

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen. 2017. *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury. 241 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4725-2774-5.

It is a measure of Scandinavian crime fiction's international popularity that this is the fifth English-language book on the subgenre I have reviewed for *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*. As his title suggests, Stougaard-Nielsen's recently published book concentrates on Scandinavian crime fiction (hereafter SCF) from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

In keeping with the novels he selects for appraisal, the author's approach is, in his own term, "socio-critical" (88). In the early chapters, the book's focus is the perceived collapse of Sweden's welfare state or, as Per Albin Hansson optimistically called it in 1928, "folkhemmet" [the people's home] (11). This leads Stougaard-Nielsen into what I see as his study's most significant flaw: an excessive concentration on the second half of the twentieth century, especially the 1960s to the 1980s, a time when the cracks in the Swedish welfare state first became too large to ignore. This is a flaw because the study is part of Bloomsbury's Twenty-First Century Genre Fiction Series (ii), which includes books on apocalyptic fiction and "crunch lit." With a few exceptions, 129 of *Scandinavian Crime Fiction's* 212 pages (excluding the bibliography and index) are devoted to novels written in the twentieth century. For example, almost 8 pages (30–37) are devoted to Anders Bodelsen's *Tænk på et tal* (1968) [*Think of a Number* 1969] and 22 pages (39–61) to Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's ten-volume series *Roman om et brott* (1965–75) [*Novel of a Crime*]. Even when Stougaard-Nielsen discusses writers whose creative output lay or still lies in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, he selects novels by Gunnar Staalesen and Henning Mankell from the twentieth century. There are ten insightful pages on Stieg Larsson's *Männ som hatar kvinnor* (2005) [*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* 2008] (100–10), but it is not until he makes an unexpected and valuable analysis (130–34) of the Gothic crime fiction novel *Låt den rätte komma in* (2004) [*Let the Right One In* 2009] by John Ajvide Lindqvist that Stougaard-Nielsen not only moves into this century but begins to treat SCF as literature more than political tracts.

It is, I think, fair to accept the 1990s as a gateway to the twenty-first century, and by far the most rewarding and insightful section of the book is Chapter 6, titled "Criminal Peripheries" (139–69). Here the author offers us close readings of Peter Høeg's influential *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992) [*Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* 1993] and Kerstin Ekman's *Händelser vid vatten* (1995) [*Blackwater* 1995]. The peripheries in question are Smilla's native Greenland and, in Ekman's novel, "North Western Jämtland in central Sweden" (156). Stougaard-Nielsen demonstrates how subtly Høeg interweaves a strong melodrama involving Denmark's stranglehold on Inuit culture and its environmentally dangerous exploitation of the ore contained in a meteor that also houses "a deadly parasite"

with the heroine’s ability to “read” traces left by humanity in ice and snow (147). Ekman’s novel involves murders committed in the early 1970s and in the present day: these are “the events by water” of her title “that destabilize the identities, memories and relationships of those inhabiting the landscape of the criminal periphery” (150).

The last chapter (171–204) is primarily focused on the new breed of tough female investigators such as Liza Marklund’s journalist Annika Bengtzon and Camilla Läckberg’s Erika Falck. Stougaard-Nielsen also includes detectives from two highly successful TV series: Sarah Lund in Denmark’s *Forbrydelsen* (2007, 2009, 2012) [*The Killing*] and Saga Norén in Sweden’s *Broen/Bron* (2011, 2013, 2015) [*The Bridge*]. Referring to Lund and Norén, Stougaard-Nielsen writes:

They are presented as “gender transgressors,” imbued with traits that generically belong to male detectives, which is further amplified by their contrasting feminized male colleagues, who are emotionally intelligent and primarily devoted to their equally fragile nuclear families. (181)

This is an accurate response to the female-male detective partnership, especially in *The Bridge*.

Scandinavian Crime Fiction is, then, an uneven book. As stated above, it is seriously flawed as a contribution to a series devoted to twenty-first-century genre fiction by Stougaard-Nielsen’s decision to root at least two thirds of his study to novels written in the twentieth century. He also tends to make questionable generalizations. Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander is indeed a “troubled man,” to borrow the title of the last novel in the Wallander series: *Den orolige mannen* (2009) [*The Troubled Man* 2011], but he is not “utterly helpless” (Stougaard-Nielsen 5), since he solves all the murders in the series. It is also surprising to find Stougaard-Nielsen referring with apparent agreement to the right-wing British author Roland Huntford’s view that Sweden in the early 1970s is as bad a place to live as Soviet Russia (5–6). Surprising, because this agreement comes after a primarily Marxist-Leninist approach to *The Novel of a Crime*, itself a socialist series that aims at revealing the “perceived fascist nature” of Sweden’s welfare state; and even more because Huntford’s claim is simply not true. Sjöwall and Wahlöö would not have been allowed to publish a biting critique of Russia or any country behind the Iron Curtain, whereas in a liberal democracy such as Sweden they could load their guns and fire at the state with impunity. Again, it is disturbing to find anyone in 2017 describing the former Yugoslavia as “a communist utopia” (57), and I found the author’s attempt to excuse the overt sexism in *The Novel of a Crime* simply embarrassing (46–47). Yet, this study of SCF includes excellent readings of novels by Høeg and Ekman and of Swedish and Danish TV crime series.

In the last analysis, this is not a book I would recommend to anyone but specialist readers. There are far more reliable studies of the subject, especially Barry Forshaw's *Nordic Noir* (2013) and Kerstin Bergman's *Swedish Crime Fiction* (2014).

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REFERENCES

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