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Invasion of the Moomins

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"Hello . . . Jerry."

"Hello . . . Moomin."

Moominpapa, he's our man! Or our horse. Or maybe our hippopotamus. Officially, he's a troll, but it's hard to tell with Moomins. One thing for sure is that Moominpapa and his family are a big deal in Finland.

As my wife, Janice, and I emerged from the customs area at the Helsinki airport, we saw posters proclaiming that the Moomins were among Finland's proudest achievements, apparently putting them right up there with Nokia cell phones, Jean Sibelius, Linux computer operating systems, Eero Saarinen and Santa Claus (the real one reportedly lives in Napapiiri, Finland, at the Arctic Circle).

Later, we turned on our hotel TV, and there they were again -- via the miracle of Japanese animation. And again at Stockmann's, the Bloomingdale's of Finland, in the form of plush toys and on coffee cups and neckties. And a few days later in the historic seaport town of Naantali there they were yet again, on their own little amusement park island. They have appeared on Finnish postage stamps (but not, to my knowledge, on Finnish currency -- yet).

But they seem not to be known in the States, except to sophisticated patrons of children's bookstores. The Moomins are the literary creation of illustrator-author Tove Jansson, a semi-reclusive, Swedish-speaking Finn who first converted her whimsical sketches into a series of children's books in the 1940s. They are lovable critters with a sense of amazement about life's vicissitudes.

It is difficult to think of an American equivalent. Disney characters? No, even though, like Donald Duck, they have no pants, the Moomins have a subtle naivete. "Peanuts"? No, they are country folk, not suburbanites, and they appear not in comic strips but in sparingly illustrated books ideal for reading aloud at the side of a wee little trundle bed.

Indeed, sleep is a common theme of the books. The Moomins sleep all winter, after eating a big hibernation eve dinner of pine needles. (Janice observes that for kids in a country that is almost totally dark half of the year, the onset of winter might be a little scary, and hearing Mom read about the Moomins' preparations for a winter-long sleep would be comforting.) Finding beds for everyone must be difficult, because under the Moominhouse roof are not only Moomintroll (the central figure) and his parents,

Moominmama and Moominpapa, but also an extended family of permanent house guests. Some are humanoid, one resembles a kangaroo, and some look like the Moomins but are called "Snork."

Moomintroll spends a lot of time with a girl troll, the Snorkmaiden. (If you can set your adult cynicism aside long enough, they will remind you of a sweet, innocent time when people of the opposite sex could just be buddies -- without one of them getting a restraining order against the other.) Moominpapa writes his memoirs; Moominmama is sort of a troll June Cleaver.

Naantali, which is also where the Finnish president lives in the summer, is full of Moominstuff. Janice and I took a special bus there from a nearby town (feeling a little bit conspicuous as the only adults on board unaccompanied by kids). The Moomin island is an old-style park, with paths and rocks and bridges, but no animatronics. You can, à la Orlando, have your picture taken with people-size, upholstered versions of the characters. Otherwise, little of the imagining is done for you, and you have to have done your homework. The "Who Will Comfort Toffle" trail, for example, assumes that you have read the book of the same name and know all about the frightened Toffle and his attempt to rescue the runaway Miffle.

The crowds of kids there when we visited clearly had no problem understanding and appreciating. They enthusiastically lined up for their trip through Moominpapa's ship. They cheered the Moomins and their befuddled magician friend during a charmingly amateurish dramatic performance. They bought Moomin-shape pastries and lollipops (yeah -- like these kids really needed more sugar).

Then they got back on the Moominbus, loaded down with Moominloot, and yelled and pouted and fussed and laughed all the way home. Again, Janice and I were out of place. We hadn't bought anything (except for Janice's Moominmama doughnut). One thing I didn't see, but would have bought, would have been a black top hat like Moominpapa's. He looks so debonair. (He's an author, you know.)

Moominpapa -- you da man. Uh, da troll.

-- Jerry Haines

Moominworld Island (in Finnish, Muumimaailma; in Swedish, Muminvarlden) is in Naantali, in the southwest corner of Finland, and is open from mid-June through mid-August. Admission is about \$12.25 adults, \$9.25 children ages 3-14.

Info: www.muumimaailma.fi. There are other Moomin-related attractions in Naantali and Tampere. You can buy Moomin merchandise online at the Moominshop(www.moominshop.com), which is operated out of Honolulu (!).

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