

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo

by Stieg Larsson

About the Book

This spellbinding amalgam of murder mystery, family saga, love story, and financial intrigue was a sensation across Europe, with millions of copies sold. It's about the disappearance forty years ago of Harriet Vanger—a young scion of one of the wealthiest families in Sweden—her octogenarian uncle's determination to discover the truth about what he believes was her murder. It's about Mikael Blomkvist, a crusading journalist recently at the wrong end of a libel case, hired to get to the bottom of Harriet's disappearance, and Lisbeth Salander, a twenty-four-year-old pierced, tattooed genius hacker possessed of the hard-earned wisdom of someone twice her age—and a terrifying capacity for ruthlessness to go with it—who assists Blomkvist with the investigation. This unlikely team discovers a vein of nearly unfathomable iniquity running through the Vanger family, astonishing corruption in the highest echelons of Swedish industrialism, and an unexpected connection between themselves.

Praise for the Book

“Mesmerizing....Imagine the movies of Ingmar Bergman crossed the Thomas Harris’s novel *The Silence of the Lambs*.”

—*USA Today*

“Wildly suspenseful . . . an intelligent, ingeniously plotted, utterly engrossing thriller.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Compelling....Combine the chilly Swedish backdrop and moody psychodrama of a Bergman movie with the grisly pyrotechnics of a series-killer thriller, then add an angry punk heroine and a down-on-his-luck investigative journalist, and you have the ingredients of Stieg Larsson’s first novel.”

—**Mchiko Kakutani**, *The New York Times*

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

About the Author

Title: Stieg Larsson

Known As: Larsson, Karl Stig-Erland; Larsson, Stieg
Swedish Writer (1954 - 2004)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born August 15, 1954, in Västerbotten, Sweden; partner of Eva Gabrielsson; died of a heart attack, November 9, 2004, in Stockholm, Sweden. Memberships: Skandinavisk förening for science fiction (president, 1978-79).

CAREER:

Journalist and author. Graphic designer at news agency Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå, 1977-99. Founder of Expo-foundation, 1995; chief editor of *Expo* (magazine), 1999- 2004.

AWARDS:

Glass Key Award, Crime Writers of Scandinavia, 2006, for *Män som hatar kvinnor*; Best Swedish Crime Novel Award, Swedish Academy for Detective Novels, 2006, for *Flickan som lekte med elden*; Glass Key Award, 2008, for *Luftslottet som sprängdes*; ITV3 Crime Thriller Award, International Author of the Year, 2008, Exclusive Books Boeke Prize (South Africa), 2008, Books Direct Crime Thriller of the Year, Galaxy British Book Awards, 2009, and Anthony Award, Best First Novel, 2009, all for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; honors, General Council of the Judiciary (Spain), for contributions to the fight against domestic violence.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- (With Anna-Lena Lodenius) *Extremhögern*, Tidens förlag (Stockholm, Sweden), 1991.
- (With Mikael Ekman) *Sverigedemokraterna: Den nationaella rörelsen*, Ordfront (Stockholm, Sweden), 2001.
- (With Maria Blomquist and David Lagerlöf) *Sverigedemokraterna från insidan: Berättelsen om Sveriges största parti utanför riksdagen*, Hjalmarson & Högberg (Stockholm, Sweden), 2004.

- (With Cecilia Englund) *Debatten om hedersmord: Feminism eller rasism*, Svartvitts förlag (Stockholm, Sweden), 2004.

"MILLENNIUM" SERIES; CRIME NOVELS

- *Män som hatar kvinnor* (title means "Men Who Hate Women"), Norstedts (Stockholm, Sweden), 2005, translation by Reg Keeland published as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2008.
- *Flickan som lekte med elden*, Norstedts (Stockholm, Sweden), 2006, translation by Reg Keeland published as *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2009.
- *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (title means "The Aircastle that Blew Up"), Norstedts (Stockholm, Sweden), 2007, translation by Reg Keeland published as *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2010.

Editor of journal *Fjärde internationalen*, and of several fanzines, including *Sfären* and *Fijagh!*

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

The "Millennium" series is being adapted for film and television by the Yellow Bird Films production company. The first, *Män som hatar kvinnor*, was directed by Niels Arden Oplev as a theatrical film, Danish Filminstitute, 2009; the second and third books will be adapted as a six-part television series.

Sidelights

Stieg Larsson was an investigative journalist and an activist who worked to counter the actions of right-wing radical groups in Sweden. He is the author of crime novels, published after his death, that became award-winning best sellers. Born in Västerbotten, Sweden, he was raised by his grandparents in a country environment in northern Sweden. In 1977, he began working for the Swedish news agency Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå. His position was that of graphic designer, and he held this job until 1999. Larsson was known for his activities as a member of Kommunistiska Arbetareförbundet (Communist Workers League), and as the editor of *Fjärde internationalen*, a Trotskyite journal. He was also one of the leading fans of science fiction in Sweden, and the editor of several science-fiction fanzines.

Prior to the success of his novels, Larsson was known mostly for his opposition to racism and right-wing radicalism in his native country, Sweden. In the 1980s, he was one of the founders of an anti-violence project known as "Stop the Racism," and he later founded the Expo-foundation. Expo-foundation was similar to the British Searchlight Foundation, which was established to expose racist, totalitarian movements and organizations. As the leader of Expo, Larsson did much to gather information about, and expose, racist and right-wing extremist groups in Sweden. He also worked as chief editor of *Expo* magazine, which was published by the Expo

organization. He was well-known as a lecturer and debater on topics relating to racism, and as such, he was the target of death threats from some of his political enemies.

In 1977, Larsson wrote a last will and testament requesting that all his money be donated to the Communist Workers League; however, as the will was not legally witnessed, it was declared invalid following his death, and his estate was directed toward his father and his brother. The disposition of his will caused some controversy, as his long-time partner Eva Gabrielson, who found the document, was given nothing of his estate--a circumstance which, in the minds of many, underlined a weakness in Swedish inheritance law.

Beginning in 2001, Larsson had spent much of his free time writing fiction. It was a hobby for him, and he had finished two complete novels and was at work on the third by the time he bothered to approach a publisher about getting his finished work into print. He died suddenly of a heart attack, however, before any of them were published. The three books together are referred to as the "Millennium" series. They were published posthumously, and they have proven extremely popular in Sweden, across Europe, and even in the United States, after being translated and published in English. At the time of his death, Larsson had partially finished the fourth novel in the series, as well as synopses of a fifth and sixth book. His ambition had been to write ten books to complete the series.

The first book in the "Millennium" series is *Män som hatar kvinnor*, which means "Men Who Hate Women." When the book was translated into English, publishers felt the literal translation of the original title would turn readers away from the book, so it was titled *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The title character is Lisbeth Salander, a twenty-four-year-old woman who has been raised as a ward of the state since the age of thirteen. Pierced, tattooed, anorexic, highly intelligent, sexually voracious and socially inept, Salander has a history of being victimized. She works as a professional computer hacker, doing investigations for the head of a powerful security firm. It is in this capacity that she meets Mikael Blomkvist. Her employer has ordered her to investigate Blomkvist, who investigates corruption in the world of business and finance. As the story begins, Blomkvist has been found guilty of libel and defamation in a lawsuit brought by the subject of one of his articles, and he is sentenced to a prison stay of several months. He is presented with a way out by Henrik Vanger, a member of a wealthy family who wants Blomkvist to investigate an unsolved murder and write a biography of his family. Blomkvist's assignment takes him to Hedestad, where his path crosses with Salander's. The two of them eventually work together to unravel the past.

Reviewing the book for the London *Times*, Joan Smith called it "a memorable debut." She felt that Salander was the most problematic part of the book: "She isn't so much a character as a revenge fantasy come to life, powering her way through the novel like the heroine of a computer game and undermining its gritty realism." Other reviewers, however, found Salander one of the strongest points in Larsson's creation. Bill Ott, a contributor to *Booklist*, called it "a shame that we only have three books in which to watch the charismatic Lisbeth Salander take on the world!" Wanda Williams, a reviewer for *Library Journal*, also found Salander "a compelling character." Michiko Kakutani, reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, said that Blomkvist and Salander

"make a very odd pair indeed--picture Angelina Jolie teamed up with a young Robert Redford--but their peculiar chemistry is what fuels this novel."

The remaining books in Larsson's trilogy were translated as *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*. The former novel explores Salander's past. In it, she is also named the prime suspect in the murder of journalist Dag Svensson and his girlfriend, criminologist Mia Johansson. Although most critics felt that *The Girl Who Played with Fire* is not as strong as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, they nevertheless applauded it. Ott, writing again in *Booklist*, observed that "Salander is one of those characters who come along only rarely in fiction: a complete original, larger than life yet firmly grounded in realistic detail." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor commended the "powerful prose and intriguing lead characters," while Rob Brunner wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that *The Girl Who Played with Fire* "is at its best when exploring [Salander's] dark secrets." Brunner added that "those who found themselves mystified and intrigued by her in the first book will tear through this exploration of her long-shrouded past." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic called the book a "tangled but worthy follow-up," asserting that "while endlessly complex, the plot has the requisite chases, cliffhangers and bloodshed." The critic also pointed out that "fans of postmodern mystery will revel in Larsson's latest."

The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest opens as Salander is in a coma, interred in a Swedish hospital after being shot in the head. Journalist Mikael Blomqvist is attempting to exonerate her of the murder charges against her. Reviewing the book in *Publishers Weekly*, a critic found that Larsson is "an undeniably powerful voice in crime fiction that will be sorely missed." Making a similar assessment in *Booklist*, Ott observed: "There are few characters as formidable as Lisbeth Salander in contemporary fiction of any kind. She will be sorely missed." According to *New York Times Book Review* writer David Kamp, "it's sad that Larsson died, and that *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* is the last book he finished. I'm not surprised at the reports that many American readers, suspended in mid-momentum by the ambiguous ending of Book 2, sprang for pricey imports of the British edition of Book 3 instead of awaiting its publication here. Reading Stieg Larsson produces a kind of rush--rather like a strong cup of coffee."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, August 1, 2008, Bill Ott, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 5; May 15, 2009, Bill Ott, review of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, p. 5; March 15, 2010, Bill Ott, review of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, p. 5.
- *Economist*, October 31, 2009, "Don't Mess with Her; Swedish Crime Fiction," p. 94.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, October 10, 2008, "2008: The Year of the 'Dragon'," p. 77; July 31, 2009, Rob Brunner, review of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, p. 58.
- *Glamour*, October 1, 2008, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 72.

- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2008, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; June 1, 2009, review of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*.
- *Library Journal*, August 1, 2008, Wilda Williams, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 69; June 15, 2009, Wilda Williams, review of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, p. 62.
- *LJ Book Reviews*, May 21, 2010, Wilda Williams, review of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*.
- *Marie Claire*, September 1, 2008, Lauren Iannotti, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 108.
- *New York Times*, September 30, 2008, Michiko Kakutani, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. E1; May 21, 2010, "A Punk Oixie's Ominous Past," p. 21.
- *New York Times Book Review*, September 14, 2008, Alex Berenson, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 27; May 20, 2010, David Kamp, review of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, January 21, 2008, "Swedish Hit Lands in France, Headed to U.S.," p. 20; May 19, 2008, "Knopf Touting Swedish Hit," p. 6; July 14, 2008, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 40; June 8, 2009, review of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, p. 27; March 29, 2010, review of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, p. 37.
- *Spectator*, October 10, 2009, "Good Women and Bad Men," p. 39.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, March 28, 2008, "Gifted Girls," p. 21.
- *USA Today*, October 9, 2008, "Heroine of 'Dragon Tattoo' Leaves a Distinctive Mark," p. D5; October 9, 2008, "Author Finds Posthumous Fame," p. D5; July 28, 2009, "To Know 'Girl' Is to Love Her," p. 2; May 20, 2010, "After Two Amazing Novels, 'Hornet's Nest' Stings," p. 1.
- *Vanity Fair*, September 1, 2008, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 230.

ONLINE

- *Bookreporter*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (January 15, 2009), author profile.
- *Euro Crime*, <http://www.eurocrime.co.uk/> (January 15, 2009), Maxine Clarke, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.
- *Girl Who Played with Fire Web site*, <http://www.girlwhoplayedwithfire.co.uk> (August 16, 2010).
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (January 15, 2009), Kirstin Merrihew, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and author profile.
- *New Yorker Online*, <http://www.newyorker.com/> (January 15, 2009), Macy Halfond, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (January 15, 2009), author profile.
- *Stieg Larsson Home Page*, <http://www.stieglarsson.com> (August 16, 2010).
- *Times Online*, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/> (January 15, 2009), Joan Smith, review of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.*

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Discussion Questions

1. Who do you consider the novel's protagonist, Lisbeth or Mikael? Why?
2. What point was Larsson trying to make with the themes running through this novel? How do issues such as violence against women, journalistic integrity, and more general notions of trust tie in with each other throughout the book?
3. What function do the sex-crime statistics on each section's title page serve?
4. Reread the passage from Mikael's book on page 112. What is its significance in terms of the plot?
5. On page 172, Henrik tells Mikael, "If there's one thing I've learned, it's never engage in a fight you're sure to lose. On the other hand, never let anyone who has insulted you get away with it. Bide your time and strike back when you're in a position of strength—even if you no longer need to strike back." Over the course of the novel, who puts this advice to the best use? How, and why?
6. How does the involvement of several Vanger brothers with Swedish fascist groups cloud Mikael's investigation into Harriet's disappearance? What role does Harald play?
7. Why does Henrik become an investor in *Millennium*? Does his plan succeed?
8. Discuss the character of Lisbeth. Some think she is a "perfect victim" (p. 447), others find her intimidating, and Mikael wonders if she has Asperger's, but the reader is allowed to see exactly how her mind works. How do you see her? How do you think she sees herself?
9. What do you think about the way Lisbeth turns the tables on Bjurman? Is it admirable, or a sign that she's unstable?
10. On page 278, Lisbeth says her new tattoo is "a reminder." Of what?
11. Several times in the novel, Mikael's journalistic ethics are challenged. Do you consider him to be ethical? In your opinion, is anyone in the novel truly honorable? If so, why?
12. After reserving judgment for most of his investigation, Mikael determines that Harriet was, in fact, murdered and that he's hunting for a killer. What prompts this decision? How does this affect the rest of his investigation?
13. Discuss the role of parents in the novel. Who is a good parent, and why? How might Harriet's story have changed if her mother had behaved differently? What about Lisbeth's? Is Mikael a good father?

14. Blackmail is used several times in the novel, for different ends. Who uses it most effectively, and why?

15. On page 552, Mikael tells Lisbeth that to him, friendship requires mutual respect and trust. By those standards, who in this novel is a good friend? Is Mikael? What about Anita?

16. Discuss Henrik's request that Mikael never publish the Vanger story. Is it a reasonable request? Does Mikael's acquiescence change your opinion of him? Do Lisbeth's demands mitigate his ethical breach?

17. What ultimately drives Lisbeth to take action against Wennerström on her own? Does she go too far?

18. Reread Mikael's statement about the media's responsibility at the top of page 628. Can you think of a situation in the American media that is analogous to the Wennerström affair?

19. Discuss the ending. Was it satisfying to you? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED READING

Martin Cruz Smith, **Gorky Park**; Peter Høeg, **Smilla's Sense of Snow**; Naomi Klein, **The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism**; Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, **The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect**.

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.