

BACKLIGHT

Pirkko Saisio, translated from Finnish by Mia Spangenberg

1. *Backlight* is a classic example of a novel of education, or Bildungsroman. What aspects of Pirkko's education does the novel draw attention to (e.g., desire, gender, relationships, religion, nationalism, sickness, dying)? How and what does she learn?
2. The novel is bookended by two perspectives of the same early morning scene, narrated by Pirkko as a high school graduate and Pirkko 32 years later. How does this framing device inform the novel's structure? What does the title *Backlight*, and the notion of illumination from behind, highlight about the novel's relationship to time and change over time?
3. Why does Pirkko want to work at a Swiss orphanage, and is it related to her sense of a "mix-up that made me this person I don't feel I am" (pg. 64)? What impact does the summer at the orphanage have on her?
4. What do each of Pirkko's female friendships (with Ellu, Ritva, and Maria, and her observations of Tante Irma and Tante Dolores) contribute to her coming of age?
5. Being seen is an important theme in the Saisio trilogy (which also includes *Lowest Common Denominator* and *The Red Book of Farewells*). In *Backlight*, what does being seen as "a future writer" mean to Pirkko (pg. 156)? How does the novel represent her artistic awakening?
6. What literary texts, films, songs, and other cultural materials contribute to Pirkko's education? How do they inform the person and/or the writer she becomes?
7. Pirkko works at the orphanage in the summer of 1968 while political protests rage around the world, including the Prague Spring, Irish Troubles, the U.S. civil rights movement, and anti-Vietnam War protests. How does the novel understand the relationship between the personal and the political, both in Pirkko's life and more generally?
8. All the books in the Saisio trilogy employ both first- and third-person narration. What topics or forms of storytelling does this unique literary strategy make possible?



Published: June 10, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-949641-80-6

eISBN: 978-1-949641-81-3

Hardback | \$23

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