

The Millennium Trilogy and the American Serial Killer Narrative:
Investigating Protagonists of Men Who Write Women

Barbara Fister

Draft of a chapter published in *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction* edited by Berit Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horck (Palgrave, 2013, 34-50.)

Readers in the United States were the last among residents of developed nations to discover the Millennium Trilogy. Even though the books were international bestsellers, publishers were reluctant to launch them in the American market, uncertain about their audience appeal. Sonny Mehta, legendary editor and publisher at Knopf, eventually acquired the books and gave them a significant marketing push, but later confessed he had had reservations, saying 'I had nightmares that we would be the only country where it didn't work' (McGrath 2010). American readers, who embrace the short chapters and fast-paced, reality-lite storylines of James Patterson and Dan Brown, seemed an unlikely consumer market for thrillers that take their time developing a story, express leftist political views, and are translations set in a foreign country. There was precedent for Mehta's concern; globally bestselling authors such as Ian Rankin and Henning Mankell had not found as receptive an audience in the United States as they had elsewhere. Yet the trilogy became phenomenally popular in the US, just as it had in countries around the world. Why did it succeed against the odds? When describing the appeal of the books, readers in online discussions, blog posts, and reviews repeatedly attribute its appeal to the girl of the title.

What is it about this character that so captivated an American audience? Are these books, ostensibly focused on condemning sexual violence against women, truly feminist, or are they part of a misogynistic tradition that exploits depictions of sexualized violence for entertainment? How does

Lisbeth Salander and her story of rape and retribution fit with trends in American crime fiction, particularly in the rise of the serial killer narrative? To approach these questions, it is worth examining the multiple sources in popular culture that contributed to this female heroine whom so many find compellingly original, and to compare Salander to other influential female protagonists created by male American writers such as Cody McFadyyn and Thomas Harris. Larsson's heroine has seized the public imagination as Thomas Harris's iconic profiler Clarice Starling did in the 1990s. Yet the Millennium Trilogy departs from trends in American crime fiction established by *Silence of the Lambs*. Although the trilogy incorporates aspects of the serial killer narrative made popular by Harris, it strategically resituates the sources of violence. Rather than depicting evil as a pathology of monstrous actors who have chosen sides in a Manichean struggle between good and evil, the trilogy suggests that violence against women is a choice made by men who have achieved social and economic power and act out their power by committing violent acts against women. Larsson has selected familiar material from the repertoire of popular culture and refashioned it for his purpose in a way that draws in the sizeable audience for thrillers while challenging the ideology underlying popular accounts of violence against women.

Violence, victimization and resistance

The depiction of violence against women in the crime genre has long been under debate, with authors such as Sara Paretsky arguing that this form of gendered violence reflects sexism in society (Fister 2011). As is discussed elsewhere in this volume, the controversy has recently been revived, with blame assigned particularly to women writers (Mann 2009). A related issue is the role of trauma in the back story of female protagonists. J. T. Ellison, the American author of a series of thrillers featuring serial murder, asked in a 2009 blog post, 'why does a strong female lead have to have a tortured background? Can a female protagonist make it in the fiction world if she's not been broken first?' She speculates that

many readers can only accept behaviour that is not 'ladylike' if the character has been given a traumatic excuse for her toughness and capacity for violence.

If, and only if, she has been raped or beaten or otherwise horribly misused . . . will she be allowed to acknowledge her bloodlust... society has conditioned us to tamp down our feminine wiles, to stow away our power, to hide behind our men and only emerge once we've been raked over the coals through some unspeakable violence.

Ellison argues that 'we're victimizing our heroines', a suggestion with which journalist Jess McCabe (2011) concurs, concluding that writers feel it would be too difficult for readers to accept female characters who are freakishly willing to undertake unpleasant and dangerous work for the same reasons men do; they must have 'some added vulnerability so we the audience can still think of the character as in need of a good rescuing.' While male detectives are equally saddled with traumatic back stories, they very rarely suffer from the emotional aftermath of violence they experienced as a victim. More typically, they suffer from guilt due to violence they failed to prevent, usually committed against female family members (as in the case of John Connolly's series hero Charlie Parker, whose wife and infant daughter were tortured and killed while he was out drinking). Male heroes' trauma is not that they have been raped, but that their wives, sisters, and daughters have been.

Though Salander is portrayed as triumphantly capable, refusing to be merely a victim, she and other women in Larsson's trilogy suffer so much abuse that many critics question whether it is truly feminist, or if it is part of a body of popular fiction that exploits violence against women as entertainment. An anonymous writer who blogs under the name 'the rejectionist' questions whether using the same images of extreme and sadistic violence against women that is standard fare for bestsellers can possibly be feminist.

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 [*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*] 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. (2010)

Interestingly, the rape scene in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* actually occupies not ten but less than two pages. The pages leading up to the rape are devoted to Salander weighing her options as she plans a strategy to put an end to her guardian's sexual harassment. Her evaluation of her circumstances is blunt and unemotional:

By the time she was eighteen, Salander did not know a single girl who at some point had not been forced to perform some sort of sex act against her will . . . In her world, this was the natural order of things. As a girl she was legal prey, especially if she was dressed in a worn black leather jacket and had pierced eyebrows, tattoos, and zero social status' (2009: 249).

Still, though rape is commonplace, Salander has no intention of passively accepting her victimhood. After being forced to trade oral sex for access to her funds, she lays plans to break his hold over her. 'There was no question of Advokat Bjurman going unpunished. Salander never forgot an injustice, and by nature she was anything but forgiving' (249). As her next meeting with Bjurman approaches, we do

not see her experiencing anxiety or dread, a foreshadowing device commonly used in thrillers to heighten suspense. Instead, she works through her options dispassionately, including the possibility of staging a fatal 'accident'. She settles instead on filming his abusive behaviour so that she can threaten him with exposure and gain the upper hand. But the ferocity of his second attack catches her by surprise.

At first, the assault is seen from Salander's point of view and is brief. Bjurman overpowers her, silences her, and begins to rape her. As soon as she feels 'excruciating pain' (2009: 274) the scene shifts to Hedeby Island where Blomkvist and Cecilia Vanger are enjoying their healthy and consensual sexual relationship, one in which Cecilia explicitly sets the rules, before the action returns to Bjurman's apartment after the assault is over. We are given the facts in a notably unemotional manner. 'Salander was allowed to put on her clothes. It was 4:00 on Saturday morning. She picked up her leather jacket and rucksack and hobbled to the front door, where he was waiting for her, showered and neatly dressed. He gave her a cheque for 2,500 kronor' (274-5). The contrast between these scenes is unsubtle and underscores the distinction Larsson is drawing between sex enjoyed by equal partners and sexual assault as an exercise of power and an economic transaction.

Significantly, we are not party to Salander's feelings immediately following the rape. After she leaves Bjurman's apartment, she looks back, and we see her from his perspective. 'Her body looked fragile and her face was swollen from crying, and he almost recoiled when he met her eyes. Never in his life had he seen such naked, smouldering hatred.' Bjurman recategorises her, not as a broken reed or a formidable opponent but as being 'just as deranged as her casebook indicated' (275), interpreting her anger as a symptom of a previously diagnosed disability. Though Larsson makes use of the common thriller ingredient of a violent sexual assault against a helpless and seemingly fragile young woman, he forgoes the tantalizing build of suspense and the sexualized violent entertainment of a 'ten-page explicit rape scene' in order to do something different. He has stripped away from this pivotal scene all

indicators that submission can be sexy and instead reveals rape as the violent exercise of authority over the disenfranchised.

Bestselling bricolage

Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Sarah Seltzer argues that the trilogy uses popular materials in order to successfully smuggle 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 (2010).

In Seltzer’s view, Larsson appeals to American readers by using the familiar materials of a popular genre, but then overcomes the limitations of the roles typically given to women in the genre by creating a complex and original heroine.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Larsson fuses two storylines from what seem to be opposite ends of the crime fiction genre, beginning with a traditional locked room mystery , then detouring into a more contemporary and violent thriller involving the systematic rape, torture and murder of women by a sadistic and depraved father and son team. In fact, the three volumes of the trilogy are a pastiche of nearly every convention one might encounter in the crime fiction genre, a set of adventures unified by a

singular social message: that men who hate women act on that hatred in ways that are far too often tolerated by society. In the same way, Salander herself is constructed out of a wealth of pop culture references in a combination that seems original, but is actually a bricolage of clichés. Larsson has assembled and repurposed genre conventions in ways that draw readers in, but then forces them to reassess and interrogate their expectations. Salander takes the position of the violated female, acting out a role that young women are expected to play in thrillers, but then she refuses to behave according to expectations. Her story and her style breathes life and purpose into clichés in a way that makes readers care about this familiar yet original character—and think differently about the role in which thrillers typically cast women.

Larsson is said to have conceived of Salander by wondering what Pippi Longstocking would be like as an adult. In an interview with Lasse Winkler he 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 (2010).

Her more or less autobiographical male sidekick is also drawn from one of Astrid Lindgren's heroes, boy detective Kalle Blomkvist, reimagined as a 45-year-old journalist, 'an altruistic know-it-all who publishes a magazine called Millennium' (Winkler 2010). When Blomkvist 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 Blomkvist 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 (291-2).

In a sense, the Millennium Trilogy holds many hidden bookshelves, and they provide clues to how the stories work by simultaneously meeting and subverting our expectations. Not only does Larsson make overt references to a number of crime writers in the three books, this playful intertextuality is also at work in the way that Larsson has borrowed various heroic characters from popular culture, as Jean-Henri Holmberg has noted in 'The Man Who Inhaled Crime Fiction' (2011: 99-105). In addition to Pippi Longstocking and Lindgren's darker stories about Kalle Blomkvist, Larsson grew up with Enid Blyton's adventure stories which 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 character from the 1960s, British in origin but quite popular in Sweden. The parallels with Salander are striking. Modesty Blaise is a bold, sexy young heroine whose origins are a mystery, having been found wandering as an orphan in post-war Eastern Europe. After running away from a displaced persons camp, she becomes 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 Blaise's story in Lisbeth Salander's relationships with older men, her illicit wealth, and her extralegal network, the Hacker Republic.

Larsson was not only familiar with popular culture, he was a serious fan (Holmberg 2011). At the age of 20, Larsson published an article in a science fiction fanzine critiquing 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. Instead, he lauded Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross MacDonal of the hardboiled American tradition. After taking a job with a Swedish news agency, Larsson had the opportunity to regularly review crime fiction. His favourite authors tended to be women, including the founders of the feminist PI genre, Liza Cody, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky, as well as writers who came later, notably Carol O'Connell, whose own series heroine, Kathy Mallory, is an orphaned sociopathic genius whose violent tendencies are barely held in check by an older male mentor. In short, Larsson's

tastes map closely to the 1980s 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 feminist mode.

From sexism to social criticism

This feminist turn has its roots in the gritty realism and social critique espoused by Raymond Chandler. In his classic essay 'The Simple Art of Murder', Chandler makes a case for the importance of both realism and idealism in the detective story, arguing that detective fiction should take on questions of power and social injustice (1944). He describes his famous 'mean streets' as being the site of corruption, the routine abuse of power, and the failure of social institutions to fulfil their obligations. The only way to write about the real world, he argues, is to acknowledge these problems—but there must also be a 'quality of redemption' (59) provided by the hero, an able, courageous, and ordinary yet honourable man.

One form of injustice is conspicuously missing from Chandler's catalogue: sexism. In the 1980s and 90s, women writers took Chandler's master plot and rewrote it by reinventing the hero, making her a woman who, by her very status in society, is in a position to view the world from the perspective of the disempowered. In Chandler's world, women were either innocents who needed protection or femmes fatales who led men to their doom through sexual seduction. By rewriting the genre, women were able to keep the focus on unmasking injustice, while adding empathy and insight into socio-economic problems to their portrayal of the detective. In many ways, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö were appropriating genre conventions in a manner similar to Larsson when they wrote 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 even if the heroes were agents of state power:

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 (France 2009).

Now, she confesses it didn't accomplish 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' (2009). Yet their Martin Beck series laid a foundation for a critical examination of the failures of society that gives Scandinavian crime fiction its reputation for dealing realistically with social issues.

That said, Larsson's trilogy is very different than the ironic documentary style of the Martin Beck series and is equally distinct from the glum and introspective melodrama of Henning Mankell's Wallander series. In Larsson's trilogy, the sweeping social critique found in Sjöwall and Wahlöö's series is transported into a lively bricolage of international popular culture references, tied together with a serious thread: a focus on violence against women. Lisbeth Salander is not just Pippi Longstocking as an adult, she is the counter-cultural hacker chick of science fiction and a kickboxing ninja babe straight out of comic-book culture, as well as the model of professionalism, independence, and resistance found in the first feminist private investigators.

Though Larsson's foray into serial killer territory borrows elements from the graphically violent fiction that Jessica Mann finds so objectionable, it approaches the subject from a different angle. At first, Blomkvist investigates the long-ago disappearance of Harriet Vanger by assembling information about the past and about the eccentric and wealthy Vanger family, but when he realizes her disappearance

may be connected to the grisly unsolved murder of an unrelated young woman, he hires Salander as a researcher to help him decode the hints Harriet Vanger left in the form of bible verses linked to women's names and initials.

At this point the locked room mystery is abruptly abandoned as the mechanics of a serial killer story are set in action. Salander links the names and initials to women who were horrifically murdered, most likely by a member of the Vanger family. Blomkvist is shocked and tells her that he finds such a possibility preposterous. 'The idea that an insanely sick sadistic serial killer was slaughtering women for at least seventeen years without anyone seeing a connection sounds utterly unbelievable to me' (414). Salander replies coolly with a numbered series of logical propositions to prove just how easily these murders could go unnoticed, prefacing her argument with an authoritative source:

We have several dozen unsolved murders of women in Sweden during the twentieth century. That professor of criminology, Persson [crime fiction author Leif G. W. Persson, who is also a respected social scientist] said once on TV that serial killers are very rare in Sweden, but that probably we have had some that were never caught (414).

She goes on to refute Blomkvist's doubts by pointing out the murders were spread out in time and carried out in different jurisdictions and with varied MOs, making for a pattern of violence against women that would be hard to see if you weren't looking for it. Later she rejects Blomkvist's characterization of the perpetrator as an aberrant religious lunatic. 'It's not an insane serial killer who read his Bible wrong. It's just a common or garden bastard who hates women' (418). Though Larsson is playing with a familiar melodramatic storyline, Salander's corrections to Blomkvist's assumptions are an opportunity to reiterate that he is oblivious to an everyday pattern of sexist violence.

In this scene, Salander explicitly challenges common interpretations of the nature of violence and the working of justice as portrayed in American serial killer narratives popularized by Thomas Harris, James Patterson and others. In what follows, I will examine the rise the serial killer narrative in America and consider the significant ways in which such a storyline is refigured in *Dragon Tattoo*.

Serial killer narratives

Larsson deliberately frames the sexual murders that Gottfried and Martin Vanger have engaged in secretly for years not merely as a moral aberration, but as an extension of their political and economic belief system, one that justifies exploitation and oppression of all kinds. This is fundamentally different to the standard American serial killer narrative, which depicts sexual violence as an expression of the spiritual battle between good and evil. In this widely-popular fictional universe, crime itself is not a social problem, it is a psychological malaise and a sickness of the soul. When violent crime is situated in a field of Manichean struggle, there is no room for social inequality or economic injustice to play a role, so readers can safely enjoy the story without having to recognize and confront sources of injustice in society. This moral framework for crime fiction is not only popular with readers, it replicates itself as it is taught in writing workshops and how-to books (such as Frey 2004) which advise writers to structure their fiction as a mythic hero's journey. This separation of crime from social causes is tightly bound up in a neoconservative view of morality and the role of the state.

Though serial murder has been the stuff of popular entertainment since at least the days of Elizabethan pamphlets recounting notorious crimes (Marshburn and Velie 1973), the phrase 'serial killer' only entered common usage in the post-Watergate era, when the Reagan administration was trying to restore funding and political authority to institutions of law enforcement after public criticism had led to legislation that restricted police practices. The public fascination with serial murderers was enlisted in the cause, because the threat of violent criminals arising without social causes effectively shifted crime

from being a social problem, and therefore requiring state-funded social policy solutions to being a moral crisis, requiring scientific and judicial intervention. Eliminating poverty would not solve the problem; instead, police powers should be enhanced to combat moral degeneracy (Jenkins 1994).

At the same time that crime was being reconceptualized as a moral rather than a social problem, popular psychology was also undergoing rehabilitation. Individual psychological trauma was deemed responsible for any number of social problems previously attributed to economic and social inequality as therapists helped their patients recover memories of familial sexual abuse. Moreover, as funding was withdrawn from social programs supporting child welfare, child abuse as a heritable form of sexual deviance passed from parent to child replaced poverty and neglect as a matter of public concern (Hacking 1991). The role of the profiler in popular fiction embodies these concepts of the scientific probing of traumatic events, the generational transmission of deviance, and the concept of crime as a moral issue, giving rise to the contemporary American crime thriller with a victimized yet morally strong female protagonist.

Thomas Harris captured the zeitgeist with *Silence of the Lambs* (1988), a bestselling thriller with a female protagonist who satisfied both feminists and tough-on-crime moralists. Though Harris did not invent the serial killer storyline, Leonard Cassuto credits him with popularizing it, calling Harris 'the Henry Ford of the serial killer story, the man who enabled their mass production' (2003: 220). Critic Stephen Fuller notes that Jodie Foster's film depiction of the book's protagonist, Clarice Starling, made the character a 'feminist icon', satisfying women who were seeking strong heroines who could fight their way past institutionalized sexism. At the same time, her absolute moral conviction appealed to the rising tide of ideological conservatives. 'This combination transformed Starling into a national totem, blending continuity and discontinuity with the past and mobilizing a deep and diverse range of public sympathies' (2005: 821). The serial killer narrative that pits a detective who is trained in science and psychology against a monstrously evil killer became enormously popular. In Patrick Anderson's

estimation, *The Silence of the Lambs* is 'the greatest of modern thrillers. It does not transcend the genre but defines it. More than any other single novel, it is the triumph of the thriller' (2007: 158). Making Clarice Starling the protagonist, he argues, was 'an inspired move' because it infused the relationship between the key players with a frisson of sexual tension, expressed in 'the strange mating dance between the charming cannibal and the seemingly virginal Clarice' (155).

Harris defines the genre not only because *Silence of the Lambs* was extremely popular, but because it has been endlessly imitated. Perhaps the most successful of writers to franchise serial killers as entertainment is James Patterson, who marketed his breakout book, *Along Came a Spider*, with a television advertisement that announced 'you can stop waiting for the next "Silence of the Lambs"' (Mahler 2010). Though it lacks the polish of Harris's novel, it combines a simplified moral conflict with fast-paced suspense and titillating violence. In Anderson's words, Patterson's Alex Cross series is 'sick, sexist, sadistic, and subliterate' (2007: 246). Nevertheless, Patterson has sold more books than any other American author, and between 2006 and 2010, his name was on the cover of one of every 17 hardcover books sold in the US (Mahler 2010). Like many other successful authors, Patterson has diversified his product line by introducing female protagonists in the Women's Murder Club series. The serial killer narrative has dominated the thriller genre for two decades, with women profilers taking their place alongside male heroes. Yet their role is fundamentally different from that of Lisbeth Salander.

Shortly after the publication of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in Sweden in 2005, US author Cody McFadyen published the first volume in a series that, while it did not achieve the commercial success of Patterson's and Larsson's books, illustrates the fork in the road that appeared in American crime fiction in the 1980s. One path was the feminist reinvention of the American private investigator genre which flourished during the 1990s but has since flagged in popularity, even though its first practitioners, Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky, continue to add volumes to their popular series featuring women detectives. The other path is the commercially successful serial killer narrative

pioneered by Thomas Harris and exploited successfully by James Patterson. In 2006 McFadyen continued that tradition when he introduced his female protagonist, Smoky Barrett, in *Shadow Man*.

Barrett is an FBI profiler who (like Lisbeth Salander) is physically small, under five feet in height, unusually talented, intelligent, and physically and emotionally scarred by trauma. As the book opens, a police psychologist is trying to bring her back from the brink of suicide after she was victimized by a man who murdered her husband and child, raped her, tortured her, and forced her to mutilate her own face with a knife. Barrett is able to get inside the minds of the serial killers she hunts, hacking into their thoughts in the way that Salander is able to break into computer networks. But evil in this fictional universe has no social vectors. It arises like a genetic mutation of morality. In the novel, the protagonist refers to serial killers as 'alien' and 'an aberration, a different species' (2006: 99), and while they have often been 'made by Frankenstein parents' who replicate themselves by maltreating their children, they cannot be rehabilitated. 'The monsters are, without exception, irredeemable' (2006: 101). Cassuto connects the rise of this kind of serial killer narrative and its monstrous villains with the defunding of mental health institutions and deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. The fictional serial killer becomes an example of the futility of mental health interventions. As Cassuto puts it, 'the transformation of the mentally ill to monstrous criminals is the story of sympathy withdrawn . . . We once felt sorry for our mentally ill, but now they disgust us—and because they disgust us, they're fair game for a collective effort at monstrous objectification. Serial killer stories take care of this objectification for us' (2003: 227). Fictional killers must be diagnosed as incurably insane, because readers must not feel sympathy toward them or any sense of social responsibility; the only cure for these monsters is to be slain.

Barrett hunts monstrous predators who hate women because women embody innocence and vulnerability. These monsters are particularly dangerous because they appear human. As one character says of a serial killer, 'It was like the opposite of Halloween. Instead of being a human wearing a monster mask, [he] was a monster wearing a human mask' (McFadyen 2006: 331). In the denouement, as Smoky

confronts the monster, her dead daughter appears to her like a religious vision to guide her hand as she slays her opponent.

This combination of a pseudoscientific 'bad seed' theory of deviant behaviour, coupled with religious imagery, satisfies neoconservative longings for moral clarity and an understanding of good and evil that is uncomplicated by issues of public policy. Evil is not nurtured by social inequality, it is an act of spiritual allegiance to the devil. This personification of evil in many ways is a cultural indicator of the American zeitgeist of the late twentieth century. The percentage of Americans who believe in the literal existence of the devil began to rise in the 1970s at the same time that public belief in the importance of social welfare programs began to decline. (Harris Interactive 2011). Distrust of secular accounts of natural phenomena in favour of literalist Christian beliefs has also grown. A poll taken shortly after *Shadow Man* was published found more Americans believe in the existence of Satan than in Darwin's theory of evolution (Stoddard 2007).

Lisbeth Salander and Smoky Barrett share features that are staples of popular culture, yet deliver very different messages. In Barrett's world, evil is a moral choice made by genetically flawed monsters; Salander sees evil as a the brutal exercise of power in a social system that favours wealth and privilege. As survivors of rape and torture, both Salander and Barrett do battle with serial killers who were raised by abusive parents and have gone on to rape, torture, and kill women in secret while appearing to be respectable pillars of society. Each of these tough but vulnerable heroines appeals to American audiences, even though they are operating in fictional universes with very different assumptions about the roots of evil. Salander offers readers a fresh narrative about women's experience that places responsibility on individual's choices and within the context of power relationships. When Blomkvist tells her that it's hard to believe that a killer has successfully murdered women for years without detection, she logically explains how entirely plausible it is once you see the pattern—a pattern she experiences in everyday life. The denouement of the serial killer part of the plot is another

demonstration of Larsson's playful appropriation of conventions. When Blomkvist stupidly follows Martin Vanger into his lair and is tied up and tortured, he is playing the 'fem jep' (female in jeopardy) role typically held by characters mystery fans encounter so often they label them with the scornful shorthand 'TSTL' – too stupid to live. Larsson has borrowed a common formula, but reversed the genders so that a man can be threatened and a woman can be the rescuer.

Later, as Blomkvist tries to understand what has happened, he ponders the psychological damage that Gottfried Vanger inflicted on his son and mouths the generational replication of evil theory that Ian Hacking (1991) has incisively unpacked. Salander disagrees with typical bluntness. 'Bullshit . . . He killed and raped because he liked doing it.' (2009: 515). As Blomkvist presses the point, she points out with ruthless logic, 'Gottfried isn't the only kid who was ever mistreated. That doesn't give him the right to murder women. He made that choice himself. And the same is true of Martin.' (516) As the conversation progresses, they both realize that Harriet Vanger must have been incestuously raped. The reason she studied the Bible wasn't for spiritual guidance; she studied it as a key to her religiously fanatical father's murders. The sacred text has become a manual for the interpretation of the motives of a deranged serial killer. Larsson has successfully appropriated the moral, religious, and pseudoscientific trappings that made the serial killer narrative an exciting yet comforting metanarrative for American readers, but by reversing roles and reimagining key elements, he has given Salander the opportunity to challenge and defeat its underlying assumptions.

Conclusion: what we talk about when we talk about rape

Sabine Sielke urges us to reflect on 'what we talk about when we talk about rape' (2002: 1) and to consider the rhetorical meaning of rape in a particular historical and cultural context. Rape has its discursive uses and is often 'an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts' (2). In the United States, rape narratives have historically shaped and been shaped by, conflicts

between colonists and Indians and between whites and blacks. Widespread and institutionalized fear of rape has been used to subjugate women seeking greater personal freedom and remind them that, fundamentally, they are prey. In Sielke's words, 'the very discourses that establish gender differences as differences in sexuality also construct female sexuality as victimization' (2). Quite often, the rhetoric surrounding rape has little to do with women and their lives; rather the depiction of violence against women participates in 'the making of a world that tends to care little about violated bodies' (3).

That being the case, the enthusiasm with which American audiences have embraced Lisbeth Salander may signal a shifting perception of sexual violence in popular culture. In the Millennium Trilogy, rape is not about sex; it isn't even about violence. It is about the unjust exercise of power in a manner that undermines social institutions and offends collective morality. Audiences respond to the fact that, in response to rape, Salander takes power over her assailant and inscribes him with a shaming label using the same tools that mark her triumphantly as a wasp and a dragon. The women in the trilogy do not react to the threat of sexual violence with fear, and Larsson does not build suspense in his audience with the threat of sexualized violence as his instrument. The male perpetrators of violence are not mutant aliens, they are men who hold political and economic power and use it to oppress others. As Blomkvist says toward the end of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* in a pontifical moment to his sister, who has just successfully defended Salander in court, 'I told you you'd be unbeatable. When it comes down to it, this story is not primarily about spies and secret government agencies; it's about violence against women and the men who enable it' (2010: 514). Though the story is, in fact, about spies and secret government agencies, about corrupt officials, cold war politics, economic injustice, and abuses of state power, Larsson has decided that what we talk about when we talk about those things is actually men who hate women.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Larsson has borrowed and refashioned the American serial killer plot as just one of many crime fiction motifs used in the Millennium Trilogy, along with the locked

room mystery, the dysfunctional family saga, the spy thriller, the financial thriller, the police procedural, the political thriller, and the courtroom drama, creating a remix of popular culture motifs that becomes an imaginative landscape in which a heroine who is also assembled from clichés can become her own original and engaging self. Her character and her highly logical yet passionate outsider response to state-sanctioned violence is what it takes to rally moral people—journalists, police, physicians, lawyers, and perhaps readers—to call social institutions to account. Larsson’s interest in situating evil within social structures in which powerful individuals routinely make self-serving choices leads him to recycle familiar fictional storylines that have previously identified evil as a monstrous Other, capturing our sympathy with a compelling heroine whose task is to expose and confront our assumptions. In the end Larsson has done what the female crime writers who reclaimed the American private investigator narrative once did; he has successfully refashioned a popular genre in a feminist mode.

Works cited

Anderson, P. (2007) *The Triumph of the Thriller*. New York: Random.

Cassuto, L. (2003) ‘The Cultural Work of Serial Killers’, *Minnesota Review* 58, 219-229.

Chandler, R. (1944) ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, *The Atlantic Monthly* December, 53-59.

Ellison, J. T. (2009) ‘What the F**k is Ladylike?’ *Moderati*

<http://www.murderati.com/blog/2009/8/7/what-the-fk-is-ladylike.html>, date accessed 4 February 2012.

Fister, B. (2011) ‘Sisters in Crime at the Quarter Century: Advocacy, Community, and Change’. Paper presented at the International Popular Culture Association Meeting, San Antonio, Texas, 23 April, <http://homepages.gac.edu/~fister/SinCPCA.pdf>, date accessed 4 February 2012.

- France, L. (2009) 'The Queen of Crime', *The Guardian*
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/22/crime-thriller-maj-sjowall-sweden>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- Frey, J. N. (2004) *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript*. New York: Macmillan.
- Fuller, S. (2005) 'Deposing an American Cultural Totem: Clarice Starling and Postmodern Heroism in Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*', *Journal of Popular Culture* 38. 5, 819-33.
- Hacking, I. (1991) 'The Making and Molding of Child Abuse', *Critical Inquiry* 17. 2, 253-288.
- Harris, T. (1988) *The Silence of the Lambs*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Harris Interactive (2011) *Harris Vault*, <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/Insights/HarrisVault.aspx>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- Holmberg, J. (2011) 'The Man who Inhaled Crime Fiction', *The Tattooed Girl: The Enigma of Stieg Larsson and the Secrets Behind the Most Compelling Thriller of Our Time*, D. Burstein, A. de Keijzer, and J. Holmberg (ed.) New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 99-105.
- Jenkins, P. (1994) *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide*. New York: Aldene de Gruyter.
- Larsson, S. (2009) *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* transl. by R. Keeland. New York: Vintage.
- Larsson, S. (2010) *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* transl. by R. Keeland. New York: Knopf.
- Mahler, J. (2010) 'James Patterson, Inc.', *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 January,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/magazine/24patterson-t.html>, date accessed 4 February 2012.

- Mann, J. (2009) 'Crimes Against Fiction', *Standpoint* September,
<http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/crimes-against-fiction-counterpoints-september-09-crime-fiction>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- Marshburn, J. H. and A. R. Velie (1973) *Blood and Knavery: A Collection of English Renaissance Pamphlets and Ballads of Crime and Sin*. Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.
- McCabe, J. (2011) 'Murder, She Blogged: Detectives in Distress', *Bitchmedia*
<http://bitchmagazine.org/post/murder-she-blogged-damsels-in-distress>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- McFadyen, C. (2006) *Shadow Man*. New York: Bantam.
- McGrath, C. (2010). 'The Afterlife of Stieg Larsson', *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 May,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/magazine/23Larsson-t.html>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- Rejectionist (2010) 'The Girl with the Lots of Creepy Disturbing Torture that Pissed Me Off: On Stieg Larsson', *Tiger Beatdown*, 29 July, <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2010/07/29/the-girl-with-the-lots-of-creepy-disturbing-torture-that-pissed-me-off-on-stieg-larsson/>, date accessed 4 February 2012.
- Seltzer, S. (2010) 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: Why We Should Cheer Lisbeth Salander', *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 July, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2010/0728/The-Girl-with-the-Dragon-Tattoo-Why-we-should-cheer-Lisbeth-Salander>, date accessed 4 February 2012..
- Sielke, S. (2002) *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. Princeton University Press.

Stoddard, E. (2007) 'Poll Finds More Americans Believe in Devil than Darwin', *Reuters*, 29 November, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/11/29/us-usa-religion-beliefs-idUSN2922875820071129>, date accessed 4 February 2012..

Winkler, L. (2010) 'Stieg Larsson: The Man who Created the Girl', *The Telegraph*, 4 June, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/7803012/Stieg-Larsson-the-man-who-created-the-girl.html>, date accessed 4 February 2012..