

JAKOB STOUGAARD-NIELSEN:

Scandinavian Crime Fiction

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The last few years have brought a number of books in English about Scandinavian, Swedish, and Nordic crime fiction, books aimed at different reader groups and of varying quality and content. The latest addition is Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen's *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, which covers crime fiction from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, starting with Swedish Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö in the late 1960s and with a main focus on the last decades of the twentieth century.

Stougaard-Nielsen has selected a number of novels and/or authors of which he makes more or less close readings of varying depth. There is a clear thematic focus throughout the book on how the novels (and a couple of television series) mirror, portray and critique the Scandinavian welfare states and their development. It can even be argued that the readers of Stougaard-Nielsen will learn more about the welfare states than about crime fiction. The inclusion of a vampire novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist further suggests that Stougaard-Nielsen's primary interest is in the portrayal of the welfare states, rather than in crime fiction per se. The efficient and inclusive title of the book is probably chosen for marketing purposes; a title more closely mirroring the content would have been something along the lines of 'the disintegrating Scandinavian welfare states as portrayed in Scandinavian crime fiction from the last decades of the twentieth century'.

After an introduction to the welfare states and the role of Scandinavian crime fiction, Stougaard-Nielsen analyzes Danish Anders Bodelsen's *Think of a number* (1968), Sjöwall and Wahlöö's *Novel of a Crime*, and Norwegian Gunnar Staalesen's Varg Veum series (mainly focusing on novels from the 1970s and 80s). These three examples then work as reference points throughout the rest of the book, as Stougaard-Nielsen continues to examine, in turn: Henning Mankell's *Faceless Killers* (1991); Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005); (briefly) Arne Dahl's *Misterioso* (1999); John Arvije Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (2004, a vampire novel, not crime fiction); Peter Høeg's

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow (1992); Kerstin Ekman's *Blackwater* (1993); (briefly) Liza Marklund's *The Bomber* (1998); (even more briefly) Camilla Läckberg's *The Ice Princess* (2003) and Sissel-Jo Gazan's *The Dinosaur Feather* (2008); the television series *The Killing* (2007, 2009, 2012) and *The Bridge* (2011, 2013, 2015); and finally Anne Holt's novel *What Dark Clouds Hide* (2012). Additionally, a handful more novels are mentioned as examples here and there. The selection thus reflects a well-established (with the exception of Gazan), primarily male, canon, and with the exception of Larsson and Holt everything analyzed at length is from before the turn of the Millennium.

In general Stougaard-Nielsen's readings are convincing, well argued, and based on a wide range of sources. Nevertheless, his selection of previous research on Scandinavian crime fiction sometimes seems a bit random, as articles by well-established scholars on some of the authors and books are missing. The readings are heavily reliant on studies by in particular Michael Tapper and Andrew Nestingen. Not least the inspiration from Tapper can probably to some degree explain both the (male-oriented) canon presented and parts of the political perspective applied in the reading of the portrayal of the welfare states. Despite the dominance of male authors, however, Stougaard-Nielsen does discuss many women detective characters, but it is not until in the reading of motherhood in Holt's novel that he goes into any depth in terms of gender analysis. The Holt chapter is also one of the strongest in the book.

Furthermore, there is sometimes a shortage of crime fiction genre perspectives applied, something that becomes especially obvious in the reading of Larsson, in whose novel the application of different genre elements plays such an essential part in the shaping of the narrative. Stougaard-Nielsen's study would also have benefitted from a more thorough discussion of how the Scandinavian authors use and develop the crime genre. Similarly, the use of Mankell's Wallander novels to exemplify the use of rural, local settings – something that is so central to a large proportion of the Scandinavian novels – is not really representative. It would have made more sense to use Läckberg's novel as the main example for that purpose. In terms of formal aspects, there are a few inconsistencies (for example, Håkan Nesser

is sometimes also spelled Haakan Nesser), some names that ought to have been there for consistency are lacking from the index, and so on, but these are all trivialities. Overall, despite my minor criticisms, it is important to stress that Stougaard-Nilsen provides insightful analysis and that *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* is an important addition to the knowledge about and scholarship on the selected texts.

Despite the attractive cover that includes a presentation mentioning readers, viewers, and fans, as well as the affordable paperback format of the book, this is a book for scholars rather than for general crime fiction readers. The language is academic, making it a somewhat slow read, and close readings of selected books as opposed to a survey or overview of themes and trends also somewhat limits the likely readership. Furthermore, the title and presentation of the book made me expect to learn more about the new authors who have emerged in Scandinavia after Stieg Larsson, but that did not happen. Nevertheless, for anyone interested in exploring the work of those authors who dominate Scandinavian crime fiction today, Stougaard-Nielsen's study will provide excellent background and references. Also the book will provide many insights for readers interested in the Scandinavian welfare states in the late 1900s, whether they are interested in crime fiction per se or not.