

Conventionally Unconventional: Lisbeth Salander's Sisters in Crime

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Abstract: The enthusiasm with which the world has embraced Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and its non-conformist heroine is genuinely puzzling. Why do audiences in so many cultures cheer the exploits of a left-wing journalist and a female hacker misfit? Where did these characters come from and what makes their adventures appeal so widely? This talk will examine the way in which Larsson drew on crime fiction's traditional story types and on feminist contributions to the genre to explore the reception of the Millennium Trilogy and, in particular, Lisbeth Salander's international popularity.

When I was sent an advanced reading copy of Knopf's American edition of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* to review for *Mystery Scene*, I was excited to finally discover what all the fuss was about. I had been following the UK reception of the book and had heard from French readers about the sensational series that everyone was reading compulsively. But I have to admit that, when I put it down, I wondered why it was such a hit and whether the book would work for an American audience. As I wrote in the review, "unlike the typical American bestseller, it is long, complex, and not paced with a stopwatch in hand." Luckily, I didn't predict it would flop or I would have been badly embarrassed. But I was—and still am—amazed that an audience that routinely elects to the bestseller list thrillers with two-page chapters, non-stop action, sexualized violence, and villains who are monstrously alien and come by their villainy by being either psychotic, Islamic, or Russian (and psychotic), would warm to a story that not only lacks a single, constantly accelerating arc, but is (even more alarmingly) leftist, feminist, and foreign—none of which have previously been predictors of success in the American book market. Even Sonny Mehta, legendary editor and publisher at Knopf, [confessed](#) "I had nightmares that we would be the only country where it didn't work." The protagonists are also unlikely to be embraced by Americans as heroic. One is a journalist, which is not a highly regarded profession in this country; an [annual Harris poll](#) on how people view professions found reporters ranked lower than bankers for honesty and ethics.

Moreover he has sex with multiple women with no consequences. The other protagonist is an anti-social, bisexual, pierced and tattooed hacker.

And yet readers have proved again that predicting bestsellers is an uncertain art. At least Knopf had the experience of publishers worldwide to fall back on—the trilogy was a hit all over the world. What is it about the books that works so well for audiences so diverse?

The most common answer is the girl of the title, the tiny yet powerful waif, Lisbeth Salander, who many find utterly original and captivating. Yet while the books are not cookie-cutter thrillers, they are a pastiche of nearly every convention one might encounter in the crime fiction genre, a lively if at times longwinded set of adventures animated and unified by a serious social purpose. In the same way, Salander herself combines a wealth of pop culture references in a combination that seems original, but is actually a bricolage of clichés. Her story and her style breathes life and purpose into them in a way that makes people care about her and cheer her on.

Larsson is said to have conceived of Salander by wondering what Pippi Longstocking would be like as an adult. According to an e-mail to his publisher (quoted in [Jacobsen](#)),

I have tried to swim against the tide compared to ordinary crime novels. I wanted to create main characters who differ dramatically from the ordinary crime characters. My point of departure was what Pippi Longstocking would be like as an adult. Would she be called a sociopath because she looked upon society in a different way and did not have any social competences? She turned into Lisbeth Salander who has many masculine features.

And in [an interview](#) with Lasse Winkler he reportedly said of Pippi Longstocking:

What would she be like today? What would she be like as an adult? What would you call a person like that, a sociopath? Hyperactive? Wrong. She simply sees society in a different light. I'll make her 25 years old and an outcast. She has no friends and is deficient in social skills. That was my original thought.

Her more or less autobiographical male sidekick, of course, is also drawn from one of Astrid Lindgren's heroes, boy detective Kalle Blomqvist, imagined as a 45 year old journalist rather like himself only more successful, "an altruistic know-it-all who publishes a magazine called Millennium."

There's some playfulness with these origins in the books. Early in *Dragon Tattoo*, hearing about Mikael Blomqvist's children's book nickname, Salander tells her boss Armasky "somebody'd get a fat lip if they ever called me Pippi Longstocking" which makes Armasky nervous, since "on more than one occasion he had thought of Salander as precisely Pippi Longstocking." Later, when Blomqvist goes to Gottfried Vanger's cabin, he browses through the books there, finding Mickey Spillane, Enid Blyton, and three books by Astrid Lindgren: *The Children of Noisy Village*, *Kalle Blomqvist and Rasmus*, and *Pippi Longstocking* – books he recognizes from his own childhood. The shelf also includes books on astronomy, short wave radio, and Harriet Vanger's bible, which—of course—eventually yields clues to her disappearance.

In a sense, the trilogy holds lots of hidden bookshelves, and they provide clues to how the stories work. Not only does Larsson make overt references to a number of crime writers in the three books, this playful intertextuality is at work in the way that Larsson has borrowed not only multiple plot devices, but various heroic characters from popular culture. (Many of these cultural references are discussed in [The Tattooed Girl](#), a compilation of essays published in 2011.)

Pippi Longstocking, of course, like many children's book heroines, lives a child's dream of independence: she lives alone, without parental control, shares her house with a horse and a monkey, wears patchwork dresses and mismatched socks, and only goes to school when she feels like it. She has unusual strength and can pick up horses and policemen—which speaks not just to physical strength but to unusual confidence. Though she doesn't observe the usual roles governing children's proper behavior, she is intensely loyal and a champion of fair play and justice. One of the things that makes Pippi so compelling, in fact, is that she sees through unfair rules of behavior and believes in a more

fundamental kind of fairness, and the anxiety created as she violates the rules, even with justice on her side, is a driving force of the stories.

Apart from Pippi and the darker stories about Kalle Blomqvist, boy detective, Larsson grew up with Enid Blyton's serial adventure stories which, though they never became popular in the United States, were to the rest of the world what Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys were to Americans. He was also a fan of Modesty Blaise, a comic strip and series of novels from the 1960s, British in origin, but quite popular in Sweden. Modesty Blaise is a sassy, sexy young heroine whose origins are a mystery, being found wandering as an orphan in post-war Eastern Europe. After running away from a displaced persons camp, she was championed by a scholarly Hungarian refugee and, after his death, became the head of an underworld operation called "the network" before retiring wealthy and taking on odd jobs for the British secret service. There are certainly echoes of Modesty's story in Lisbeth and her relationships with older men and with her own extralegal network, the Hacker Republic.

Larsson and his long-time partner Eva Gabrielsson were early and avid fans of science fiction, involved in publishing a fan magazine that included a feminist section, acknowledging the genre-bending contributions women were making in the 1960s and 70s, introducing feminist themes into stories that had been dominated by male characters and readers. Though I have no idea if Larsson continued to follow science fiction, his iconic hacker chick resembles Neal Stephenson's Y.T. in the 1992 novel [Snow Crash](#), a young female cyberpunk skateboarding courier who joins forces with a boy named Hiro Protagonist, who is a genius but has just lost his job delivering pizzas for the mafia. Together they hack into systems in order to sell intelligence and discover a nefarious plan to infect people with a computer virus. (*Snow Crash*, incidentally, takes place in a dystopian Los Angeles after corporations have taken over and dismantled the federal government. Evidently, it takes place in the very near future.)

However, I want to focus on Larsson's interest in crime fiction and how it intersects with feminism. At the age of 20 in his fanzine he wrote an article lambasting the Swedish crime fiction scene,

finding little of interest in a genre then dominated by Agatha Christie-style puzzle mysteries like those of Maria Lang and Stieg Trenter, excepting in his critique only the work of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö who he told others he preferred to read in English translation (according to [Holmberg](#) 102). He lauded instead Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross MacDonald of the hardboiled American tradition. He was, at the time, trying his hand at fiction, writing both science fiction and crime stories. In the 1980s and 90s, after going to work for a Swedish news agency, he frequently reviewed crime fiction. His favorite authors tended to be women, including Liza Cody, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky, all of whom revived the private eye subgenre by creating strong female detectives, and writers who came later: Patricia Cornwell, Val McDermid, and Carol O'Connell, whose own series heroine, Mallory, is a orphaned sociopathic genius whose violent tendencies are barely held in check by an older male mentor. Larsson's tastes map closely to the feminist turn in the genre, as women took the social concerns of the American hardboiled tradition, stripped away its sexist elements, and recreated the detective hero in a new mode, a feminist mode.

Let's first look at the social critique found in the hardboiled tradition. In his classic 1944 essay, "[The Simple Art of Murder](#)," Raymond Chandler made a case for the importance of both realism and redemption in the detective story. After ridiculing the artificiality of manor house mysteries, he argued that art has to be realistic, and to be realistic, detective fiction would have to take on questions of power and social injustice, because the real world is not a pretty place. He wrote:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of moneymaking, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from

practicing; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge.

It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in . . . But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything.

Here are all of the elements of outrage found in the Millennium Trilogy: the wealthy manage social institutions to benefit them rather than society at large; they collaborate when convenient with criminal elements; the criminal justice system treats the powerful differently than it treats the weak; and the legal system is corrupt. The only way to write about the real world is to acknowledge these problems—but there is one other thing required. “In everything that can be called art,” Chandler wrote, “there is a quality of redemption.” For Chandler, that redemption comes in the figure of the hero who is brave and moral, a common man who represents the interests of common people, but is always a man of honor. The actions of the hero and the choices he makes provides the redemption necessary to art because it is the hero who uncovers and confronts injustice.

However, there is one form of injustice conspicuously missing from Chandler’s catalog, and that injustice is the sizzling fuse of the action in the trilogy: sexism.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s women writers took Chandler’s masterplot and rewrote it by reinventing the hero, making her a woman, a woman who is by her very status in life sensitive to power relationships and in a position to view the world from the perspective of the disempowered. These female detectives’ outsider status was earned at birth, and yet they enact their heroism as “realists of murder” in the Chandlerian tradition. There is, of course, a built in conflict when women elect to join the tough guy tradition: in Chandler’s world, women were either innocents who

needed protection or, more frequently, femmes fatales, evil and manipulative sirens who led men to their doom using their beauty and sexual seduction. By rewriting the genre, women kept the focus on unmaking injustice, but had to also throw off the trappings of a male hero who is defined as a lone male. [Laura Ng proposes](#) that the feminist revision of the private detective may consciously adopt aspects of the male hardboiled tradition while unconsciously drawing on women's proletarian novels of the 1930s, taking on their preoccupation with class, identification with blue collar workers, and a sensitivity to community, socio-economic violence, and the masculinity of violence itself.

Now this is where it gets tricky. Can heroes in a misogynistic genre be feminists? In fact, is the restoration of order, one of the attractions of the popular detective genre, consistent with feminist critiques of social institutions, or is it contradictory?

In an early examination of the female detective, [Kathleen Gregory Klein](#) argues that feminism and hardboiled detection are inevitably in conflict, that a writer cannot be a feminist and yet fulfill the expectations readers have of the genre. She writes, "the feminist detective who restores order to a disordered world . . . winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women when she reestablishes the ordered status quo" (201). In her estimation, Sara Paretsky is the writer who comes closest to bridging the gap between commercially successful adaptation of popular detective tropes and a feminist perspective. She "demonstrates how much more is required of a feminist detective fiction than the substitution of a feminist for a male private eye. The genre," Klein writes, "must be completely remade . . . but will the result be either detective fiction or feminist? Or will it simply be an unsatisfactory, watered-down version of both which has compromised all of their greatest attractions?" (221). In short she finds that detective fiction as a genre is inevitably conservative, both in literary and political terms.

[Maggie Humm](#) is less willing to cede detective fiction to men and positions women as border crossers who challenge men's "traditional masculine antagonism to powerful women" and complicate

masculine power by refusing “the ‘eroticism’ of physical violence.” As she writes, “what unites feminist detectives is the potent understanding that moral justice does not depend on forms of personal authority but on collective responsibility” (186).

If it seems impossible for women to be both feminist and detectives who traverse mean streets, then it is equally impossible to imagine the police procedural as a site of social criticism because the police are part of an oppressive social order. Yet that, of course, is what Maj Sjöwall and her partner in crime, Per Wahlöö did in their ten-volume “story of a crime.” In a [2009 interview](#), Sjöwall said that she and her partner admired Simenon and Hammett and realized that the popularity of crime fiction offered a vehicle for social commentary. “We realised that people read crime and through the stories we could show the reader that under the official image of welfare-state Sweden there was another layer of poverty, criminality and brutality. We wanted to show where Sweden was heading: towards a capitalistic, cold and inhuman society, where the rich got richer, the poor got poorer.” Now she confesses it didn’t effect the change they’d hoped for. “Everything we feared happened, faster. People think of themselves not as human beings but consumers. The market rules and it was not that obvious in the 1960s, but you could see it coming.” Yet it laid a foundation for the slightly subversive criticism of the failures of society and its institutions that gives Scandinavian crime fiction its reputation for dealing realistically with social issues. Any number of writers and critics believe that the wave of Nordic crime fiction so popular today inherits its style and substance from the Martin Beck series.

That said, what we find in Larsson’s trilogy is something very different than the ironic documentary style of the Martin Beck series and very different from the glum and introspective melodrama of Henning Mankell’s Wallander series, closer perhaps to the intricate plotting and outsized characters of Jo Nesbø’s Harry Hole series, but much more concerned than Nesbø is with social inequality. What we end up with is the sweeping social critique of the Martin Beck series transported into a lively bricolage of international popular culture references, tied together with a serious thread: a

focus on violence against women, including social statistics and historical vignettes about women warriors. Lisbeth Salander is not just Pippi Longstocking as an adult, she is the counter-culture hacker chick of science fiction and a kickboxing ninja babe straight out of comic book culture. She is oppressed and vulnerable, but independent and powerful. She is a victim who refuses to be a victim. She is an outsider who wouldn't think of going to the police to report her guardian's sexual assault because throughout her childhood the police only protected men who hate women. She ends up not only revealing the hypocrisy of social institutions, she contributes to restoring order by helping identify the individuals who have corrupted social systems intended to support equality. Her story and her contempt for those who wronged her lead others—journalists, police officers, and lawyers—to uncover corruption and reveal it to the world. It is, of course, an activist journalist's dream: that by covering a story that uncovers injustice, the state will be held to account. Salander does not have to accept social rules; she is able to remain true to herself and keep her independence while others repair the system.

There has been much debate on whether Larsson's trilogy truly is feminist, or if it exploits violence against women as entertainment. Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, [Sarah Seltzer](#) [argues](#) the trilogy successfully smuggles a subversive message into millions of beach tote bags in a kind of "bait and switch" move—using entertaining and familiar popular culture motifs to make a serious point. "In an action-story landscape where women are too often relegated to girlfriend, sidekick or prey in need of defending, Salander grabs the spotlight and refuses to let it go . . . Larsson's novels achieve something perhaps more difficult than advancing a social-justice cause: introducing an utterly original female character to the world, one who avoids the tired archetypes of helpless victim, lovelorn and needy single female, karate-kicking babe, ferocious tiger mother, or deranged scorned mistress. Lisbeth Salander is a fascinating mess, a real piece of work, but she's active and human."

An anonymous blogger who works in publishing and blogs under the name "the rejectionist" [disagrees vehemently](#). She feels Salander is a totally unoriginal collection of clichés, a self-loathing

anorexic yet curiously attractive girl who falls for a middle-aged babe magnet who happens to be a stand-in for the author. She questions whether using the same pile-up of extreme and sadistic violence against women that is standard fare for bestsellers can possibly be feminist or whether in fact it's masturbatory exploitation. "Packaging that nastiness up as feminist is icing on an ugly cake. There are men who hate women: I am aware of this. Anyone who has ever tried living as a woman is aware of this. I don't need a ten-page explicit rape scene to bring this point home; I need only to leave my house . . . Most of us will never be abducted by a sadistic serial killer, thankfully. But all of us will, at some point, be told we are less because we are female. The worst thing about this book is that it seems to be saying the only violence against women that counts is the kind that ends up with us dead. The rest of us, I guess, are just complaining."

So I am left with much the same question that Klein faced when wondering if Chandler's misogynistic private eye could be regendered to carry a feminist message, but here the question is a bit different: can an author claim to be a feminist when he uses the same story line as popular serial killer melodramas—ones that create suspense through slaughtering women in repeated scenes of sexualized violence, pitting the forces of good personified by dedicated, scientific police officers, against the forces of evil, personified as monsters arising without social precedent except, perhaps, to have had unhealthy relationships with their mothers? I think the answer is yes. Like Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Larsson chose to write in a genre that is popular and entertains people. He used it to build a retirement fund, but also to indulge in a fascination with popular culture that made him want to be a writer in the first place, and also to carry a message. That message is not lost when he borrows material from popular culture and refashions it. The first volume of the trilogy poses the greatest contrast in borrowed material—he combines a highly traditional "locked room" style mystery with a thriller based on sadistic torture of women—and tosses in Nazis for good measure! Yes, it's laid on thick. But the story arc that matters is Lisbeth's story, and the rape she endures is not a male rape fantasy. It is described in very few words

and without any titillating, drawn-out suspense. It is not seen from the classic “male gaze,” but from the perspective of a young woman who is momentarily helpless and enraged. And when a character does fall victim to a monstrous sexual deviant in a hidden torture chamber, it is not a woman, but rather a man who is rescued by a woman.

Twenty-five years ago, at the first conference ever held on the topic of women in crime fiction, Sara Paretsky made a stirring speech about the increasing amount of sadistic violence against women being portrayed in crime fiction. It led to the formation of an organization, [Sisters in Crime](#), which has as its mission promoting equality for women crime writers. Explicit violence against women remains a staple of the thriller genre, to the point that a couple of years ago British critic [Jessica Mann](#) vowed to refuse to review it any longer, complaining that “each psychopath is more sadistic than the last and his victims' sufferings are described in detail that becomes ever more explicit, as young women are imprisoned, bound, gagged, strung up or tied down, raped, sliced, burned, blinded, beaten, eaten, starved, suffocated, stabbed, boiled or buried alive.” This kind of popular entertainment, she says, is anti-woman.

Yet in the Millennium Trilogy, I believe Larsson borrowed that serial killer motif as just one of many crime fiction plots and refashioned it in a genre bricolage, from the locked room mystery to the troubled family saga to espionage, the financial thriller, the police procedural, the political thriller, and the courtroom drama to offer a varied fictional landscape in which a heroine who is also assembled from clichés can grow into her own original and engaging self. Her character and her outsider response to state-sanctioned abuse is what it takes to rally good people—journalists, police, and lawyers—to call social institutions to account. In the end, I think Larsson, like the female crime writers he admired, has successfully refashioned a mainstream genre in a feminist mode.