. Most of the novel depicts Emilia in such a self-erotic state, self-destructive and disoriented from the people who care about her.

Emilia's oriented desire for Kristian greatly limits her world. She stops spending time playing with her younger brother, meeting her friends, talking to her mother, to the extent that her only friend is Milla. Milla is grieving for her childhood friend who has just died of an overdose. Emilia reluctantly agrees to meet up, but when Milla fails to keep their

appointment, Emilia breaks into Milla's home. She finds Milla stoned and cutting herself. Emilia does stay with Milla, but her thoughts are focused on Kristian. Milla's self-harming with drugs and razor blades is undoubtedly easier to recognise, but Emilia's behaviour is, I suggest, also a form of self-harming.

The very first response Emilia has to Kristian is 'tunsin jotain levotonta virtaavan sisääni' [I felt something restless flowing inside me] (8). Note the word *levotonta* [restless]: desire moves her, but 'restlessness' indicates a lack of orientation, a lack of direction. Interestingly, this description of Emilia's heightened state of arousal comes directly after a lengthy description of Kristian's *hands*. Hands are definitely the sexiest parts of the body in *Huhtikuun Puutarha*. In the field of embodied cognition, the concept of 'minded hands' has been developed to describe the kinds of knowing that are manual. In the final part of this article, I draw on this research to examine how texts like *Huhtikuun Puutarha* promote masturbation. Although I cannot report on any empirical research on erotica, by drawing analogies to empirical studies of how the body responds to other kinds of text, I hope to take the onanistic teenage reader seriously.

THE KNOWING BODY: EMBODIED READING AND THE ONANISTIC READER

The concept of 'embodied reading' arises from the field of embodied cognition; it seeks to acknowledge the whole body's contribution to meaning-making - both in terms of knowledge formation and emotion stimulation- whilst reading. Research to date has focused neutral topics such as how the eyes search for information in various contexts (Zambarbieri and Carniglia), and how reading words such as 'cinnamon' or 'garlic' causes responses in the olfactory and gustatory systems (González et al.). However, if we want to examine how texts and bodily responses cohere, then erotica is an ideal material to work with. Direct empirical research is not needed: there is a considerable body of existing research from which we can extrapolate.

Reading is a distributed, multi-scalar activity (Trasmundi et al.). This claim rejects the idea that reading is a code-breaking activity situated entirely in the here-and-now. It also rejects the idea that the brain acts 'on' the text. The brain has a vital, coordinating role to play, but the 'distributed' aspect of reading

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means that the *whole* body contributes to meaning-making. For instance, even very experienced readers of alphabetic texts make use of the sound system: small tongue movements appear during silent reading, revealing readers' constant connection to oral language (Price). The olfactory and gustatory systems can be evoked simply by reading words with strong associations to smell and taste (González et al.). The hands and eyes do more than bring the text into view for the brain to interpret: they contribute their own knowledge, which may not be possible to express in language. Sarah Bro Trasmundi has shown, in the context of emergency medical treatment, that doctors using their hands to determine a patient's temperature make fewer mistakes than those using a thermometer or looking at a chart (95). The additional information that comes from direct skin contact between doctor and patient may not be possible to articulate in words, but it demonstrably supports diagnosis. In reading research, the term 'minded hands' has been coined by Anne Mangen to capture the sense-making capacities of the hands (Mangen, 'Hypertext', 'What Hands'; Trasmundi et al.; see also Holmes). Digital books all feel the same because the reader's hands are touching the same electronic device. Scrolling does not provide the kinds of detailed location information- 'left-hand side, halfway down the page, approximately 1/3 of the way through the book' - we take in subliminally as we read. Mangen and her colleagues have run several studies comparing reading on screen with reading on paper (Mangen et al.; Mangen and Kuiken) (and there are similar studies of handwriting vs. typing [Frangou et al.]). Repeatedly, what these studies reveal is that the relative lack of haptic information in digital environments contributes to a weakened, less imaginative, less memorable experience (Mangen and van der Weel; Mangen et al.). Most relevantly for the reading of erotica, readers are less likely to feel 'transported' into the fictional realm when reading on a digital device (Mangen and Kuiken). This would suggest that reading erotica on Kindle is likely to be a less stimulating experience than reading a paperback. However, Leskinen's comprehensible metaphors for the aura Emilia experiences when she masturbates can be assumed to stimulate the body at least to the extent that reading 'garlic' stimulates the olfactory system.

Research also shows that *where* we read has a great impact on our interpretation but especially our memories of reading (Schillhab et al.). So, when asked about a favourite book, people's responses are likely include descriptions like 'I remember reading it in the garden one particularly hot summer'. The tactile sensations relating to the place of reading are brought into memories of the story. This relates to the second part of the definition of embodied reading: it is multi-scalar - that is, it simultaneously operates on multiple time scales. Reading connects us to our surroundings, but also connects us to past memories. These memories might be the smell of cinnamon or garlic or a recollection of a past conversation. Trasmundi and her research team have studied the physiology of reading, and one of her interests is the place of the imagination in reading - even the reading of academic texts for university studies. She notes the frequent occurrence of 'self-initiated ruptures': moments when the reading appears to break down (*forthcoming*). During these ruptures, readers will stop looking at the

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text; they may look away or simply close their eyes. Her investigation into what happens during these pauses has led to the 'punctuated equilibrium hypothesis' which proposes that these ruptures are the moments when the reader processes the information in the text by drawing on memories and imagination. As such, the ruptures are not breakdowns, but rather intense moments of meaning-making when multiple time scales and information from many senses conjoin. How texts

contribute to such moments is not yet known, but the erotic passages in *Huhtikuun Puutarha* are consistently followed by a break (a blank line or chapter break), which promote ruptures for the processing of pleasure.

So reading is distributed – it is a full-bodied experience – and multi-scalar—it operates on many time zones simultaneously. It is punctuated with breaks for combining various information types and sources. How does this help us to understand the teenage readers and their erotica better? I have used the idea of desire as a form of way-finding to show how *Huhtikuun Puutarha* favours masturbation over heterosexual relationships. Rather than reading Emilia’s failed romances as punishment for being sexual, I suggest that Leskinen has found a meaningful way to promote sex-positivity.

Leskinen’s novel shifts attention away from Emilia’s sexual *identity* to focus on her *sexuality* (c.f. Sedgwick, ‘Jane Austen’ 822). Emilia masturbates in the privacy of her bedroom, but her desire was sparked within a community of friends. At this point, she is surrounded by her extended family, her friend, and her partner. This is a healthy, sex-positive portrayal of teenage desire that invites readers inwards with its erotic description of the experience of orgasm. In contrast, when Emilia obsesses over Kristian, she becomes restless, withdrawn, and isolated. She is sexually satisfied when they are together, but does not take care of her desires when she is alone. By this I do not merely mean that Emilia’s descriptions of herself masturbating after she has begun her relationship with Kristian end, but rather that her orientation to the world narrows, leaving only space for Kristian. To clarify, I am proposing that an onanistic reading of this novel provides a means of focusing on the sexuality within the individual, not in relationship to a desired other. This way of approaching teenage desire seems more productive than focusing exclusively on desire within relationships.

In everyday speech, poor decision-making may be derided as ‘thinking with his penis’. As work with embodied cognition has already shown in relation to minded hands, it is reasonable to think of the genitalia as sense-making organs as well. Drawing on Sedgwick and Abrahamsson, I have illustrated the problem of self-eroticism. These adolescent characters (Emilia, Bella Swan, and Marianne Dashwood) are filled with desire but lack an outlet. As a result, they become restless, unfocused, and engage in behaviours that are self-harming so long as their desires are fixated on another person. However, when Emilia’s desires are channelled into masturbation, she connects to those around her. As sense-making organs, the hands have much to offer. If we care about the readers of these books, and do not want to ridicule their sexual maturation, then thinking in terms of minded hands and onanistic reading offers routes forward.

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