

“Sing a New World into Being”:
A Review of Joseph Damrell’s *Root Cellar*
By Beth L. Virtanen, PhD

Raino Karhu, a site coordinator for archeological digs, an archeologist without his final degree, comes home to the western Upper Peninsula to see to the final days and to settling the affairs of his crazy “aunt” Viena, his mother’s distant cousin whom his family has accepted as an aunt.

At her cottage in the woods outside Ewen, Reino is gradually caught up by the power of Viena’s Finnish, runic spirituality through which Reino’s place as shaman and healer is slowly revealed to him.

At the beginning of the text, Reino reminisces about his aunt Viena’s home as he experienced it as a child:

I actually remembered that particular trunk of hers . . . because as kids we had always wanted to know what was in it, pretending that it might be something scary or weird. Everything connected to Viena struck us that way in general because her place was what you would call rustic, and the trunk just added to the mystery.

His lack of knowledge of Viena’s special powers at the outset of story is clear; even his language reflects his ignorance of the importance the gifts his aunt Viena has always possessed.

As it turns out, the trunk he finds, the one Viena has willed to him, holds the knowledge of the old ones, the Finns whose language Reino comes to speak out during his trances, but one he did not consciously know. As Reino comes to understand the true significance of the trunk, the root cellar, and his aunt Viena’s gifts to him, he develops a significantly greater awareness of the spirituality of this world, of its eternal presence and of his role in it.

At first Reino tries to escape from the trunk and the knowledge possessed in it, but he is not successful. The initial time Reino tries to get away, Tapio, an old and offensive bachelor who had known Viena, prevents his departure. On a second try, a bear seems to intervene, and on the third try he ends up in a bar in Ewen, drinking with his enemies and his friends, eventually returning to the cottage to take a sauna with someone who helps him relocate himself in relation to the powers of the runes that he seems now to be acquiring.

Slowly and with guidance from spirits and friends, Reino comes to know the eternal powers that now pass through him, and with these he readies to go out into the world to learn and grow. He says thus:

No hapless, helpless wanderer now, I scale the world and know its interstices. I sing with those ancient spirits, those ancient shamans, those ancient magi, my heart yearning to know all they know, to help this world shake off its destroyers, to see what good can come from living in a good way. They sent me a partner, these old teachers, whom I can cherish, who will care for me, to help me to walk in balance along the snow trail, to spell me in my labors, to guide me in my search. Together, we will sing a new world into being.

In his language we hear reflected the ancient runic verse of the Finns, and in the chant we are invited to join him in the recreation of a world view in concert with our rightful and proper place within this world.

While I enjoyed and recommend *Billy Maki* and *Gift*, in *The Root Cellar*, Joseph Damrell has written his finest work to date. It is reflective of a mature narrative voice and a sure sense of grounding in the place where Man ought to stand.

The text is available from North Star Press of St. Cloud.