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Popular Crime Novels – New Paradigms for Women

by Nete Schmidt

I am originally from Denmark, blond, and blue-eyed. I have five kids of varying ages, but no tattoos and no piercings, so I am a very normal Danish woman! I had an important introduction to the state of feminism in the United States when I lived in San Francisco for a year in 1986. A single mother of three, I had brought my kids along and got a lot of help from a dear friend Jenny, who had a husband and two kids. She also worked twelve hours a day, and when I asked her when she saw her kids, she introduced to me the notion of “quality time” for an hour each night. I remember thinking that feminism was not faring too well in the U.S., a notion that was confirmed when I moved here permanently and saw my daughter being required to go back to work after six weeks of maternity leave.

It was outright depressing, but then came 2005, when Stieg Larsson published his first novel, Män som hator kvinnor (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo).\(^1\) The Swedish movie version was released in 2009, followed by an American version in 2011. Like millions of other women, readers, and viewers around the world, I fell in love with Lisbeth Salander. Feminism was right back in the saddle, entering the scene from a rather unexpected side, the crime genre, and, in this case, with a male advocate. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* arguably laid the foundation for the phenomenon labeled Scandinavian Noir, spreading Scandinavian crime fiction around the globe. The innovative style and global popularity of Scandinavian Noir clearly suggests that feminism is not dead; instead, it is taking on a new and fascinating shape promoted and illustrated by women swimming in the murky waters of crime and murders.

To frame my argument, let me go back a few decades to the heyday of American hard-boiled crime fiction, where we find this description of Mrs. Regan through the eyes of Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* from 1939:

I sat down on the edge of a deep soft chair and looked at Mrs. Regan. She was worth a stare. She was trouble. She was stretched out on a modernistic chaise longue with
her slippers off, so I stared at her legs in the sheerest silk stockings. They seemed to be arranged to stare at. They were visible to the knee and one of them well beyond. The knees were dimpled, not bony and sharp. The calves were beautiful, the ankles long and slim. Her hair was black and wire and parted in the middle and she had hot black eyes. She had a good mouth and a good chin. There was a sulky droop to her lips and the lower lip was full. (17)

As you can see, the sexy woman is a very sexy appendix to the powerful, competent, very masculine private detective. As Henriette Rostrup explains,

A real woman [was]... sensual, warm-blooded, cold, and controlled, unreachable and yet just within reach. She was so intelligent that she knew she would gain more by hiding it than by showing it. She was dangerous to play with, and life was easier if one stayed away from her, but she made life hard for she tempted with the ultimate fulfillment of all fantasies; in brief, she was fatal. (11)

Mrs. Regan represents the epitome of the woman and the female role in the hard-boiled crime story for which Chandler set the standard, but as Rostrup argues, she is far from being a literary role model for feminists since she is “neither free nor independent but locked into an anxious male fantasy from which it is impossible for her to escape.” (12)

Moving up to our day, here is an altogether different description of a female crime novel protagonist:

She cut the cod into slices as her laptop signed in, turned the slices in salt and flour, then put them in a heavy pan with a bit of melted butter in the bottom. She listened to the frying sound as she sent over the three articles, then splashed some lemon juice over the fish, dug out some frozen dill and scattered that over the top, then poured in some cream, warm water, fish stock, and a handful of frozen prawns. (83)


We have been propelled forward not just by the decades, but primarily by the part played by the female protagonist, who has
moved into the center of the novel and become a serious role model; you could actually cook your dinner following her recipe! Of course, she is also multitasking around a couple of young kids starting a fight in the living room. Lisbeth Salander, the female protagonist-heroine in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy is not encumbered by a family, husband, or children. Instead, she multitasks with a single focus on her computer and technology, which provide her with an identity, a livelihood, and the means of survival in the patriarchal Swedish welfare society.

What has happened, and what could happen for women based on the so-called “Stieg Larsson Effect?” There is definitely a new sheriff in town, and it is a female, or rather several females, so the question is what they have in common, and why they are potential, albeit fictional, role models for the lives of real, contemporary women? In this article, I am going to focus on two Danish crime fighting women, Sarah Lund and Dicte Svendsen while including two Swedish women, Annika Bentgzon and Lisbeth Salander, as well.

Before beginning a discussion of these female characters, however, I want to provide some background information on the contemporary societies in which they function. The first area to consider is the job sphere. All four women work outside the home which correlates to the reality of women’s employment: around 72.5 percent (Denmark) (Statistikbanken 2014) and 72 percent (Sweden) (OECD 2012) compared to 58 percent in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor 2014), and compared to a male employment rate of approximately 75 percent (OECD Better Life Index 2014). In an article in The Atlantic discussing the countries where women have the best lives, Olga Khazan writes,

According to the OECD’s “Better Life Index,” women in Denmark have the most overall life satisfaction ... but then again, so do the men, so perhaps it’s just a happy place. A whopping 89 percent of people in Denmark reported having more positive experiences in an average day (feelings of rest, pride in accomplishment, or enjoyment) than negative ones (pain, worry, sadness, or boredom).

The Scandinavian countries rank very high in parameters such as work, life, and health conditions for women. Khazan concludes, “There is no clear stand-out country or region, but in general, it seems like you’d be better off somewhere in either Scandinavia or Southern
Europe.” The workweek is a manageable 33 hours on average (Denmark and Norway) (Kurtz 2013), the workers are productive, and the economy is healthy. 43 percent of women have positions of leadership in the public sector (Olsen 2013), and vacation time is five weeks with pay plus five “personal days” during the year. Women’s average income places them squarely in the middle class, and yet they still make on average only 84 percent of an average man’s salary (“Nyt fra Danmarks Statistik” 2013).

Secondly, two of the four female protagonists are or get divorced. Two are not in a permanent relationship, which, again, reflects conditions in contemporary Scandinavia. In Denmark, the divorce rate is 46 percent (“Skilsmisser” 2014) and in Sweden it is 55 percent (graphs.net 2012). These women are not averse to new relationships, whether they be fleeting or of a more permanent character. They typically harbor no serious issues concerning their body consciousness, and, therefore, casual sexual affairs provide entertainment and enjoyment without concurrent guilt-feelings.

Third, for those who are mothers, their children are admirably taken care of by the extensive welfare system that provides subsidized care in nurseries, daycare, and kindergartens when the lengthy paid maternity and paternity leave is over. In Denmark, mothers are entitled to four weeks leave before delivery, fourteen weeks afterwards, while fathers get two weeks during the first fourteen weeks, and then the mother and father have 32 additional weeks to divide between them as they choose (“Barselsorlov i Danmark” 2014). In Sweden, the mother and father have 480 days to divide between them (“Svenske Regler for Barselsorlov” 2014). Typically, children start kindergarten at the age of three and continue until school starts when they are six. In cases of divorce, the characteristic scenario is shared custody of the children (“Forældremyndighed” 2014), and children are encouraged to embrace a high level of independence.

Finally, such independence is the governing idea in the Scandinavian welfare system. As is well known, the “folk home” politics include universal health care, free education, pensions, and a cradle-to-grave security. With the high taxation rates as the great equalizer, the existence of the female detectives is predicated on this purportedly stable foundation of mutual responsibilities and benefits.

Nevertheless, female detectives in Scandinavian crime novels still have to deal with deep-seated male power manifestations at work.
Their private lives are juxtaposed to and frequently suffer from their overwhelming professional personas, which accurately reflect the dichotomy felt by many women today. Rather than seducing hard-boiled males, the women desire to carve a niche of equality in the job-market where the glass ceiling is still firmly in place. They challenge the ingrown, cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity through their occupation with "other areas" since the female crime story "deals in a fictional, literary form with important societal and political issues while the female characters are interested in feminine questions such as heartaches, food, their weight, and guilty consciences" (Meyhoff 2005). While the social interaction of the protagonists is defined by the notion of gender, they are attempting to undo gender and challenging its imperviousness to change.

This brings me to Dicte Svendsen, protagonist of *Liv og Legeme* (Life and Body), who lives in Aarhus, Denmark, where she is employed as a crime journalist at *Dagbladet*. At the beginning of Elsebeth Egholm’s eight-book series, Dicte is divorced and has relocated from Copenhagen with her teenage daughter Rose. She has bought a small house on the outskirts of the city, and she is reunited with her two closest girlfriends. However, her life is haunted by her adolescence, as she became pregnant by her teacher at sixteen and gave the child, a boy, up for adoption under grim pressure from her parents, staunch Jehovah's Witnesses. Leaving her religion shortly afterwards also meant severing all family-ties, and for her family she is no longer among the living. Her attempts at some kind of reconciliation invariably fail even when her father dies an unnecessary death.

Her longing for her unknown son leaves a big empty hole inside her stomach until she finds him when he is in his early 30s. She forges a relationship with him, despite reluctance on his part, and her existence is somewhat defined by the guilt she feels for having given up her baby for adoption instead of fighting the establishment head-on at the time. She has had to create her life from scratch, generating an existence based on contemporary friends and lovers. Dicte, then, is not "normal" in having belonged to a small religious sect in the mainly secular Denmark.

Dicte's relationship with her daughter Rose is strained. On one hand, she is controlling and obstinately dominant, worrisome and meddling, and on the other hand, she relies on Rose to bring order into her rather chaotic, daily life. Dicte is a messy person, indifferent
to domestic chores. Rose cleans, walks the dog, and cooks healthy dinners, and she also admonishes Dicte to eat rather than nurse a glass of the ubiquitous red wine that she uses to get through crises. Gradually, Dicte starts a relationship with her co-worker, the photographer Bo, and he moves in with her. However, she is always tottering on the brink of depression, lack of self-confidence, and insecurity, making her a very difficult partner and their life together far from consistently fulfilling. As a reporter, on the other hand, she excels. Her skills as a writer, journalist, tracker, solution-finder, and pushy co-worker are unsurpassed, and her collaboration with the police benefits both her and chief detective Wagner. Her boss wants her to emote and reveal her feelings in her articles, yet she knows that she has to protect her inner core and often works in spite of her central desires, focused on keeping her emotions under control. Her job leads her into impossible, dangerous situations where common sense and logical reaction patterns have been suspended and replaced by an irrational eagerness to pursue the criminal. When she is absorbed in a case, she withdraws into her own universe, hating herself for rejecting her partner, yet unable to remedy it. However, since she and her partner share the work-sphere, she frequently relies on his support, actions, and acumen to help her find results. Her dichotomous roles define her, but she is still caught in by gender role expectations because of the categorizing she is exposed to based on her appearance and behavioral cues, such as dress, hairstyle, and tone of voice.

The gulf between personal and professional life is even more prominent in the case of Sarah Lund, protagonist of the TV trilogy Forbrydelsen (The Killing) from 2007-12. When she is first introduced to viewers, her personal life is flourishing. Divorced, she is on the cusp of moving to Sweden with her teenage son to live with her boyfriend, and in the interim they are staying with her mother while she clears her desk at work. When the first murder victim is discovered she reluctantly agrees to a brief stay while postponing her move and associated events, but from then on her personal life goes downhill. Her boyfriend finally loses patience as she keeps prolonging her stay indefinitely, and he ends up returning her possessions. She ignores her son and mother, and she becomes totally absorbed in the political and social ramifications of the case at hand, in the course of which her male partner is killed.
The beginning of Season Two finds Lund in Jutland, having been demoted to a truck-checking police offer at a ferry crossing. Her former boss implores her to return to Copenhagen to help solve what turns into a string of killings. Again, she has a male partner who vanishes at the end, and the final screenshot shows her walking alone down the middle of the road, surrounded by nobody. Her slight figure in the famous patterned sweater looks frail and lost as she stares straight ahead.

In the third and final season, Lund lives alone in a newly purchased house. Her mother has re-married, her son has a pregnant girlfriend and refuses to talk to her, and her new partner in crime-solving turns out to be quite complicated. This time, she focuses on the abduction of a little girl, expertly negotiating social and political pitfalls. At the end, she takes the law into her own hands and rejects the offer of a potentially satisfying new relationship. She chooses not to become a doting grandmother and instead flies off into the sunset to an unknown destination. Her personal life has disappeared, and her professional life has completely taken over, defining her personality and leaving her with only the appearance of a normal woman.

Both of these women are anxious but not in the sense of fearing the unknown. They prefer the unknown as it offers challenges, and they find ultimate satisfaction in the fearless skill they employ to tackle atrocious crimes. Their anxiety is an inseparable and necessary element of alienation and self-estrangement. Their personalities are defined by the aforementioned gulf between their personal, social interaction skills and their professional crime solving skills. In her 1996 book, Devorah Kalekin-Fishman argues that “a person suffers from alienation in the form of ‘powerlessness’ when she is conscious of the gap between what she would like to do and what she feels capable of doing” (97). Both Dicte Svendsen and Sarah Lund experience this predicament. They lack the ability to follow through and commit in the personal sphere, and they escape to the professional sphere as a conscious, less challenging choice. They continue developing their crime solving skills while consciously ignoring and neglecting the demands made on their personal life by family, partners, and friends.

Both women also struggle to identify with the dominant values of society and are launched into normlessness defined as “the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior” (Seeman 1959,
Female social values encompass fulfillment through wifehood, motherhood, domesticity, and female friendships. Dicte Svendsen has female friends; Sarah Lund does not fulfill even this category, and there are numerous examples of her socially "deviant" behavior: for example, she leaves a formal Danish party in the middle of a speech given by the bride, consistently hangs up on people in the middle of phone conversations, leaves her son and mother hanging when they need to talk to her, defies orders to stay in touch when following a track on her own, and actively disobeys orders from her boss when she feels she can reach her crime-solving goals. Dicte rudely leaves her friends after having invited them for dinner, steals from co-workers if it benefits her investigation, snubs friend and enemy alike, and routinely dispenses with any kind of social lubricant in her conversations with others. The fact that they are females neglecting socially acceptable behavior emphasizes their normlessness, but for them to establish an identity for themselves they must uncover and confront the evil inherent in serious crimes.

The character of Saga Noren from the Danish / Swedish co-production, Broen (The Bridge) from 2011-13, offers the most extreme example of self-estrangement. She is completely independent in her personal life and has no permanent partner or children. She does, however, actively seek male partners for sex, and she is never concerned with the feelings of the persons with whom she is interacting. She is straightforward and never lies, not even to spare someone's feelings, and it seems that blood and violence of her job do not affect her mental equilibrium. Like the two previous women, she is consumed by her work, but in contrast to them, this does not produce feelings of guilt or insufficiency. At one point during the investigation, she meets a man in a bar who asks if he can buy her a drink; she replies with a yes, and then says that they can go to her house for sex afterwards. When he looks surprised at her bluntness, she confronts him by asking whether that was not what he was after in the first place, and he has to acquiesce! Later, when the case has been solved, she calls him back and says she is ready to have sex again. Saga Noren plays a very atypical gender role and does not let normal social anxiety invade her mind.

Finally, in the Millennium Trilogy by Stieg Larsson, Lisbeth Salander is portrayed as the ultra-goth role model. She is an extremely technologically savvy computer hacker with a photographic memory
and considerable martial arts and survival skills. She is also an anti-social, bisexual activist, who possesses brains that are very enviable in today's technology dominated society. She has no permanent partner, but she both initiates and participates in casual sex. Her childhood and adolescence were marred by abuse, first at the hands of her father and later by the Swedish welfare system and its psychiatrist representative. In the first book, she is shown battling the guardianship that still shackles her independence, and her actions form the backdrop for the revenge that is a salient theme throughout the three books. She ends up rich and vindicated, but still alone. Judith Lorber argues that Salander's popularity is predicated on her gender ambiguity. It is "not an androgyny of masculine and feminine traits, but a mix of attributes within her gender identity as a woman. She is both victim and avenger, abused child, iconoclastic revel, punky teen in appearance and competent woman in behavior" (53). For Salander, love and intimacy are the price of survival (Lorber 2012, 61). As has often been mentioned, Larsson was planning to write 10 books in all before his sudden death, so Salander's future path is unknown, but her strength is unique, and her persistence as a crime solver is comparable to or exceeds that of the other women.

On a side note, it is interesting, and somewhat mystifying, to consider the worldwide popularity of Scandinavian crime solvers and crime novels in the light of the notoriously low crime and incarceration rates in all the Scandinavian countries that emphasize rehabilitation rather than punishment. Another aspect that also deserves a more thorough investigation is the connection between the stronger political near-equality with a larger percentage of female politicians passing and initiating measures benefitting women, for example, the previously mentioned maternity leave allowing women to be both mothers and working, productive members of society.

However, the final part of my argument is the price paid, in varying forms, by the female detectives for their independence and feminist role-modeling. Through their professional actions, the women question what is expected of a normal, female life, and they are constantly facing the threat of being labeled as alienated social deviants. Their pasts surface and present them with unresolved feelings of guilt and insufficiency while they are attempting to be good mothers and partners as well as strong individuals. They rarely feel competent and capable in their personal lives, where the expectations of their
surroundings become insurmountable barriers. The feminine crime story does not analyze or theorize; it merely showcases the negative side effects of the patriarchal society. The female protagonists' feelings of inferiority relate directly to "the cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender" (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 511). Even though these beliefs may be stereotypes, they still carry a substantial and broad social significance as the inner battles of these women clearly exemplify.

Although they are caught in a gender construction, they seek to transgress it by succeeding in arguably male fields, thus battling and redefining the professional expectations for females. Their actions and words criticize inequality, discrimination, prostitution, sex trade, and violence against women. They are attempting to draw attention to these issues while also assuming the dual role of protagonist-victim, which is not only disparate from the roles of male detectives but also beyond the parameters of "normal" life for a woman today. It seems unavoidable that the strong females are victimized when, towards the end of each work, as the threads start forming a decipherable network, they are pulled directly into the action. Facing threats and physical abuse, they become victims on a par with the other victims in the books. Their tormentors are consistently male, so although the women embrace professional male roles, they still end up as "weaker sex" victims of stereotypical gender roles.

Nonetheless, as I have shown in this paper, the women have moved from the periphery of crime solving to the center, and in the process they have grown from being one-dimensional to being multifaceted characters. This does not mean that they are perfect women or perfect role models. In the domestic sphere, they are not overly concerned with the "normal" female chores of cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc., and they choose to focus their energies on the work sphere, which is, however, still defined by a male power hierarchy. As a role model, the "abnormal / deviant" woman functioning as detective is strong and recognizable, and she becomes an object of identification while modeling a positive step forward towards independence and equality. At the same time, however, the price she pays as a victim at the hands of male criminals leaves indelible scars in her psyche and, gradually, makes it impossible for her to function in today's society. The authors, then, are sending an equivocal message
about strong female detectives, since the way they are perceived by society is reflected in the way they see themselves, and the feelings of alienation and worthlessness induced by this juxtaposition may, for some, lead to an escape in near normlessness and autism. Their passionate, focused crime solving defines them as autotelic: persons who are internally driven and who need few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, outward power, or fame. The action is rewarding in itself, and they are autonomous and independent, but they have not become conscious of themselves in the sense that they can create socially fulfilling lives and relationships.

The four women mentioned fall into three different categories: They are all autotelic, but while Dicte Svendsen is semi socially functional, Sarah Lund is socially dysfunctional, and Saga Norén and Lisbeth Salander are semi-autistic. Arguably, they each fit the stereotype of the frazzled post-modern detective while also reflecting the women’s liberation movement that saw the rise of the strong female personality in the workplace, the woman who has enough self-confidence to follow her goals and choose her own path, the woman who actively chooses her sexual and other partners, and the woman who achieves success and becomes an object of envy. The female detective of Scandinavian Noir fiction illustrates how it is viable to be a new woman both in the private sphere and the career universe. She also demonstrates the resilience of the gender hierarchy, and although she challenges them, the social relational contexts carry the preexisting gender beliefs into the new activities she is embracing as a female detective. In a fictional way, she depicts the multi-faceted attributes of being pushy, protective, aggressive, decisive, and feminine. She represents life in all its dimensions: the big picture with the problems of the multi-ethnic society, terrorists, the progression of media and technology, the environmental issues, etc., as well as the “small” problems of the domestic sphere: marriage, family, fashion, children, career, etc. The women differ significantly from the femme fatales of an earlier era in that they retain their independence even when they are not desired by men. They have escaped the constraints placed on women who are turned into bodily manifestations of male desire, and they have created their own existence (Rostrup 1995, 25). Yet romance is also a substantial element in the crime story.

Feminist crime fiction creates an enticing mixture with its reliance on recognizable emotions while telling an exciting story, and this
makes an emotional identification possible, which was missing in the hard-boiled genre. The female detective becomes a “real person”, fighting criminals, as well as the hegemonic gender roles that epitomize her own existential problems, and that is the primary reason for the success of the genre. Even though the gender hierarchy, in effect, is rewritten, it is severely challenged, and the female detectives, in their independence, self-reliance, doubts, fears, and multi-tasking personalities illustrate the individual resistance that together with socioeconomic change is conducive to the undermining of the gender system, leading to more equality in the workplace and home.

The women have a real choice, supported by the society they live in, that is not hostile to women choosing multiple roles but actively encourages it and makes it financially feasible; the women are not shackled by the chains of religion or choked by the oppression of anachronistic traditions, so these hugely popular books show female role models going in a direction that would definitely be beneficial for women around the world and in the United States as well. Although the women “may not engage in feminist politics... in the sense that they all exemplify bravery and defiance in the face of violence and evil, and triumph in a misogynist, patriarchal world, they are all feminist heroes” (Lorber 2012, 61). They point the way to a future that in which powerful “men who hate women” have less power, for although feminism has been declared dead or near-dead by many today, the popularity and success of Lisbeth Salander and the other female characters I have discussed prove that a lot of very necessary, energetic, vibrant feminism still exists, with strong, persistent female crime solvers as its embodiment.

Notes

1 The original Swedish title, of course, translates directly to Men Who Hate Women, so it is still difficult to explain where the dragon tattoo title came from, but that is not a relevant discussion in this context.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. “En rigtig kvinde [var] ... sensuel, varmblodig, kold og kontrolleret, uopnåelig og dog lige inden for rækkevidde. Hun var så intelligent, at hun vidste, at hun ville opnå mere ved at skjule det end ved at vise det. Hun var farlig at lege med, og livet blev lettere af at holde sig fra hende, men hun gjorde livet svært, for hun lokkede med den ultimative opfyldelse af alle fantasier; kort sagt hun var fatal.”
“hverken er fri eller selvstændig, men fastlåst i en angstfyldt mandefantasi, som hun umuligt kan slippe ud af.”


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