

Forshaw, Barry. 2013. *Nordic Noir: The Pocket Essential Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction, Film & TV*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials. 160 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84243-987-6.

Barry Forshaw is the author of *The Man Who Left Too Soon: The Life and Works of Stieg Larsson* (2010) and *Death in a Cold Climate: A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (2012). In a review article in this journal (2013), I concluded with regard to *Death in a Cold Climate* that while it was a useful and often insightful guide, it suffered from a tendency to digress and to pad the writing with lengthy and often irrelevant quotations from authors, translators, and publishers (Lingard 184), and too great a concentration on Swedish writers at the expense of their colleagues in the other Nordic countries. *Nordic Noir* offers a quantum leap in organization and balance. Forshaw still uses quotations, mainly from authors and translators, but these are always to the point, and many are from personal interviews and conversations that provide a welcome sense of immediacy to the reader. Similarly there is a fairer balance among the five Nordic countries, including the Faroe Islands, in political terms Danish, but with a literary tradition of their own, most notably in the novels of William Heinesen, whose *De fortabte spillemænd* (1950) [*The Lost Musicians* 1971] is to my mind a masterpiece of magic realism.

After a brief survey of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's Martin Beck series (13–16), Forshaw devotes two chapters each to writers who left too soon: the late Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson. Whereas Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's Martin Beck novels enjoyed a brief fame outside Sweden during the 1970s, Forshaw rightly sees Kurt Wallander as the "Trojan Horse" of contemporary Nordic crime fiction. Forshaw is not alone in his opinion that Mankell, like P. D. James, raised the bar of detective fiction with "impeccable plotting and nuanced characterization" (18), values to which Forshaw adds a strong social/political conscience evident, for example, in *Mördare utan ansikte* (1991) [*Faceless Killers* 1997] and *Den vita lejoninnan* (1993) [*The White Lioness* 1998] (19). Mankell points out that there is also a good deal of social comment in Conan Doyle, a writer he admires. There follows an informative section based on a conversation between Forshaw and Mankell in the lounge of an expensive London hotel. Amusingly, only Mankell seems aware of the mice scurrying about (24)—a scene worthy of *Fawlty Towers*.

Mankell remained tactfully neutral about which actor—Rolf Lassgård, Krister Henriksson, or Kenneth Branagh—had most faithfully portrayed Kurt Wallander (26–27). He did, however, agree with Forshaw that Ingmar Bergman, Mankell's father-in-law, might have taken the same approach to filming *An Event in Autumn* (2012)—based on *Händelse i hösten* (2004), originally published in Holland as *Het Graf* [2004]—the English-language film directed by Toby Haynes, which had been shown the night before: "Principally, this would have involved letting the landscape and the silence interact with the characters—something that the

director has tried to do here” (27). The conversation goes on to cover Mankell’s political beliefs, engagements, and novels such as *Kennedys hjärna* (2005) [*Kennedy’s Brain* 2007] and *Kinesen* (2007) [*The Man from Beijing* 2010]. Mankell makes it clear that these “are about the times we’re living in” (29). His reference to John le Carré suggests a transition from police procedural to the espionage novel, and he praises le Carré for making readers more aware of the cold war and contemporary issues such as corrupt pharmaceutical companies, the focus, as Mankell says, of *Kennedys hjärna* [*Kennedy’s Brain*] (29). On a personal note, I would suggest that *Den orolige mannen* (2009) [*The Troubled Man* 2011] is a brilliant synthesis of present-day detection and cold-war espionage. As Forshaw’s conversation with Mankell ends, the mice are still busy and still unnoticed by everyone except Forshaw and the Swedish author: a found image perhaps, to borrow a chapter heading from *Den orolige mannen*, of what his novels have always been about: “Händelser under ytan” [Events below the surface] (149).

It is not a misuse of the term to say that Stieg Larsson’s death in 2004 was tragic. In 2005, *Männ som hatar kvinnor* [*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* 2008], the first novel in his Millennium Trilogy, became the best-ever selling Swedish book and a world-wide publishing sensation. As Forshaw never met Larsson, his chapter, “Lisbeth Salander’s Legacy,” concentrates on the trilogy’s heroine, the question of Larsson’s merits or demerits as a writer, and the possibly excessive presence of sexual abuse of women by men, suggested in the first novel’s Swedish title: *Männ som hatar kvinnor* [Men Who Hate Women.] Though Forshaw goes on to praise the author’s creation of Salander as “the single most distinctive female character in modern crime fiction” (38), he is surely guilty of exaggeration when he writes that Salander is “repeatedly raped and abused throughout the novel sequence” (34). There is one case of rape—admittedly horrible—in the present time sequence; Salander’s earlier experiences of abuse occurred many years before the plot begins, to become valuable material for her defence in the very well-crafted trial chapters of the third novel, *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (2007) [*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* 2009]. Moreover, Larsson never sensationalizes the trilogy’s sexual content, which reflects both his passionate feminism as well as his dangerous campaign, as a journalist, against Swedish neo-Nazism. While agreeing with Forshaw’s verdict that Larsson’s prose is “utilitarian” (36) compared with Mankell’s, it is hard not to admire his plotting, characterization, and sense of place. The island where Mikael Blomkvist and Salander track down the neo-Nazi serial killer of marginalized women is vividly realized. Forshaw points out the influence of Agatha Christie, a writer admired by Larsson, in this isolated locale (35). Forshaw concludes that the author’s “sociopathic Goth heroine and the caustic examination of the Swedish dream in Larsson’s world of massive government corruption and sexual corruption and sexual abuse had a seismic impact on the world of popular fiction” (38).

One bone I have to pick with Forshaw is his apparent belief that the genus “English-speaking reader” only exists in Britain and America. I exchange emails about Nordic crime fiction with an Australian friend of my sister, who takes university courses on the topic, and there must be millions who read English translations of Mankell and Stieg Larsson in Africa, Canada, the Indian subcontinent, and New Zealand. This insularity appears in his section on Camilla Läckberg, where he complains that this powerful Swedish writer has yet to make a breakthrough in the UK. I can simply reply that the McConnell (public) Library in Sydney, Nova Scotia, has all her novels, which can also be found in Chapters and Indigo in Halifax. Forshaw does go on to show due admiration for Läckberg’s Fjällbacka, which he calls “one of the most perfectly realized settings in crime fiction from any country” (41). Läckberg told Forshaw “that she is most comfortable describing such a locale (Fjällbacka is actually her hometown) rather than a more cosmopolitan, less insular setting” (41).

In the chapters on the other Nordic countries, Forshaw widens the reader’s knowledge by introducing writers and novels unknown hitherto to this reader, and I would imagine many others: the Norwegian K. O. Dahl, for example, whose *Den fjerde raneren* (2005) [The Fourth Man] “is a solid noir story” (96); Dahl’s 1930s compatriot Arthur Omre’s *Flukten* (nd) [The Escape] described by Dahl as “one of the first and best noir stories written in Norway” (97); and the Faroese novelist Jógvan Isaksen’s *Blið er summernat i Førolandi* (1990) [Gentle is a Summer Night in the Faroes; not yet, apparently, translated into English], a tale of “brutal murder and Nazi gold” (107). In the Norwegian chapter, Forshaw takes his eye off the ball in a discussion of Anne Holt who “hardly paints a roseate view of Denmark’s urban areas and outer reaches” (91). Well... no.

Forshaw ends his study with his own choice of the top twenty Nordic Noir novels, the top six Nordic Noir Films, and the top six Nordic noir TV dramas.

Nordic Noir is exactly what it promises to be: *The Pocket Essential Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction, Film & TV*. It is the best English-language introduction to its chosen genre and can be recommended to first-time and more experienced readers alike.

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REFERENCES

- Lingard, John. 2013. “Scandinavian Crime Fiction: A Review of Recent Scholarship.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 21: 164–89.