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‘Men Who Hate Women’: Masculinities, Violence and the Gender Politics of Nordic Noir

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Abstract

*Gender politics is at the heart of what crime novelist Hakan Nesser called ‘the strange genre of Nordic Noir’ (quoted in Foreshaw 2012: Preface), a contemporary body of writings with historical roots in a heavy political subtext that betrays a wider dissatisfaction with both the demise of the welfare state and the ideal of post-war utopianism in contemporary Scandinavia. Steig Larsson's *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2005) quickly became regarded as a key example of the emerging new genre of Nordic Noir and one of the biggest global publishing phenomena of the twenty-first century. As a result of its popular female protagonist, Lisbeth Salander and section headings featuring damning statistical data about male violence against women in Sweden, the novel has been celebrated as a vessel for Larsson's ‘deep feminist sympathies’ (Whitelaw 2010).*

Challenging claims that the novel offers a vision of female empowerment, this article instead suggests that Larsson uses his first fiction, and the wider Millennium Trilogy of which it is a part, to create and cull female characters using the men who ‘hate’ them as representations of the competing tensions between masculinity and violence in the new genre of Nordic Noir. Nordic Noir is the product of claustrophobia, of small countries in the midst of population crises, frustrated at a lack of safety promised in the post-war years and experiencing a growing lack of faith in the authorities governing them. This article suggests that beneath popular imaginaries of seemingly peaceful and equal societies, Nordic Noir exposes violent masculine authority as an expression of the relationship between the individual and the neoliberal state in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Nordic Noir, Gender, Politics, Genre Fiction, Steig Larsson.

Gender politics is at the heart of what crime novelist Hakan Nesser called ‘the strange genre of Nordic Noir’ (quoted in Foreshaw 2012: Preface), a contemporary body of writings with historical roots in a heavy political subtext that betrays a wider dissatisfaction with both the demise of the welfare state and the ideal of post-war utopianism in contemporary Scandinavia. Steig Larsson's *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2005) quickly became regarded as a key example of the emerging new genre of Nordic Noir and one of the biggest global publishing phenomena of the twenty-first century. As a result of its popular female protagonist, Lisbeth Salander and section headings featuring damning statistical data about male violence against women in Sweden, the novel has been celebrated as a vessel for Larsson's ‘deep feminist sympathies’ (Whitelaw 2010).

Challenging claims that the novel offers a vision of female empowerment, this article instead suggests that Larsson uses his first fiction, and the wider Millennium Trilogy of which it is a part, to create and cull female characters using the men who ‘hate’ them as representations of the competing tensions between masculinity and violence in the new genre of Nordic Noir. Nordic Noir is the product of claustrophobia, of small countries in the midst of population crises, frustrated at a lack of safety promised in the post-war years and experiencing a growing lack of faith in the authorities governing them. This article suggests that beneath popular imaginaries of seemingly peaceful and equal societies, Nordic Noir exposes violent masculine authority as an expression of the relationship between the individual and the neoliberal state in the twenty-first century.

Concerned with reframing Scandinavia in the eyes of the post-millennial world, Steig Larsson's first fiction is set in Sweden. In 2007, Sweden was ‘named as best practising democracy by *The Economist*, the least corrupt nation by Transparency International, most equal in gender relations by the World Economic Forum, and most generous donor of overseas development aid by the OECD’ (Armstrong 2010). With a lower suicide rate than France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand it appeared to be the pinnacle of national perfection. As one of the most highly developed welfare states anywhere in world, with comprehensive access to health care and education, free trade and 80% of the work force in trade unions, Sweden tops league tables for social welfare ahead of much wealthier countries like America. Significantly, the Global Gender Gap Report in 2006 rated Sweden number one in the world for gender equality. However, Sweden also enjoys above average crime rates for assault, sexual assault, hate crime and fraud. Although Scandinavian countries like Sweden seemed to be living the dream on paper, Nordic Noir is suggestive of a very different reality on the ground. As novelist Henning Mankel commented, ‘our system of justice doesn't work, democracy is doomed. I think we are worried about that, so maybe that is why detective stories are so popular in Sweden [...] Until recently it was a very cold, isolated culture. Our art can't bring about social change, but you cannot have social change without arts’ (Armstrong 2010).

Politics lie at the heart of Nordic Noir, whose historical roots lie in the landscape of the countries it represents. Debunking images of Sweden as a social paradise, Nordic Noir instead interrogates a wider loss of faith in the police and masculine authority to solve crime. The murder of the Swedish Prime Minister in 1986 – a crime for which no one has ever been successfully charged - marked the end of a humanist and controlled society, the encroachment of arbitrary brutality and a

realisation that the country was not hermetically sealed from global influences. From this point onwards, the troubles of the rest of the world flooded into Sweden with new waves of immigration threatening a formerly homogeneous society. Generating insecurity about the fate of country, these fears lie in the criminal and so appear in the crime genre. Concerned with a veritable Pandora's box of transgression, Nordic Noir expresses a wider national anxiety through the microcosm of novels and their characters. As Ibsen reminded us many years prior to the rise of Nordic Noir, social situations can create outcasts who can act violently. Reflecting on changes to the social, economic and political landscape, Nordic Noir counters images of blondes, Ikea and the midnight sun with sexual violence, a Nazi past and a corrupt corporate present.

In Nordic Noir, collective conflict can be understood through the individual. Larsson's novel offers a highly critical view of gender and identity by engaging with affairs of the state, as well as the heart. In Nordic Noir the state is not peaceful or egalitarian and in Larsson's work in particular there is something profoundly rotten in the state of Sweden. Functioning as a reflector on the rise and fall of the welfare state, Nordic Noir bears a debt to the golden age of British crime fiction as well as the hard boiled US tradition. With an emphasis on social realism and critique, trauma is mirrored in the landscape of novels that use crime as a means to reflect upon the state and society. Populated by masculine authority figures who are exploitative, violent, and aligned with a politically inspired notion of critique, Larsson focuses on excluded and marginalised women to offer the relationship between masculinity and violence as a prism through which to view contemporary neoliberal life.

Vanessa Thorpe reflects that 'crime fiction, it is clear, has now overtaken Abba and flat-pack furniture as the most influential Scandinavian export' (2010). Reflecting on internationalism and the crime genre, Zizek argues that 'main effect of globalisation on the detective fiction is discernible in its dialectical counterpart: the powerful re-emergence of a specific *locale* as the story's setting' (2005). The force of the settings from which Nordic Noir takes its name is key to the success of these novels which are set in wealthy and seemingly harmonious countries – a so-called 'soft society' according to Nesbo – where a cradle-to-grave welfare system provides a false sense of security and hides a dark underside.

The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo is both a good example of this new genre of Nordic Noir, a first fiction for its author Steig Larsson and the first part of the *Millennium Trilogy*. Book one offers an orthodox crime novel with a self-contained mystery. Number two is a police thriller and number three is a political thriller. While plotting improves throughout the trilogy, the first novel tries to encompass many sprawling plots centred around a genealogical tale of five generations of the Vanger family. Spanning several continents, the first novel bears the influence of both English and American crime fiction and situates its story in real Swedish towns – a classic marker of Nordic Noir. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, begins with Mikael Blomqvist, crusading financial hack and part-owner of 'Millennium' magazine, facing life after losing a libel action against a leading industrialist. With his reputation shredded and being personally liable for damages, the opportunity for Blomqvist to lick his wounds and earn some cash comes in the form of an offer from a former lion of Swedish industry, Henrik Vanger, who invites him to his isolated home in Sweden's northern lake district to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Harriet, his 16-year-old niece, from the

family's private island some 40 years previously. Vanger is obsessed by the thought that she was murdered by a member of his family even though nobody was ever found and no one saw her leave. Blomqvist finds himself in the middle of a much wider and more serious mystery as his investigation intersects with fundamental tenants of contemporary Swedish politics and economics. Aided by Lisbeth Salander, a computer hacker and social misfit, the pair attempt to restore justice.

Nordic Noir novels exhibit a degree of topicality that few could have anticipated in advance of the genre's development. Larsson's first fiction, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, was published in the UK in September 2008, the same week that Lehman Brothers collapsed. Casting bankers and industrialists as villains, his plots and characters hold a mirror to contemporary Swedish society, revealing a deep mistrust of government, the promotion of profound individualism and a celebration of the ethics of journalism. Sweden is not all about Volvo, Abba and Ikea, and as such Nordic Noir sets out to re-imagine the country. Encouraging a move away from images of a bland land where the sun never sets and paternity leave is endless, Nordic Noir rips this facia apart to reveal an underworld of violence, sex and corruption across men in business, law enforcement and the secret services. Reframing ideas about violence and masculinity against the experiences reality of these ideals, it explores their manifestation in debates about welfare state retrenchment, the rise of neoliberalism, and corruption in corporate practice. In this novel the Vanger corporation stands as a model for the decline of old models of masculinity and previous Swedish ways of conducting business. With its old men and declining health, the novel makes clear that the Vanger corporation must open itself to globalisation in order to survive.

Sex trafficking and immigration were prominent in the Swedish headlines at time Larsson was writing and Sweden's past social-democratic consensus was beginning to show signs of tension. The 'Sjoberg Debate' which broke out in the late 1980s and early 1990s attempted to tackle increased immigration that had pushed up unemployment as the number of asylum seekers soared and a backlash began from local governments under pressure to take them. This culminated in the city of Sjoberg taking a vote against accepting any more immigrants. Subsequent political debate led to the Aliens Act of 1989 which produced a combined immigration and integration system. 2009 saw an immigration high of over 100,000 people in a year coming to live in Sweden (the biggest groups coming from the former Yugoslavia and Iraq) and by 2010 14.3% of the population were born outside Sweden according to Eurostat. Nearly a fifth of the Swedish population is either foreign born or a child of two foreign born parents. In Larsson's novel, Dragan Armansky is the most prominent example of successful immigration. Born in Croatia to immigrant parents, he builds a successful business and contributes towards his new country. But tellingly, there are no successful female immigrants in Larsson's text. Immigration is a hot topic in Nordic Noir, a new genre which is as concerned with the threat from the outside other, as it is from the disgruntled native.

In an early email to his editor Eva Gedin, Steig Larsson asserted that his first fiction much be 'called Men Who Hate Women' since it is 'also the theme of the novels'. While this title was only retained by the Swedish version of the text – the other foreign versions opting for the more commercial and less political *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* – Larsson's original wish foregrounds gender relations as being central to the plot of the novel. Discussing his construction of characters in the same email, Larsson told his editor he had 'deliberately changed the sex roles [...]

in many ways Blomkvist acts like a typical “bimbo”, while Lisbeth Salander has stereotypical “male” characteristics and values’ (quoted in Johnson 2010). Setting gender laws and ideals against the reality of his characters life experiences in twenty-first century Swedish society, Larsson uses crime fiction to conduct a fictional exploration of the men who hate women.

The reality for women in the fictional world of Steig Larsson is that, despite the laws and advances of twenty-first century Sweden, they cannot have it all. His female characters must choose between motherhood and professional success, a relationship or a fulfilling sex life. In a novel containing numerous examples of women who are subject to sustained physical, psychological, linguistic, legal and economic abuse, gender becomes a key factor in power struggles which usually resort to violence and rape as means of revenge and justice. Suggestive of a wider system of violence against women in covert ways across all sectors of society, sexual violence becomes a mechanism in Larsson’s work. The novel prefaces each of its sections with a statistic about violence against women in Sweden (including the claim in its opening epigraph that ‘18 per cent of the women in Sweden have at one time been threatened by a man’). Yet the novel has been criticised for its conservative gender paradigms. Harriet Vanger is the only model of motherhood offered by the text which is not dysfunctional but even she is forced to flee to Australia to set up her own business (the Cochran Corporation) which cannot flourish under a sexually abuse father and a socially abusive Swedish corporate structure. There is a marked absence of a successful female immigrant in the novel and the traditional ideal seems to be staunchly Scandinavian. As security head Dragan Armansky reflects, ‘The women he was usually attracted to were blond and curvaceous, with full lips that aroused his fantasies. And besides, he had been married for twenty years to a Finnish woman named Ritva who still more than satisfied these requirements’ (36).

Larsson’s women together constitute the ultimate male fantasy, a smorgasboard variety pack of womanhood in all its various forms. Larsson’s most powerful women usually end up in bed with his protagonist Blomkvist. Erika Berger – an upper middle class, international Swedish-Belgian, lives in posh suburb of Stockholm and has a sexy and classic appearance and non-conventional sexuality (she sleeps with both Blomkvist and her husband who is bisexual and allows her to sleep with her ex and colleague on the magazine). Inspector Sonja Modig is a policewoman who thinks of her children as she draws her gun and who exhibits both physical and moral courage. Annika Giannini, Blomkvist's sister (and the one exception to the sleeping with Blomkvist rule!) is a top-flight lawyer while Amazonian investigator Monica Figuerola ends up in love with him at the end of the trilogy. The *Millennium Trilogy* as a whole represents women in masculine professions – working as private security guards, as boxers and even as female warriors. Women in these books might be editors and lawyers but significantly their work usually involves defending male sexual freedom. In *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, female agency is enabled to protect men.

As the trilogy progresses, these women are marginalised from the narrative to allow Salander to take centre stage. Salander comes to enjoy a dominant presence over all other women. Celebrating the power of the individual over the collective, the Private Investigator over the police, the crime genre promotes and is usually concerned with loner operators. In her work as a self-employed contractor, Salander is the ultimate individualist. As Mary Evans highlights in *The Imagination of Evil*, the best Scandinavian crime fiction interrogates the ground that connects the

rich, powerful (and usually male) insiders with poor, vulnerable (usually female) outsiders (2009). Larsson's novel connects corporate business, political and social corruption and criminality. However, neither the state nor the collective comes to the aid of the victims of his work, they do not protect them – and people do not turn to the state or to collectives in times of trauma – they turn to detective agencies, to specialist anonymous individuals, which is why in Larsson's novel Salander does not report her rape, Dragan Armansky's private security business does so well and the police are called upon so little.

Interrogating materialism and idealism, Larsson shows that masculinity expressed by violence lies at the heart of the bourgeois neoliberal state. Salander is raped by her guardian, not just a random man, and this imbalance of power relations is used to represent both a wider imbalance in society and the endemic corruption of responsible government bodies. Larsson has been accused of sensationalising misogyny but misogyny is not sensational. As Susan Brownmiller famously argued in her 1975 text *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* – 'rape is violence, not sex. Rape should not turn us on' (1993 [1975]: 423-4). Minimising the book's brutal rape, torture and murder of dozens of women, the end of the novel is entirely inconsistent in showing 'principled' character Blomkvist and 'feminist avenger' Salander concealing the murders from the police and the families of the victims. Thrusting the reader into the role of the voyeur, the novel engages with the problematic and largely covert relationship between masculine authority and violence. Negotiating familiar dynamics of power and control, the end of the novel shows that powerful men are still getting away with abusing helpless women - a code of silence not only sanctioned, but perpetuated, by both Salander and Blomkvist.

As Melanie Newman points out in her less than enthusiastic analysis of the novel, 'Stieg Larsson should be a feminist hero' (Newman 2009). Many readers and critics did celebrate his first fiction as offering a genuinely new and feminist icon in the shape of Salander. As one blogger reflects, 'I lost count of the book reviews I read that basically went like this: HUZDAH FEMINIST STIEG LARSSON, FEMINIST PENNER OF FEMINIST THRILLERS FOR FEMINISTS LISBETH WHAT A BABE' (Rejectionist 2010). Yet, there is no avoiding the fact that most female characters in the trilogy are, at some point across the three novels, subject to violence as an expression of male authority. The Men Who Hate Women in these novels are also men who enjoy exercising power and control over women. Despite Larsson's ostensible feminist agenda, his campaigning against the hatred of women and his work promoting equality, his novels occupy a problematic grey area in which accusations of the reproduction of aggressive gender limitations and expectations can be exchanged. The titles of the Millennium Trilogy – *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played With Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest* - imply that these are feminist texts whose main interest lies in making women the central focus of the story. However, beyond the covers, the texts can be seen as scarcely feminist at all.

In Larsson's work, sex-positivity – the celebration of sexuality as a positive aspect of life - is shown to be a male preserve. Those women who attempt to engage in this are punished and labelled and always pay the price. Offering a nod to second wave feminism in its focus on female identity and separatism in the form of individualist characters such as Salander and Ericka Berger, Larsson's women operate alone and align themselves with men rather than other women in order to

survive. As a result, Larsson creates a world devoid of female friendship or communication. What is perhaps most problematic about the relationship between masculinity and violence in these novels is that it is shown to be at least as significant and endemic a problem as fascism or corporate crime, yet these latter two are the only things explicitly condemned and punished by the text.

Despite the avowed claims of the spectral presence of the author and the championing of marketing executives, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* is no feminist polemic and nor can its central female characters be called 'feminist avenging angels' (Cohen 2009). Instead, this first fiction evidences the troubled expression of masculinity through violence. Every crime in this novel has motivations that lie in the sexual as much as in the political and its conclusion offers a depressing realignment of gender liberation and capitalism. Salander only becomes truly independent when she siphons off some of the corrupt cash and no longer needs to rely on her male guardian to dole out money to her. While the novel does represent the kind of multi plat-formed violence women face every day of their lives, a hatred of women also penetrates the nature of the criminal acts against the opposite sex. One victim is choked to death by shoving a sanitary towel down her throat while others are subject to the explicit rape fantasies of their male attackers. In this violent novel that not only represents violence against women but arguably sexualizes it, Larsson's focus on the men who hate women at the expense of the women themselves becomes part of the problem, not a solution to it.

Reflecting on the structural juxtaposition of genre fiction, Umberto Eco argues that genre 'must achieve a dialectic between order and novelty – in other words between scheme and innovation' and that this 'dialectic must be perceived by the consumer, who must not only grasp the contents of the message, but also the way in which the message transmits these contents' (1985: 173-4) In choosing to focus on the commercial potential of the 'dragon tattoo' title over the author's original 'men who hate women' title, the publishers, marketing men and male estate driving Larsson's first fiction undermine its potential as a polarising political statement about masculinity and violence in the new millennium. Every violent crime against women goes unpunished or is not brought to trial in this novel. The welfare state is clearly not working and gender equality is a distant dream. Blomkvist and Salaendar work to mask crimes against women and in doing so corroborate in the structural, systematic and sexual violence meted out. Larsson's first fiction is therefore both something new and something very old indeed. As Salander tells Blomkvist, the true horror of this story is that the criminal male is 'not an insane serial killer [...] it's a common or garden bastard who hates women' (418). Both in this first fiction and across his Millennium trilogy as whole, Steig Larsson's male characters engage in physical, psychological, emotional, linguistic, legal and political violence against women as the mask of feminist thriller slips to reveal a series of texts that revel in rape, fetishise sexual violence and act out misogynistic fantasies on the female form.

As part of a wider move towards socially conscious crime fiction, Larsson uses the new genre of Nordic Noir as a means of generating popular debate and a call for a more individual re-visioning of violence as an expression of masculine authority in contemporary society. Drawing on classic Norwegian authors like Henrik Ibsen and Amalie Skram, a tenuous fragile version of social democracy remains in this novel. As a contemporary Nordic saga, the Millennium trilogy's first

instalment presents a country focussed not on Ikea and the welfare state but on Nazis and misogynists. Yet his novel also develops the seedy aspects of Noir, the underworld exposes and the casual sex of a fast and duplicitous society. Combining elements of the police procedural with sums and surveillance, it does not push against the boundaries of the genre but work within them, addressing new meanings and contexts of a changed twenty-first century Sweden.

In the new millennium, crime fiction has diversified to become a media and cultural phenomenon. It is as a result of this diversification, a result of the 'strange genre of Nordic Noir', that crime fiction is enjoying a vibrant and growing position in the fields of not only literary studies, but translation, television, film and cultural studies the world over. By re-centring the focus on Larsson's tale on a locked-room violent thriller in which economic fraud (a Swedish company ripping off the government to fund a fake business in Russia) rather than violence against women becomes the real – and punished - crime of the tale. His publishers mobilise the political heritage of the crime genre to highlight a corruption that permeates society. As we are reminded by Blomkvist, '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' (514) This crusading journalist and his freelance private investigator take on the classic locked room mystery of Harriet's disappearance to reveal much wider truths about Swedish society, and crime fiction, in the new millennium. Innovating rather than redefining the crime genre his amateur detectives Blomkvist and Salander chart the rise of violence as an expression of masculine authority, celebrating individuality over the collective as the ultimate expression of neoliberal principles in contemporary Sweden.

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