

The Stieg Larsson phenomenon

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Crime novels, detective stories, mysteries, come in all shapes and sizes, with varying national overtones and colorings. The best of them can entertain, but even the vast majority of those do not stay long in one's memory—they are not challenging or complex enough. So such books can be read, forgotten, and then re-read, on the bus, on vacation, in a waiting room.

The three novels by Swedish author Stieg Larsson, who died in 2004 at the age of 50, published in the US as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, have attracted much attention and many readers around the world.

For the English-speaking reader of a certain age any mention of Swedish crime fiction is likely to bring to mind, first of all, the novels of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö written between 1965 and 1975 (when Wahlöö died). Prominent among them were *The Man on the Balcony*, *The Laughing Policeman*, *The Abominable Man*, *The Locked Room*, and *The Terrorists*.

Then there is the more recent work of Henning Mankell, best known for his series of gloomy Inspector Wallander novels, the first of which was published in 1991. Kenneth Branagh played the lead character in a six-part British television adaptation, shot in two series of three films each in 2008 and 2009.

The plot of Stieg Larsson's novels, which he conceived of as a whole, is too sprawling to recount in detail. Two figures dominate the books: Lisbeth Salander, a young researcher and computer hacker of almost superhuman skill, with a painful history of abuse that has made her deeply mistrustful of authority, even anti-social; and middle-aged journalist Mikael Blomkvist, who specializes in exposing corruption and financial swindling.

In the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Salander and Blomkvist eventually join forces to solve a 40-year-old mystery and flush out a violent serial rapist and killer. In the course of the book, Salander also suffers a brutal assault from her legal guardian and revenges herself upon him in equally savage fashion, and Blomkvist gets the goods on billionaire corporate crook Hans-Erik Wennerström, who has previously inflicted a legal and professional defeat on him.

The second and third novels, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, which form more of a single unit, are taken up by an investigation into sex trafficking conducted for Blomkvist's magazine; a triple murder, which Salander is accused of committing; and Salander's attempt to settle the score with her terrifying father, a former Soviet spy and defector, and later a prominent gangster in Sweden. An important subplot involves the misdeeds of a secret unit of the Swedish security police, Säpo, which for convoluted reasons has conspired against Salander for years.

How is the immense popularity of these books to be explained? Larsson was the second best-selling author in the world in 2008, and his trilogy of novels has sold some 40 million copies to date. *The Girl Who Played with Fire* was the first translated work to top the *New York Times* hardcover fiction best-seller list in a quarter-century. Swedish-language films of all three books have been released, and Hollywood is planning its own versions, with Daniel Craig, the current James Bond, in a leading role.

Larsson's books are superior to run of the mill crime fiction in a number of ways. Although somewhat farfetched, his plots are carefully planned and worked through. One feels the author has actually worked at the books, and has a purpose in mind. There is something single-minded, almost fanatical, about the construction and trajectory of the work. The result is that the reader is drawn into the story and follows it attentively. Larsson's language, at least in translation, is not extraordinary, but it is clear, efficient, and does not get in the way.

The various Swedish crime fiction writers mentioned have one principal advantage over the majority of their US and British counterparts at least, the influence of left-wing ideas (the contradictions of which we shall return to). In general, the Swedish writers indicate a sympathy for the underdog and a hostility, or at least a critical attitude toward the powers that be. This social conviction is not the least important element in explaining their popular appeal.

We are not centrally treated in Larsson's work, for example, to the inner lives, the everyday stresses and strains, of CIA or FBI agents, or their Swedish equivalents. Such lives presented honestly would be of interest, of course, but in contemporary thrillers these characters and their activities are, in one way or another, thoroughly sanitized and even glorified.

The villains in Larsson's novels are individuals whom wide layers of the population instinctively consider to be villainous: corporate directors, fascist sympathizers, military spies, secret policemen, gangsters, corrupt lawyers and psychiatrists, etc. The heroes are crusading, relentless journalists and researchers, dedicated to exposing wrongdoing at the top of society. Blomkvist is a likeable figure and Salander, when she is not inflicting punishment on other people, has her intriguing and even sympathetic side.

The combination of sufficient literary skill, clever and detailed plotting, and an anti-establishment stance help explain the success of Larsson's books. Readers are looking for something out of the ordinary, something striking and lively.

Nonetheless, Larsson's novels have many unattractive features as well, which speak to some of the peculiarities of our time. Above all, his books reveal to what a degraded state a "left-wing" point of view has been reduced in current literary or semi-literary circles.

Larsson was an individual, of course, with his own life history, psychology, and conceptions. Sweden has particular political and artistic traditions. However, certain global trends unquestionably find expression in his work, many of them not healthy ones.

One is struck by the violence in the novels. The author depicts scenes of rape, torture and various forms of mayhem in graphic and gratuitous detail, without artistic distancing or much critical insight. One might go so far as to say there are even hints here and there in Larsson's work of the repugnant "torture porn" genre of horror films. (The Swedish film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* follows its source in that respect.)

The books exhibit a type of left-wing or anarchist "vigilantism" that will not help anyone. Salander in particular is remorseless in exacting personal and painful revenge, and generally the reader feels urged to side with her. The books revel in Salander's desire for retribution, including her childhood fantasy of setting her malevolent father on fire. Even her

researching, i.e., computer hacking, has overtones of physical violence: “If there was any dirt to be dug up, she would home in on it like a cruise missile. ... Her reports could be a catastrophe for the individual who landed in her radar.”

At a critical moment in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* Salander delivers a blow to the vicious killer from behind, who howls, eliciting a comment from her worthy of Clint Eastwood: “Do you like pain, creep?” Later, speaking of “men with fucked-up sexuality,” such as the serial killer, she says, “If I had to decide, men like that would be exterminated, every last one of them.” The author makes no effort to separate himself from such comments.

In *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, Larsson writes, “What actually convinced her [Salander] to decide to play the game Blomkvist’s way was her desire for revenge. She forgave nothing.” This theme, driven home again and again, has nothing in common with socialist, or even democratic, principles. How does raw vengefulness advance the struggle against oppression?

The absence of compassion—even for miserable wretches—and the general distaste for anyone who doesn’t share the author’s and characters’ obsessions and world outlook are troubling. Intriguingly, borrowing from the “law and order” right, the novels (or its principal mouthpiece, Lisbeth Salander, at any rate) reject any consideration of what drives someone to crime. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, dismissing Blomkvist’s attempts to place the murderer’s insane crimes in the context of an extremely diseased family background, Salander asserts angrily that the killer “had exactly the same opportunity as anyone else to strike back. He killed and he raped because he liked doing it.”

Sounding very much like a radio talk-show demagogue expounding on “personal responsibility,” Salander later complains “that it’s pathetic that creeps always have to have someone else to blame.”

Bound up with this is Larsson’s relentless and puerile “feminism,” which reaches absurd heights. A great portion of life, according to the author, revolves around male violence against women. The Swedish-language title of the first novel in the series is “Men Who Hate Women,” and Salander again spells out the point. After listening to Blomkvist’s theory about the killer, she remarks two-thirds of the way through the book, “I think you’re wrong. It’s not an insane serial killer who read his Bible wrong. It’s just a common or garden bastard who hates women.”

Sex trafficking, it turns out, is a perfect subject for Larsson and his journalist characters because “It’s not often that a researcher can establish roles along gender lines so clearly. Girls—victims; boys—perpetrators.” (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*) Larsson makes a concerted effort to reduce all of social life along similar lines, with deplorable results. After some 1,800 pages, the trilogy more or less ends on this remarkable note (in Blomkvist’s words): “When it comes down to it, this story is not primarily about spies and secret government agencies; it’s about violence against women, and the men who enable it!” (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*)

Larsson also apes the ultra-right in his Manichean view of humanity. One uses the words “heroes” and “villains” advisedly. Each character enters the stage unmistakably marked either “good” or “bad,” and universally lives up to his or her tag. (One reliable predictor is gender; there is not to my recollection a single female evildoer in the novels.) What Salander practices in the realm of the relations between the sexes, Blomkvist argues for in reporting: “For Blomkvist the golden rule of journalism was that there were always people who were responsible. The bad guys.” (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*) Variations on this theme too are repeated numerous times.

“Left” simplification or mythmaking is no better than any other kind. Social life and human behavior are complex, intensely contradictory phenomena, which demand profound study and thought. Larsson obviously had no time for Trotsky’s notion that the reader could take

from serious literature “a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and of the role of the subconscious, etc.”

The artistic consequences are severe. One reads Larsson voraciously, and one forgets the bulk of the story almost as forcefully and decisively. There are no moments of great drama to hold in one’s consciousness (the disturbingly violent or semi-pornographic sequences remain for different reasons), no compelling encounters and conflicts that sum up our time or our problems. In this regard, Larsson’s work unhappily resembles a considerable portion of contemporary popular writing and filmmaking.

Larsson was an admirer of science fiction, and the books have that feel to them. They concern themselves, above all, with various technological or “forensic” processes, especially Salander’s computer skills. Some of it is riveting, and Larsson’s fascination with the details of the processes is infectious. But the effect wears off, and by the end of the third book, the series is significantly losing steam.

In the end, these are not books that mirror life in any important or enduring manner. Perhaps the most damning criticism one could make is this: readers can have no more idea about the texture of life in Sweden after reading the three novels than they had before they began. Oh, one learns something about the world of Swedish journalism, how the police force and courts operate there, something about the history of Swedish pro-Nazi movements and the activities of the secret police. But the blood and sweat of everyday life? Its taste and smell? Nothing.

And here is a critical component of the type of middle class “leftism” that Larsson engaged in—the absence of any orientation toward the life of the working population, or toward social relations and problems in general. The working class is almost entirely missing. Larsson was a member of an organization that falsely called itself “Trotskyist,” but Trotsky would have only had contempt for its politics. The lack of a genuine revolutionary party in Sweden was not Larsson’s fault, but his participation in petty bourgeois protest politics (ecology, feminism, etc.) masquerading as Marxism helped disorient him and his novel-writing.

The artist is free to create whatever he or she likes, but the “social conditions in historic human society are, first of all, the conditions of class affiliation” (Trotsky). Art, which “often expresses the deepest and most hidden social aspirations,” ignores those conditions at its peril. This is not some sociological task artificially imposed on the artist, but flows from the deepest purpose of art itself. The greatest drama lies nearest to the truth, and the central truth about our world is its domination by social divisions and their implications. The greatest writers in the modern era have understood this, however they chose to interpret it.

The crime novels of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö

Even a comparison with the earlier Swedish crime fiction writers Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, also leftists, but of another generation, is instructive. Wahlöö described the pair’s goal as using “the crime novel as a scalpel cutting open the belly of the ideologically pauperized and morally debatable so-called welfare state of the bourgeois type.” Whether they achieved that is open to question, their books can be overpraised, but they certainly succeeded, at their finest moments, in providing a feeling for the distinctive features of life in Sweden at the time.

Their second novel, *The Man on the Balcony* (1967), based on the case of a man who attacked and killed two small girls in Stockholm, opens with the unsettling image captured in the book’s title. In the early morning of a hot summer’s day, a man stands silently on the balcony of an apartment building in a big city, smoking cigarettes, intently watching the street.

“The man on the balcony was of average height and normal build. His face was nondescript and he was dressed in a white shirt with no tie, unpressed brown gabardine trousers, gray socks and black shoes. His hair was thin and brushed straight back, he had a big nose and gray-blue eyes. ... The man on the balcony had no feeling of being observed. He had no particular feeling of anything. He thought he would make some oatmeal a little later.”

The individual proceeds to commit quite horrific acts, but Sjöwall and Wahlöö never portray him, or any other of their killers, as monsters. Each is portrayed within a concrete social situation: Swedish society at the time had provided for certain minimal economic and social needs, but poverty, injustice, and deep-going alienation and dissatisfaction persisted. The perpetrators of crimes in their novels tend to be the flotsam and jetsam of modern capitalist society, forgotten, isolated, resentful.

In *Murder at the Savoy* (1970), the authors describe a series of brawls, attacks and violent random acts, with which the police are suddenly confronted, as “unpremeditated crimes, almost accidents. Unhappy people, nervous wrecks, were driven into desperate situations against their wills. In almost all the cases, alcohol or drugs were of decisive importance. It may have been partly due to the heat, but more basic was the system itself, the relentless logic of the big city, which wore down the weak-willed and the maladjusted and drove them to senseless actions.” This sentiment is well expressed, and almost completely absent in Larsson.

In the same book, the killing of an executive, Palmgren, is carried out, also on the spur of the moment, by a man who has been the victim several times of Palmgren’s business operations. The killer tells police how he had sat and stewed. “After he’d been evicted, forced to move, laid off from work and finally divorced, he would sit in his lonely room in Malmö thinking over his situation. It became clearer and clearer to him who was the cause of all his troubles: Viktor Palmgren, the blood-sucker, who lines his purse at the expense of other human beings, the big shot, who didn’t give a damn about the welfare of his employees or tenants. He began to hate this man as he’d never thought it possible to hate any human being.”

The authors clearly see themselves as speaking for those who have no voice. In *The Abominable Man* (1971, filmed by director Bo Widerberg in 1976), they write: “The center of Stockholm had been subjected to sweeping and violent changes in the course of the last ten years. ... Stockholm’s inhabitants looked on with sorrow and bitterness as serviceable and irreplaceable old apartment houses were razed to make way for sterile office buildings. Powerless, they let themselves be deported to distant suburbs while the pleasant, lively neighborhoods where they had lived and worked were reduced to rubble.”

The “abominable man” of the title is a vile policeman, slain for once allowing an ill woman to die unattended in his jail-cell. A former police colleague of the murder victim tells Inspector Martin Beck of the homicide squad, the central figure in the Sjöwall-Wahlöö series, that the dead man “taught me a lot.” Beck replies, “How to commit perjury, for example? How to copy each other’s reports so everything’ll jibe, even if every word’s a lie? How to rough people up in their cells? Where the best places are to park in peace and quiet if you want to give some poor bastard a little extra going over on the way from the precinct to Criminal?”

In *The Terrorists* (1975), the last in the series, an eccentric lawyer defends a distressed young woman, falsely accused of trying to rob a bank, in court: “Rebecka Lind has not had much help or joy from society. Neither school, nor her own parents, nor the older generation in general have on the whole offered her support or encouragement. That she has not bothered to involve herself in the present system of rule cannot be blamed on her. When, in contrast to many other young people, she tries to get work, she is told that there is none.”

The girl, after a series of personal disasters, ends up shooting a government official. She later explains to Martin Beck, “It’s terrible to

live in a world where people just tell lies to each other. How can someone who’s a scoundrel and traitor be allowed to make decisions for a whole country? Because that’s what he was. A rotten traitor. Not that I think that whoever takes his place will be any better—I’m not that stupid. But I’d like to show them, all of them who sit there governing and deciding, that they can’t go on cheating people forever.”

The elements of social understanding and sympathy for humanity’s difficulties need to be revived, and significantly deepened, in contemporary fiction and film.



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