

## The Red Book of Farewells

**Pirkko Saisio**

**Mia Spangenberg, Translator**

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In Pirkko Saisio's autobiographical novel *The Red Book of Farewells*, a Finnish woman navigates being a lesbian in a time when homosexuality was outlawed and when the currents of communism pervaded every aspect of life.

Death opens the book and reappears—via a blood stain on a bedroom floor, a dead seal on an island, and Pirkko's mother's funeral. But there is birth as well: Pirkko has a baby girl, Sunday's Child. Relationships blossom and die: Pirkko experiences first love, but leaves it in favor of Havva, whom she goes on to co-parent with.

Written in poetic stanzas, the narrative jumps around in time: as an adult, Pirkko explores a hostile island with friends; she gives birth to her daughter in 1981; she comes to terms with her attraction to women in the 1970s. Colors permeate her narrative: Pirkko makes love to her first partner in a green room, while multiple chapters titled "the red throne" detail the communist currents of the student theater that she joins.

Dreamlike imagery blurs the lines between memory and fantasy. Pirkko's first lover is referenced as "the clown-eyed girl"; she brings Pirkko dark blue crocuses. And Havva wears heels that sound like machine guns when they connect with the ground. Pirkko writes farewells to the various places she's lived and the cafés that she's frequented; the most poignant farewells are contained in a box of letters that she rediscovers decades later, which were written after she gave birth, when she intended to commit suicide. There is no joy in finding these letters, though: "Pandora's box is full of snakes."

*The Red Book of Farewells* is a moving, uneasy, and artistic novel about growing up queer in a time of conflict.

JEANA JORGENSEN (May / June 2023)

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