

# Kati Närhi



# THE NO TH ING

*A bizarre melancholy has taken hold of a small town. One by one the townspeople begin to exhibit strange symptoms. Mrs. Flan can sense the presence of her late husband. Mr. Lunni can no longer find enjoyment in his art collection. Street signs become unintelligible and the little daughters of the Madagascar family notice themselves thinking dangerous thoughts...*

THE NOTHING (EI MIKÄÄN) is a picture book for adults that is based on an enigmatic story about a town overrun by depression. For this endeavour, Kati Närhi, who is known for her dark illustrations, has chosen a palette of strong colours: powerful yellow, rose and hues of slate. However, the humour of the book, inspired by Victorian prints, remains dark.

A picture book made for adults is still an oddity in the literary world, which is why the publisher was asking for something that was more comic book -like. However, not every artist sees it as their mission to lead their audience towards explanations and reason. This creates a more active role for the viewer, or in this case the reader: they must interpret what they read and see for themselves. As it shies away from familiar genres, Närhi wound up publishing the book herself. The finished work resists linear and continuous storytelling.

Even though picture books are usually made for small children, adults are involved in the reading process: they read the text aloud while the children listen. It is also adults who choose and buy or borrow the books. The choices adults make are affected by other adults, such as children's book critics, library staff and the authors, publishers and sellers of the books. Therefore it would be naive to claim that picture books only spoke to children.

In the bright light of the corona spring, one cannot help but read the book through the lens of the current situation. Without realising it, Närhi has arrived at something very crucial: the ways people react to crises are very similar regardless of the nature of the crisis. Who is blamed, where solutions are sought, who becomes paralysed and who behaves in some other way entirely.

THE NOTHING offers the reader several simultaneous and interconnected stories and possibilities. What is interesting is that the book has no clear protagonist. The reader is presented with several people who appear to have various secrets, problems, worries and joys. The work may leave the reader confused. "Whose story am I supposed to follow?"

However, there is no right or wrong way to read the book, but all different possibilities and interpretations are allowed. Some of the stories, such as Mrs. Flan's story that is followed throughout the book, form a coherent whole while others are left open and unfinished.

People are allowed to view the picture book as a hermetic composition where the physical aspects of the work, such as its size, shape and layout also carry meaning in addition to its text and images. Besides the content itself, attention is also paid to the covers, title pages, typography and the feel and quality of the paper. These details make the reader pause to look at them even before the main story begins.



Närhi's book reminds us of the fact that real life is also random and chaotic and we can only impose order and meaning onto it with the help of new stories. If you can cope with this, you will love the book titled THE NOTHING.

*Illustrator and comic book artist Kati Närhi (b. 1973) lives and works in Helsinki. She is represented by Napa Agency. Närhi has published four graphic novels and illustrated over 20 books. The third part of Närhi's Agnes trilogy, The Seventh Guest (Seitsemäs vieras, WSOY, 2015), won the Sarjakuva-Finlandia comic art award in 2016.*

[katarhi.com](http://katarhi.com)

Text: Veera Pekkinen

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