

Bergman, Kerstin. 2014. *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir*. Milan: Mimesis Edizioni. 191 pages. ISBN: 9788857519838.

This study by Kerstin Bergman is one of two recent books on Swedish crime fiction (SWCF). The other, by Steven Peacock (2014), focuses on adaptations of Swedish mysteries as feature films and television series, while Bergman writes exclusively about the genre in its novel form. Bergman has written a history of her subject, from the 19th century to the present day, though her focus is on the late 20th and early 21st centuries: “This book aims to provide a thorough survey of contemporary Swedish crime fiction, an account easily accessible to avid crime fiction readers, while simultaneously being useful to an academic audience of scholars, teachers, and students” (11). Her first chapter is a short overview of SWCF, including the important but not widely known fact that Edgar Allan Poe was not the originator of the mystery genre. Bergman points to a number of Scandinavian novels and stories involving a mixture of crime investigation and the gothic, including Carl Jonas Love Almqvist’s short story “Skällnora Qvern” (1838) [Skällnora Mill] (13). However, Prins Pierre’s *Stockholms-detectiven* (1893) [The Stockholm Detective] “is the first Swedish novel where a coherent story about a crime and the investigation of that crime is at the centre of events” (13–14). Bergman goes on to record the influence of Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie on SWCF in the early to mid-20th century, and to argue that Stieg Trentner and Maria Lang are the first “Golden Age” Swedish detective fiction writers.

Chapter II examines the police procedural from the 1960s on, with special emphasis on Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s Martin Beck series, which were, for most English-speaking readers at least, the first SWCF novels to challenge the British Golden Age writers such as Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers and the American hard-boiled genre made famous by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. For Bergman, the Martin Beck novels are important, not just for their high literary quality, but because the authors were the first to have “politicized the police procedural genre” (22) by demonstrating that beneath the “idyll” of its welfare state, “Sweden was turning into an increasingly capitalistic, harsh and brutal society where the class divides were growing” (34). Thus, Sjöwall and Wahlöö broke from the Golden Age whodunits and paved the way for a darker vision of Sweden in later SWCF. Bergman ends the chapter with a detailed analysis of the last Martin Beck novel *Terroristerna* (1975) [The Terrorists]; this novel attacks the new Swedish capitalism, all political parties, and the media, and, in short, presents Sweden “as a terrible place to live” (45). Bergman quotes critic David Geherin’s view that the authors’ “bitter and sarcastic tone” had taken their critique of Sweden’s decline a bridge too far (41). Nonetheless, especially in their last novel, they paved the way for contemporary writers such as Henning Mankell with his

disillusioned view of Swedish society and its police and Stieg Larsson's exposure of corruption and neo-Nazism in high places.

I found Bergman's discussion of Mankell less rewarding. Her focus is on how the Swedes and their police forces deal with "the other" in his police procedural novels, "the other" meaning both legal immigrants and criminals from post-Soviet Eastern Europe and South Africa. She selects three Mankell novels that exemplify this confrontation with the other: *Danslårarens återkomst* (2000) [*The Return of the Dancing Master*]; *Kennedys hjärna* (2005) [*Kennedy's Brain*]; and *Den orolige mannen* (2009) [*The Troubled Man*]. The first two are odd choices. *The Return of the Dancing Master* is a fine novel, but does not include Kurt Wallander; *Kennedy's Brain* is, I think, one of Mankell's weaker efforts, a venture into John le Carré territory without le Carré's mastery of the international thriller genre. *The Troubled Man* does centre on Wallander, and shows Mankell at something like his best. However, Bergman's discussion is too taken up with character and theme: Wallander's drift towards Alzheimer's; Linda's marriage and her baby; and a generalized paragraph on the Cold War, which fails to demonstrate how vital this era is to the novel's complexity, symbolism, and suspense.

Two fine central chapters contrast novels set in Stockholm with those located in "The Neo-Romantic Countryside: From Maria Lang to Mari Jungstedt" (103–19). The latter is especially rewarding, with its evocation of landscapes such as Camilla Läckberg's Fjällbacka, Åsa Larsson's Kiruna in the Swedish Arctic, Johan Theorin's Öland, and Mari Jungstedt's Gotland, which Bergman describes as "a small and closed community" akin to the locale of Caroline Graham's *Midsomer Murders* (112). In these "pastoral" novels, there is an absence of that social critique (114) that Bergman finds in the Martin Beck and Wallander series. However, Sweden's neutrality in WWII is being questioned in such works as Läckberg's *Tyskungen* (2007) [*The Hidden Child*], and Larsson's *Till dess din vrede upphör* (2008) [*Until Thy Wrath Be Past*].

The final chapters devoted to SWCF, are centred on the most famous Swedish crime novelist, Stieg Larsson, and one who is far less known outside Sweden, Arne Dahl. This section of Bergman's book can, I think, be faulted for her tendency to digress, to cram in so many writers analogous to Larsson and Dahl, that the reader feels bombarded by too much information. The study ends, curiously, with an excursion to crime fiction written in Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland—countries that deserve separate studies rather than a cursory glance. These glitches aside, Kerstin Bergman has provided readers with an extremely well researched, thorough, and rewarding companion to Swedish Noir. When one has read her book, it is hard to believe how much informed, fascinating, and accessible scholarship has been packed into well under 200 pages. Her work can

be recommended to anyone interested in Nordic Noir or to those who are curious about the worldwide success of the genre.

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