

Politics of Nordic Noir

As I'm writing this the gunning down of Muslims at prayer in New Zealand is fresh in my mind and on the news. I had intended to focus on race and ethnicity in this article on Nordic Noir, and this terrible incident makes this focus even more relevant.

Nordic Noir is a genre of crime fiction that burst onto the western bookshelves with the publication in English in 2008 of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. In fact, in the Scandinavian countries it is regarded as beginning in the 1960's with the DI Martin Beck series by the left-wing couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo of Sweden.

It includes crime fiction from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Greenland and Iceland. My image of these countries is of social democratic tolerant societies. However, in these novels the authors peer under that public layer to expose dark secrets and hidden hatreds embedded in intolerance of other races, refugees and immigrants; white supremacy; memories of World War II; the expansion of the European Union; the proximity of the oppression of Russia and the upheavals in the Baltic states. The protagonists are deeply disappointed in their politicians and believe society is worsening.

The aspect of this that most surprised me was the level of animosity towards other races and nationalities as early as the 1990's when Russians and Eastern Europeans were demonised. In later novels those from Africa and the Middle East are viewed with suspicion. The Nordic countries' relationships with Germany are coloured by World War II.

In Mads Peder Nordbo's *The Girl Without Skin*, (Denmark, 2017) set in Greenland, the author opens with the local elections and continues with the animosity between Greenlanders, Inuits, Faroes Islanders and Danes. The Danes are considered with contempt and hatred by the other three and the Danes view them with arrogance and as being backward.

When Henning Mankell was writing his Wallander series he hoped to highlight the growing racism, xenophobia and anti-immigration feeling in Sweden. His *The Dogs of Riga* (Sweden 1992) depicts the collapse of the Baltic states and the oppression of Russia. The Russian minority in Latvia, where the book is set, oppose their push for independence and are regarded as bandits by the Latvians. Wallander relates the growing fear in Sweden of the increasing presence of the Russian mafia which the protagonists link with the KGB. He comes to understand what fear and oppression can do to people. Even though many of the novels reference Russia, it is particularly in this novel that the overbearing presence is made real.

Henning Mankell's *Faceless Killers* (Sweden 1991) portrays prejudice against refugees arriving from Poland and a camp for refugees from Africa and the middle east, that had been the subject of cross burnings, rocks through windows and later a horrific murder by two white supremacists. Wallander shows his prejudice when he thinks, "I really hope that the killers (of an old farming couple) are at that refugee camp. Then maybe it'll put an end to this arbitrary, lax policy that allows anyone at all, for any reason at all, to cross the border into Sweden." Wisely he kept this opinion to himself. As the story progresses Wallander develops some more compassion and understanding for these desperate people. Throughout the book there are opinions and debates about refugees and immigrants from a range of countries.

To Australians Russia is a distant enemy of the state and is not seen in the same way because it is not next door. This feeling of fear and memory permeates most of the Nordic Noir I have read and includes ex-Soviet bloc countries.

In Australia our memory of World War II is of a past and distant war. In the Nordic countries it is a close memory with people still affected by it. During World War II the Danes resisted attempts by the Nazis to deport Danish Jews and indeed went to great lengths to hide them or to help them across the sea to Sweden. The Swedish declaration of neutrality had been

respected by the Germans, but Norway and Denmark were occupied. Some of the murders hark back to this era.

Stieg Larsson, who worked on an anti-racist magazine as he wrote his crime novels, portrayed virulent Nazism in his first novel in the *Millennium* series: *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (Sweden 2005).

The ambition of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo was to create a portrait of a corrupt modern society. As Jonathan Franzen says in the introduction to the English edition, “The book is fuelled by the tension between the dystopic vision of its authors and the essential optimism of its genre.” They depict the exploitation by landlords of Turk and Algerian workers. A particularly odious character hates three categories of people: foreigners, teenagers and socialists, and says he would escape to the mountains “if it weren’t that the whole of Lapland is lousy with Lapps.” The authors deal with difficult subjects with great whimsy.

The Blind Goddess (Norway 1993) by Anne Holt depicts ‘dark-skinned people as apprehensive with hands damp with perspiration after hours of waiting to be told their fate in the Police Immigration Department’.

The Blinded Man (Sweden 1999) by Arne Dahl references Central European and Russian refugees. The unfortunate term ‘svartskalle’ or ‘blackhead’ is used to refer to people with dark hair = those from the Middle East.

The Jussi Adler-Olsen *Dept Q* series set in Denmark and first published in Denmark in 2007 has an ensemble cast which includes a Muslim ‘cleaner’ who doubles as an investigator. The main detective, Carl Morck, has a thrumming low-level misanthropy which permeates all his interactions. Although this includes racism, Morck nevertheless comes to appreciate Assad. This doesn’t necessarily mean he isn’t racist, having made an ‘exception’ of one Muslim.

Woman With A Birthmark (Sweden 1996) by Hakan Nesser mentions ‘a racist gang had run amok through the immigrant district...and caused a certain amount of damage’. A racist teacher is viewed with opprobrium by his colleagues when he tells a student ‘to go to hell. Or back to the country he came from, wherever that was’.

Most Nordic Noir is socially conscious crime fiction that includes protagonists who not only grapple with racism, but also sexism and political corruption.