

# The Captivating Chill

## Why Readers Desire Nordic Noir

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**ABSTRACT:** This article outlines some of the common denominators of Nordic crime fiction: characteristics beyond the geographical setting, which are shared by a majority of the fiction included in concepts like *Nordic Noir* or *Scandicrime*, and which seem to make this fiction especially attractive to international readers. Five such factors are found to be of particular importance: 1) The Stieg Larsson effect, 2) Welfare state criticism, 3) (Relative) gender equality and strong women characters, 4) Exotic landscapes and settings, and 5) A strong bond to the Anglo-American crime fiction tradition. Many aspects of these common denominators are also shown to be related to or functioning as symbols of a national and/or Nordic identity.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article décrit certains des dénominateurs communs de la fiction criminelle nordique : des caractéristiques allant au-delà du cadre géographique, qui sont partagées par une majorité de la fiction incluse dans des concepts tels que *Nordic Noir* ou *Scandicrime*, et qui semblent rendre cette fiction particulièrement attrayante vis-à-vis des lecteurs internationaux. Cinq de ces facteurs sont jugés d'une importance particulière : 1) L'effet Stieg Larsson, 2) La critique de l'État providence, 3) L'égalité (relative) des sexes et des personnages féminins forts, 4) Des paysages et décors exotiques, et 5) Un lien fort avec la tradition anglo-américaine de la fiction criminelle. Il est également démontré que de nombreux aspects de ces dénominateurs communs sont liés à ou fonctionnent en tant que symboles d'une identité nationale et/ou nordique.

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In the last few years, crime fiction from the Nordic countries has captivated a world audience. What is often collectively labelled as *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, *Scandicrime*, *le polar polaire*, or *Schwedenkrimi*, and has lately been embraced by the catchier concept of *Nordic Noir*, consists of a very diverse collection of authors and novels from five different countries and numerous crime fiction sub-genres. Nevertheless, despite the variety, this fiction seems to share something beyond the nationalities of its authors, something that is desired by international crime fiction audiences. In this article, I will outline some of the common denominators of Nordic crime fiction: characteristics beyond the geographical setting, which are shared by a majority of this fiction, and which seem especially attractive to international readers. As will be shown, many of these common denominators are also related to or functioning as symbols of a national and/or Nordic identity.

## The Concept of Nordic Noir

The concept of Nordic Noir embraces a large and very diverse collection of novels—and sometimes also film and TV productions. Its common thread is that it all belongs to the genre of crime fiction, albeit widely defined, but the term covers anything from traditional whodunits, to spy-novels and thrillers. The most obvious common denominator, however, seems to be that the authors originate from the Nordic countries: from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, or Finland. In terms of chronology, Nordic Noir generally refers to the relatively recent decades, starting with the Swedish Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's novels of the mid-1960s. Conceptually speaking, however, the main focus tends to be on the years since the turn of the Millennium, 2000. The Nordic Noir crime novels can be set anywhere and everywhere—from rural Iceland to the Nordic metropolitan capitals such as Stockholm and Copenhagen, to places in Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, Australia, as well as in the United States—and most likely Canada too.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that most of the fiction embraced by the Nordic Noir concept has nothing to do with “Noir” as we traditionally know it from international crime fiction and film history. Part of the truth about why the use of this term has become so popular is, of course, that Nordic Noir has a great alliteration and sounds catchy, but there is a little more to it than that. Based on an examination of large numbers of international reviews of and articles about Nordic crime fiction, the following can be noted: first, the “noir” in Nordic Noir seems to refer to an idea about the cold and dark Nordic winters, when days are short and nights long, and to the waste and desolate landscapes of the northern latitudes. International scholars and critics interpret the sparsely populated landscape and the extreme character of the seasons almost as symbols representing a Nordic

sentiment or mentality. The cold and darkness along with the Nordic countryside scenery is also commonly reflected on the covers of international translations, for example the cover images on Camilla Läckberg's *The Ice Princess* (2008), Jo Nesbø's *The Leopard* (2011), and Helene Tursten's *The Glass Devil* (2007), just to mention a few, all display a snowy countryside landscape with frosted trees set against a black sky.<sup>2</sup> No matter in what season the novels are set, a disproportionate number have snowy scenes on their covers, and a large portion of the remainder feature images of Nordic landscapes—even if they are set in metropolitan cities. An example of the latter is Liza Marklund's *The Bomber* (2011), which is set in Stockholm but depicts a tree-lined countryside winter road on the cover.

Second, there is a common preconception that Nordic fiction is particularly violent (cf., Gallagher), but although there is the occasional very violent story, Nordic crime fiction is actually no more violent than any other crime fiction. This reputation has probably originated from Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy, and particularly from the scenes in *Män som hatar kvinnor* (2005) [*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* 2009] where Lisbeth Salander is raped and when she later takes revenge by, in turn, raping her rapist (Larsson 230–35, 240–46). In Larsson's text, these rape scenes are short and not very explicitly described. Nevertheless, they have become the most widely discussed scenes of Nordic crime fiction, and as they have been used to illustrate the abundance of graphic violence in crime fiction in general, they have gathered a reputation that has very little to do with what is actually present in Larsson's novel (cf., Horeck, Gregersdotter, and Åström 4).

Third, in addition to the cold and dark landscapes and the reputation of excessive violence, the Nordic Noir concept also draws on the bleakness of the crime genre in general. Crime and criminality are by definition dark aspects of contemporary society, aspects that are mirrored in all crime fiction—be it Nordic or any other—and this has also no doubt contributed to the labelling of Nordic crime fiction as Noir.

## The Five Attractions of Nordic Noir

Why do foreign readers then desire Nordic Noir? And are there really any unifying elements, common to this large and diverse body of literature? The answer to the second question is actually “yes,” and these common aspects also constitute an important part of what makes these novels so desirable to an international audience. Making generalizations concerning the motivations of large and diverse audiences must of course always be based primarily on initiated guesswork. In this case, the reasons suggested in what follows as to why international readers have developed a preference for Nordic Noir are founded in the reading of an extensive amount of international (primarily English language) reviews and other reactions to Scandinavian crime fiction over many years as

well as in the study of cover designs and other promotional material relating to the fiction in (primarily English) translation. In addition to the observations of its reception and promotional material, the many questions and comments I have received from foreign readers and scholars over the years when speaking about Scandinavian crime fiction in international contexts have also been taken into consideration. This has led to the conclusion that there are five main reasons why international readers desire Nordic Noir—as apart from just craving crime fiction in general—and these are also factors common to a large part of Nordic crime fiction of recent decades:

1. The Stieg Larsson effect
2. Welfare state criticism
3. (Relative) gender equality and strong women characters
4. Exotic landscapes and settings
5. A strong bond to the Anglo-American crime fiction tradition

I believe these five factors to be of equal importance. Additionally, a few more but somewhat less important factors can be included: melancholic and “defective” police detectives, (mostly alleged) excessive violence, and (mostly alleged) “Swedish sin” and sex. All the above factors will now be addressed and explained one by one, before the article is rounded off with a few concluding remarks about what readers of Nordic Noir really desire that makes them choose this particular crime fiction.

### **The Stieg Larsson Effect**

Since the world-wide success of Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy, most commercial publishers of fiction around the globe have attempted to “discover” and contract the next Stieg Larsson from among the Nordic crime writers. This has meant that international rights to novels by numerous authors have been bought to an extent that would never have been possible otherwise. The *Millennium*'s success has made publishers more inclined to take their chances with Nordic authors. This, in turn, has increased the visibility of Nordic crime fiction, and thus made it more easily accessible to readers, making them buy and read more crime novels from the region. Readers and publishers both seem to perceive the geographical origin and the comparisons with Larsson as an emblem of quality. Expressions such as “The next Stieg Larsson” (Nesbø 2009), “Step aside Stieg Larsson. Holt is the queen of Scandinavian crime” (Holt), and “Iceland’s answer to Stieg Larsson” (Sigurðardóttir) are commonly printed on the covers of English translations, thus showing that Larsson has become a benchmark for the quality of Nordic crime fiction as a whole. Additionally, just like the publishers, many individual readers also strive to be able to “discover” the next Stieg Larsson

among the numerous Nordic crime writers around, before their friends do and before the (potential) real hype begins for a successor. There is of course always the risk that readers might feel a bit let down when realizing that not all Nordic crime writers are as great. However, the risk of being disappointed is mitigated by the excellent translators often involved, who in many cases actually end up improving the quality of the Nordic novels. For example, Henning Mankell's and Camilla Läckberg's language, in both cases a quite simple language in the Swedish originals, often becomes more aesthetically advanced in the English translations by Laurie Thompson (Mankell), Steven T. Murray (Läckberg), and Tiina Nunnally (Läckberg).

### Welfare State Criticism

Since Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö published their ten novel police procedural series *Roman om ett brott* (1965–75) [*The Story of a Crime* 1967–76] in the 1960s and 1970s, Scandinavian crime fiction has been known for its social and political criticism, and in international scholarship it is often concluded that Sjöwall and Wahlöö politicized the police procedural genre (cf., Dove 19, 23, 217–24, 240, 242). Over the years, the social criticism aspect has spread to all crime fiction sub-genres in the Nordic countries, and although by no means all Nordic crime writers engage in social and/or political criticism in their novels, this is still a strong critical current in present day crime fiction from these countries. Since the 1950s, the Nordic welfare societies have developed a reputation abroad for being a successful middle way between capitalism and communism, a type of society where the state takes care of its citizens. People from other parts of the world are often curious—sometimes even envious—of the Nordic welfare states with their high taxes that provide such things as free education, free healthcare, and free care for children and the elderly. Although this is not as true as it used to be, as the welfare systems are currently in the process of being dismantled, many people abroad still believe things to be the way they used to be in the past, and they still want to learn more about these strange societies.

Nordic crime fiction is mostly concerned with realistic depictions of society here and now, while purely historical crime novels from Scandinavia are relatively rare (for exceptions, see Agger 89–136).<sup>3</sup> This focus on the present makes Nordic crime fiction an excellent source of insights into their welfare state systems. It is probably true that crime fiction is one of the main sources of knowledge about the Nordic countries for a majority of people around the world and, apart from for example IKEA, crime fiction provides this knowledge packaged into attractive and easily accessible stories. A large number of the crime writers apply a critical perspective when portraying these welfare state societies, examining and interrogating how they really function. International crime fiction readers thus get the “inside scoop” as they learn about the not-so-perfect aspects of these

welfare states—thereby getting an upper hand on their friends who still believe everything is fine and dandy in Scandinavia. The attraction in reading about the welfare states might also be tainted by just a little hint of *schadenfreude*, as international readers might take comfort, and perhaps even pleasure, in learning the fact that “perfect” Scandinavia is not so perfect after all.

### **(Relative) Gender Equality and Strong Women Characters**

As when it comes to fiction readers in general, a majority of readers of most crime fiction sub-genres are women, and these women naturally desire strong women characters to identify with. Nordic Noir has numerous women authors—in Sweden between 35 and 40% of the novels published in the 2000s have been written by women (“Topplistor”). Many of these women writers have brought strong women protagonists into their fiction—such as Liza Marklund’s Annika Bengtson, Leena Lehtolainen’s Maia Kallio, Elsebeth Egholm’s Dicte Svensen, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir’s Þóra Guðmundsdóttir, and Anne Holt’s Hanne Wilhelmsen—, but there are also many tough women protagonists in crime novels by male Nordic authors, for example Stieg Larsson’s Lisbeth Salander or Arnaldur Indriðason’s Elínborg.

Internationally, the Nordic countries are known for their gender equality, and reading about women who combine career and family or men who take parental leave, cook for their family, and clean the house is also part of the Nordic Noir attraction for women readers from other countries. Even though most Nordic readers still find crime fiction of their countries to be dominated by gender stereotypes and outdated gender roles—and know that their countries still have a long way to go in terms of gender equality—, to international readers much of this still seems progressive and thus contributes to the attractiveness of Nordic Noir.

### **“Exotic” Landscapes and Settings**

Nordic literature has a long and strong tradition of portraying nature and landscape, and this is something that has also found its way into crime fiction from the different regions. Typical of this is how Henning Mankell in his Wallander novels so often uses descriptions of the weather in order to illustrate how his characters feel and how the investigations are progressing, or the way Mons Kallentoft lets the seasons play an important part in his novels and inscribes nature with an essentially innate evil, or how Åsa Larsson makes her characters have an almost symbiotic relationship with the landscape of the far north where her novels are set. Nordic crime writers in general tend to dedicate a lot of focus and space to setting, often to a far greater extent than their international colleagues do (Lundin 8).

It is probably true that few international readers have actually visited the Nordic countries, but they often picture the large and sparsely populated landscapes of the north as something exotic; a land with its extensive forests, deep lakes, and wide mountain tracts—where wolves, moose, reindeer, and perhaps even polar bears roam—seems far removed from the densely populated urban areas of many countries, with their considerably larger populations in relation to geographical size. Contributing to the exoticism are also the long, cold, and dark winters and the summers with almost eternally long days and the midnight sun. This might appear almost as a fairy-tale setting, in which people with strange habits and traditions live in colourful little houses, people who with hedonistic rites celebrate midsummer, and then in almost Ku Klux Klan-like white robes and with burning candles celebrate the darkest time of the year.

Nordic nature and landscape are also emphasized and exaggerated in both book covers and in how they are received as the Nordic novels migrate abroad. It is the exotic and foreign that is expected to generate desire in readers (and viewers), a dream of a different place, one that is spacious and open. Natural elements and scenery are also extensively used in order to symbolize the Nordic countries and a Nordic identity. The promotional shots from BBC's televised Wallander series constitute a particularly illustrative example, dominated as they are by Swedish rapeseed fields against clear skies in vibrating yellow and blue, colours reminiscent of the Swedish flag, thus stressing that this is something very different from your generic British crime series.

### **Influences from the Anglo-American Crime Fiction Tradition**

Since its beginnings in the 19th century (Bergman 2014, 152–53), the Nordic crime fiction traditions have always been inspired by British and American predecessors and crime fiction sub-genres. This makes the Nordic novels easily recognizable and accessible for international audiences. The recognition of genre conventions softens any cultural clashes, makes the differences between the legal systems seem less confusing, and makes any allusions and/or references to crime fiction tradition recognizable and familiar. This creates a perfect balance between the exotic and unaccustomed, on the one hand, and the comfortable and familiar, on the other hand. It makes readers feel safe while exploring the foreign Nordic otherness. An important reason behind the success of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy is the creative way in which he incorporated numerous crime fiction sub-genres and crime fiction references into his work (Bergman 2013a, 110, 115–16).

### Additional Factors

Finally, a few more factors involved in making Nordic Noir attractive to international readers should be briefly mentioned. One such factor is the melancholic and “defective” police detective, who has been around since Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s Martin Beck character. At first glance, these Nordic detectives might not seem too different from Colin Dexter’s British Chief Inspector Morse or Michael Connelly’s American Harry Bosch, but when taking a closer look it becomes clear that the Nordic detectives generally tend to be more fallible. They have more problems with their bodies and bodily functions, they doubt their abilities to a greater extent, and they make more mistakes. This makes them seem more human than many of their international counterparts, and, in turn, perhaps more loveable. Additionally, the detective’s failing body is one of the most common symbols of the disintegrating welfare society, particularly in Swedish crime fiction—from Martin Beck’s colds, flus, and depressions to Kurt Wallander’s stomach problems, diabetes, and Alzheimer’s disease.

Nordic Noir has also, as initially mentioned, developed a reputation for being excessively violent. Violence is an important part of the entertainment industry today and something that people enjoy exploring in the safe manner of reading a book or watching a movie. Even though it is untrue that Nordic Noir is more violent than any other form of crime fiction—of course there are some very violent examples from Scandinavia too, but they tend to be exceptions—this is something that makes many readers curious; they want to see if it is really true and, if so, what that would be like.

The Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, also have a reputation for liberal attitudes towards sex—who has not heard about “Swedish sin”? It is a well-established truth that sex sells, or rather, in this case, the expectation of sex sells. Even though sex might be less of a taboo subject in the Nordic countries than perhaps in countries where religion still plays a more important role in society, it is hardly true that Scandinavians have more sex or are more promiscuous than people in the world in general. Nor is it true that crime fiction from the region contains more sex than other crime fiction. However, in the last 15 years, there has been a stronger focus on the personal relationships and love lives of the detective characters in Nordic crime fiction than there used to be. Whether this has brought more explicit depictions of sex into the fiction is unclear, but it has probably brought more healthy and non-criminalized sex into these books—some of it explicit, but most of it rather in-between chapters and out of sight of the reader. Still many foreign readers approach Nordic Noir with an expectation of sex, something that contributes to its attractiveness.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, what international readers do desire as they approach Nordic Noir, as apart from any other crime novel, can thus be narrowed down to:

1. Identification with a life that is in some way assumed to be “better”—whether in terms of gender equality, social welfare, or more sex.
2. Knowledge of the exotic. Whether it is Nordic nature and cultural habits, Swedish sin, excessive violence, welfare state politics, or just identifying the next hyper-bestseller—these are things about which readers are curious and want to know more.
3. *Schadenfreude*. As readers acquire some insights into life in the Nordic welfare states, they realize that everything is not as perfect as it is reputed to be. This can make international readers feel better or smug about themselves and their own life and society, knowing that the Scandinavians do not really have that much to be so proud of... except perhaps their great crime fiction traditions.

## NOTES

1. Actually, the first Icelandic crime fiction story, “Íslenzkur Sherlock Holmes” (1910) [*An Icelandic Sherlock Holmes* 1994], was written by an Icelandic immigrant in Canada, Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, about other Icelandic immigrants in Canada (Jakobsdóttir 46).
2. Many of these novels have been published in several different editions in English translation, but the covers referred to here are found on the editions listed in the references; the same is applicable to all specific covers subsequently mentioned.
3. It is, however, very common that Swedish crime novels with a present-day setting also contain a back story set in historical times. For example, it has been particularly common to return to the Swedes involvement with the German Nazis during World War II (cf., Bergman 2013b).

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