

Why Peter Høeg could take Stieg Larsson

Indsendt af Jens H. Ilsøe S... den 24 marts, 2013 - 19:14



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Being Irish I have no position on Denmark vs Sweden. However I can compare novels so today it's *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* vs *Miss Smilla's Feeling For Snow*.

Denmark

Smilla evokes a sense of betrayal in readers looking for modish Scandicrime. It encompasses not just a murder but colonialism and the origins of life itself. That makes it a great novel (despite the plotting problems with the ship segment).

Of course having grown up in a colony myself I am very sensitive to this part of the novel. Smilla's cunning, lack of trust, and deep cynicism are so true to life it's astonishing. A Dane wrote this and confronted Danish misdemeanours in Greenland but he did it very subtly. We aren't battered with statistics; Hoeg shows us how colonialism drives people to despair and cynicism and how it distorts human relationships (Smilla's with her father has disturbing overtones).

The death of Andreas Fine Licht is subtle because it evokes the use of indigenous peoples to make museum exhibits. This makes the scene haunting and it is all the more effective because the author does not put this parallel in words. It picks up on shameful history Europeans prefer to forget and lets the reader decide morally how they feel about it.

Speaking of Andreas Fine Licht Høeg resists the urge to reduce it to Danes = bad, Greenlanders = Good. The Mechanic is one of the most interesting male characters I've ever read; he has the shyness many men have but which is little explored in literature. He truly loves young Isaiah in a way even Smilla didn't; one could call it a fiercely paternal love. Just as The Mechanic is a real man, Smilla is a real woman – not in her first flush of youth and too intelligent really to fit in anywhere. Even the victim Isaiah isn't a symbol; he becomes an avenging part of the landscape in the finale.

Sweden

So, onto *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, or as the original Swedish title gently put it, *Men Who Hate Women*. For a book that very earnestly feeds you statistics on the horrible things men do to women there's a surprising amount of misogyny under the surface – Salander's rape, the 'Twatbudgie Incident,' death after death of anonymous women. It's not disturbing, it's disgusting.

I do love Lisbeth Salander but she's a superheroine – a genius like Smilla, she's a hacker of unearthly ability. And then we come to Blomkvist, a man who was so weak he broke up his family for his friend with benefits, and yet is so irresistible even rape victims forget their trauma and want him (to be fair in this book everyone's a rape victim). I call Mary Sue. As Blomkvist has the same job the author did it's an irresistible conclusion; it contrasts with *The Mechanic* who shares his writer's Christian name. All in all it's a surprisingly immature novel because the author forces his own disturbances and opinions on you. Lisbeth is a great character but she could do better than Blomkvist. But then in Larsson's world *All Men Are Evil Raping Bastards*...apart from Blomkvist.

So: *Smilla* is a great novel because it asks hard moral questions without making one reach for a whiskey. *Men Who Hate Women* is like getting a jackhammer to the face repeatedly and is so fantastically hideous the message about the oppression of women is lost. And this is nothing to do with Denmark vs Sweden.

Kicked asses

Because we kicked the asses of both of you at Clontarf. See you at the Gathering!

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