

A GRAYWOLF PRESS READING GROUP GUIDE

YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED AT SUVANTO

A Novel by

Maile Chapman



Discussion Questions

1) Sunny Taylor is an American living abroad, as are many of the “up-patients” on her ward. On page 14 the narrator states that “It’s hard to learn the language and it’s hard to penetrate this culture. It takes time to make friends in Finland. . . . It is clearly easier to come here, to the hospital, than to try to adjust.” What role does cultural alienation play in the novel? Why did Sunny choose such a remote and foreign place to live and work? Was she prepared for the challenges?

2) On page 10, during Sunny’s first meeting with her supervisor, the Head of Nursing, she is told that, “What we want from you is competent nursing, and also patience.” A moment later she adds, “And common sense, because you’ll feel the isolation here.” Does Sunny succeed at providing those things? In your opinion, does she make any mistakes?

3) *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* employs two distinct points of view, the first person plural and the third person omniscient. What is the purpose of the choral voice? What is the effect of shifting from one point of view to the other?

4) Who is speaking in passages such as the following on page 99: “[Sunny’s] work is nearly meaningless, and life is nothing but a search for meaning, yes? Isn’t that right?” How would you describe this tone, and how does that affect your interpretation of events?

5) How do the changing seasons and weather affect the development of the narrative? What role does landscape play in the book generally?

6) Chapman often describes the aging body with unflinching precision. How are we meant to react to the degradation and failings of the body? What do you think the author is saying about her characters’ attitude toward their bodies?

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7) Before she came to Suvanto, Sunny was caring for her ailing mother. In other words, she is often in the position of attending to others without addressing the reality of her own needs. What do you think Sunny needs? Is she capable of taking care of herself?

8) Julia Dey, the ex-ballroom dancer from Denmark, instigates much of the book's tension. She is a menace and pest, but she can also be funny and charismatic. Did you sympathize with Julia's predicament? Given all the trouble she causes, why are the patients so outraged by her eventual death?

9) According to Pearl's husband, William Weber, on page 212, she has "actively chosen to make herself ill. She is, as she has always tried to convince him, *not like other women*." Is this a fair conclusion? Are all of the up-patients simply neurotic? If not, what is wrong with them?

10) Unlike many of the other up-patients, Laimi is Finnish, and she is eager to leave the institution. What is her role in the story? What is the nature of her relationship with Sunny?

11) Despite the apparent order and efficiency and high level of professionalism at the hospital, we discover that it is as much an economic system as a medical facility. Care is not necessarily distributed equitably among those who need it on the lower floors. Does *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* have anything to say about contemporary health-care issues?

12) The presence of Dr. Peter Weber, the American obstetrician who is experimenting with a new C-section procedure at Suvanto, seems to highlight the moral ambiguity of medical progress and process. His goal is to save the lives of both maternity patients and their babies by making a dangerous operation safer, and to make the older patients "into happier people" after hysterectomies. His methods, however, probably wouldn't be considered ethical today. Are those methods justified? Is Dr. Weber a threat, a misguided innovator, a tragic hero, or something else entirely?

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13) Dr. Weber and Nurse Frida are murdered in a moment of hallucinatory frenzy. What is the source of the rage that inspires the murderers?

14) Although some reviewers called the novel a “thriller,” it does not really rely on cliffhangers or plot twists for momentum. How does Chapman ratchet up the tension and create an atmosphere of anxious menace?

15) Chapman has mentioned both Stephen King’s *The Shining* and Euripides’ *The Bacchae* as direct and indirect influences on *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*. In particular, Chapman has acknowledged that the genre of the Gothic novel casts a shadow over her own novel. How are Gothic conventions reworked in this book?

An Interview with Maile Chapman

The following interview was published in the London Guardian after Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto was named a finalist for the Guardian First Book Award. Reprinted with permission, © Guardian News & Media Ltd 2010.

Why did you decide to write a novel about the nurses and patients of a 1920s sanatorium in Finland?

I started the novel during a snowy winter in central New York State, at my desk with a pile of old reference books. I knew I wanted to write about a nurse trapped in a claustrophobic work routine, and about Scandinavia. I was also thinking a lot about functional architecture and design (because of the capricious heating system in my apartment building, and the old windows that leaked warmth away instantly). I came across some black-and-white photos of Alvar Aalto's tuberculosis sanatorium in the pine forest at Paimio in one of the books, and that's what first put Finland in my mind as a setting. The hospital buildings looked modern, despite being designed in the late 1920s. The book mentioned briefly that physical details in the rooms, such as light, color, sound, and temperature, were calculated around the comfort of long-term patients, and this intrigued me. The photos were strangely pleasing and they pulled my ideas together in an eerie way: nursing, Scandinavia, functionality, work, isolation.

Was it your first attempt at writing?

It's not my first stab at writing, but it is the first novel I've written. It's my first published book.

What came first?

I spent three years in a master of fine arts program working on short fiction. I still write the odd short story—it's a form I love to read. But I'm working on another novel because there's much more room to create chaos. I also sometimes write about medicine and the body in literature, but that's mostly for academic conferences.

What were the hardest bits?

Getting the nursing and medical parts right! My aunt is a retired nurse, and I have friends who are nurses, so I was aware that they and readers like them would notice if I got things blatantly wrong. I also wanted to describe Finland with the disorientation an outsider would feel, without making use of surface experiences and stock images, and it's hard to do that from a distance. It helped that I had a year there to do research.

How did you research the novel?

I had a Fulbright grant year in Finland, so I could visit the hospital in Paimio and other buildings I'd seen in photos. The Fulbright Center staff in Helsinki were wonderful, and Abo Akademi University, in Turku, gave me access to campus resources and the library, and even let me take classes. There was no shortage of kind people willing to show me around public buildings, such as hospitals, offices, and fire stations.

How did it come to be published?

I started the novel nine years before it was published, working in a vacuum, and when it was finished a literary agent took me on. Luckily for me, my excellent editors and publishers said yes to the manuscript last year—an experience well worth waiting for. The publishing part felt like it happened quickly, unlike the writing part.

What are you most pleased with?

I still get a feeling of suspension and solitude from the pages. It feels a bit like the isolation I sometimes felt while writing it, and that pleases me, even if a bit grimly.

What would you do differently/better next time?

I've heard writing a novel is like learning a foreign language; once you've practiced on the first one, the next comes a little easier. I hope the novel I'm working on now won't take nine more years to finish.

Who were your literary models?

I used *The Bacchae* of Euripides for pace and structure. I worked my way through the gothic canon, as part of my doctorate in literature, toward the end; no doubt those big, moody novels influenced me. When I read in search of sheer pleasure and creative reassurance I turn to the stories of A. S. Byatt for gorgeous prose with so many layers of deep traction and satisfying narrative. I look to W. G. Sebald for his exacting yet distorting control of time and detail. And I keep Haruki Murakami and Scarlett Thomas close at hand, because their books show me that you can do anything—no matter how unexpected—inside the world of a novel, if it's right for the fictional world in question.

What I Read, Watched, Looked at, and Listened to While Writing *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*

by Maile Chapman

Many novels as well as books about architecture, medicine, and the history of Finland helped me while I worked on *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*. *The Bacchae* of Euripides, for example, was one of my original inspirations, and as I returned to that play over the years something of the feeling of Greek drama made it into the novel. I was also influenced by the eerie mood and snowbound tension of the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's film version of *The Shining*, adapted from the novel by Stephen King, as well as by various works of music and visual art. Below is a list of some of the sources of inspiration that contributed to my novel in obvious as well as hidden ways.

The Bacchae, Euripides

The Shining, Stanley Kubrick (film)

Finnischer Tango—Ist das Glück nur ein Traum? M. A. Numminen
and Sanna Peitäinen (recording of Finnish tango music)

La France Croisée, Romaine Brooks (painting of a wartime nurse)

Paintings from *The Kalevela*, the national epic of Finland—Akseli
Gallen-Kallela

As I worked on the architectural aspects of the novel, I visited as many hospitals and other public buildings in Finland as I could. I also relied on books like these as I thought about how the Suvanto hospital complex would have looked, and how the buildings and grounds would have felt to the people who lived and worked there:

Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition, Siegfried
Giedion

Profiles: Pioneering Women Architects from Finland, Ulla Markelin,
et al

Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism, Kenneth Frampton,
Pekka Korvenmaa, Juhani Pallasmaa, Marc Treib, Alvar Aalto,
Peter Reed (editor)

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Hospitals in Finland: Paimio Sanatorium, Tyks, Children's Castle, Meilahti Hospital, Helsinki University Central Hospital, Jorvi Hospital

I was lucky enough to spend almost a year in Finland, with the assistance of a Fulbright grant, and these are some of the books that helped me become familiar with Finnish culture, literature, and history both during and after my time there:

Helsinki: A Literary Companion, Hildi Hawkins, Soila Lehtonen

The Summer Book, Tove Jansson

Tango Nostalgia: The Language of Love and Longing: Finnish Culture in Tango Lyrics Discourses, Pirjo Kukkonen

Books from Finland: A Literary Journal (www.booksfromfinland.fi)

The Sauna: A Complete Guide to the Construction, Use, and Benefits of the Finnish Bath, Rob Roy

The Lady with the Bow: The Story of Finnish Women, Merja Manninen and Päivi Setälä (editors), Michael Wynne-Ellis (translator)

The Kalevala, Elias Lönnrot

Love & Solitude: Selected Poems, 1916–1923 (English and Swedish edition), Edith Sodergran and Stina Katchadourian (translator)

Over the years I looked at many general nursing handbooks, textbooks, and technical manuals while thinking about what Sunny and the other nurses might have been doing during their shifts at Suvanto. I sought out ephemera, like nursing final exams, training pamphlets, and procedural guides, and I also depended on books such as these, about the history of women's medicine and health in particular:

Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America, Richard W. Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz

The Hygiene of Life and Safer Motherhood (two volumes), Sir W. Arbuthnot Lane (editor)

That atmosphere I tried to create in *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* owes a lot to my love of Gothic novels, and I read many of the classics of the genre while writing. I also looked at some of the theory

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underlying Gothic fiction to try to understand how to create a mood of dread, suspense, and unease:

“The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud

The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry

The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day, (volumes 1 & 2), David Punter

Here are just a few of the novels I read and thought about while I wrote *Your Presence Is Requested at Suwanto*, including some of my very favorite books (and quite a few of the original Gothics). Although these might not appear to have much in common, they all handle themes I hoped to write about, including isolation, displacement, the unreliability of the senses, and the ways that social institutions and systems affect individuals, both when they work and when they break down:

The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann

Villette, Charlotte Brontë

The Yellow Wallpaper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

“The Turn of the Screw” from *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, Henry James

The Woman in White, Wilkie Collins

We Have Always Lived in the Castle, Shirley Jackson

Lord of the Flies, William Golding

Smilla's Sense of Snow, Peter Høeg

Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro

The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye, A. S. Byatt

Dracula, Bram Stoker

The Island of Dr. Moreau, H. G. Wells

Uncle Silas, Sheridan Le Fanu

Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë

Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

The Monk, Matthew Lewis

The Mysteries of Udolpho, Ann Radcliffe