Title

‘[B]etween power and the people’: Journalist-investigators in Nordic crime fiction

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Abstract

Recent Nordic crime fiction contains numerous amateur detectives who are professional journalists. Their presence is partly explained by the shared roots and formal affinities of crime reportage and crime fiction, and by the journalistic backgrounds of many Nordic crime writers. However, the rise of the journalist-investigator as a rival to traditional police detectives is also a mark of growing distrust in the competence of the Nordic welfare state and its officials. Nordic journalist-investigators are typically crusading reporters motivated by

a desire to uncover and prevent social injustice, including the neglect and abuse of vulnerable social groups by absent, incompetent or corrupt public officials. In acting as moral guardians of social justice, journalist-investigators carry out the principle of the press as a fourth estate, designed to check state power by publicising abuses of authority, and signal a possible shift from the welfare state towards a civil society. However, this role is also compromised by the ethical dilemmas journalist-investigators face between the demands of uncovering information, protecting vulnerable witnesses, informing the public, preventing crime and meeting commercial imperatives. These conflicts spotlight troubling tendencies within crime fiction and crime reportage: both kinds of writing are underpinned by a narrative structure of anticipation, suspense and dramatic revelation and premised upon the reader's voyeuristic investment in sensational subjects.

Key words

Nordic crime fiction; journalism; public sphere; fourth estate; social justice; welfare state; ethics; civil society

‘[B]etween power and the people’: Journalist-investigators in Nordic crime fiction

‘Swedish journalism,’ editor Anders Schyman reflects in Liza Marklund’s novel *The Final Word* (2015), ‘had developed hand in hand with the welfare state, . . . the connection between power and the people . . . When one was falling apart, the other was bound to go the same way’ (21–2). Schyman’s protégée Annika Bengtzon is one of the many professional journalists who act as amateur detectives in the ‘global literary and media phenomenon’ that is recent Nordic crime fiction (Stougaard-Nielsen 3). Bengtzon, a ‘formidable reporter with good organizational skills’ (*Bomber* 126) who is the protagonist of a series of eleven novels (1998–), has in the twenty-first century been joined by a whole host of other journalist-investigators. The most famous of these is the ‘excellent’ ‘political and financial reporter’ Mikael Blomkvist in Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium Trilogy* (2005–7), whose investigations uncover a systematic web of state-sanctioned corruption and abuse (*Tattoo* 53). Fellow Swede Mari Jungstedt’s ‘stubborn’ TV reporter Johan Berg features in a series of eleven novels set on the island of Gotland, nine of which have been translated into English (2003–) (*Unspoken* 252). Danish Elsebeth Egholm’s headstrong crime reporter Dicte Svendsen appears in nine novels (2002–), available to English-speaking audiences as a three-season TV dramatisation starring Iben Hjejle and Lars Brygmann (2013–15). Norwegian Thomas Enger’s Henning Juul, scarred both physically and emotionally by the death of his young son Jonas in a suspected arson attack, ‘cover[s] crime; murders, filth, evil’ in a series of five novels (2010–14) (*Burned* 25). Finnish writer Antti Tuomainen’s journalist-narrator, the ‘dedicated,’ ‘determined’ Janne Vuori of *The Mine* (2015), writes on the environment, ‘tax avoidance and the grey economy’ but his investigation also brings about an ethically problematic collaboration with his long-lost father Emil, a supremely professional but kind-hearted contract killer (141, 6). Icelander Yrsa Sigurðardóttir’s *Why Did You Lie?* (2013)

features three journalists: the 'lonely, friendless' freelance photographer Helgi, who prefers to look at life through 'his camera, which effectively forms a barrier between himself and the subject' (15, 279); Helgi's journalist father Stefán, murdered years before by a paedophile whose activities Stefán was investigating; and reporter Thörstur, who as a child had witnessed Stefán's murder and later reopens the case with disastrous consequences.[1] While these journalist-protagonists are depicted as flawed human beings, their investigations into the failings of the Nordic welfare state and of collective responsibility nonetheless confirm the socially conscious press as an important upholder of social justice.

This recent appearance of numerous journalist-investigators in a literary landscape previously dominated by police procedurals (Brunsdale 4; Nestingen 217) has attracted surprisingly little sustained critical attention. Book-length studies of Scandinavian or Nordic crime fiction by Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, Steven Peacock, Andrew Nestingen and Barry Forshaw do not single out the journalist-investigator per se for detailed analysis. In their recent discussion of post-1970s European (including Nordic) detective fiction, Mary Evans, Sarah Moore and Hazel Johnstone note that recent amateur detectives include lawyers, journalists and hackers, who tend to be in possession of 'advanced investigative skills' that 'predispose them to seeing the truth as manufactured,' without focusing specifically on journalist-investigators (128). In a discussion of the *Millennium Trilogy,* Sarah Niblock contends that Larsson depicts 'the crusading journalist as an upholder of social justice' and journalism 'as an idealised profession,' 'revis[ing] the literary figure of the investigative reporter' 'for the new millennium' by insisting on the need for journalistic compassion, but does not discuss the genre more broadly (81, 80). Sarah Lonsdale's analysis of fictional and cinematic journalists focuses on British examples.

This essay seeks to remedy this critical oversight by offering a wide-ranging discussion of the journalist-investigator in recent Nordic crime fiction. I contend that the

journalist-investigator emerges as an alternative detective figure in an age troubled by what Stougaard-Nielsen terms 'a growing distrust in the inevitable "goodness" of the Scandinavian welfare state' (3). With their varied cultures, histories, languages and political systems, the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) do not form an entirely homogenous region. However, all five have traditionally invested heavily in social welfare and consistently score highly in surveys of social wellbeing, good governance, gender equality and overall 'happiness.'[2] In the Nordic model, the state has traditionally acted as a caring and inclusive *folkhemmet*, or 'people's home,' promoting socially progressive policies, communal responsibility and equal opportunities. However, public trust in the welfare state has in recent decades been eroded by far-reaching austerity measures, the scaling back of social services and high unemployment figures during the severe recession of the 1990s and following the 2008 banking crisis; substantial increases in social inequality and exclusion; concerns over alcoholism, suicide and mental illness; the atrophy of rural communities; and rapid changes in societal makeup resulting from the poor integration of immigrant populations. Traumatic revelations about historical programmes of racial hygiene, Nazi collaboration and Soviet appeasement during and after the Second World War, the murders of prominent politicians such as the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 and the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Anna Lindh in 2003, and a recent political shift towards the populist right raise further questions about the viability of the Nordic model. Even when the Nordic countries continue to perform well globally in social surveys measuring opportunity, equality and welfare, as elsewhere in Europe 'satisfaction with the welfare state is much lower than support for welfare state provision' (*ESS Welfare Attitudes* 6).

The rise of Nordic crime fiction as an internationally recognised genre coincides with this gradual 'fractur[ing]' of the 'dream of the welfare state' (Peacock 3). As a subgenre of crime fiction that, according to Stougaard-Nielsen, offers a 'distinct, localized . . . take on the

most globalized of popular genres,' Nordic crime fiction is centrally concerned with questions of societal wellbeing, responsibility and accountability (3). The genre addresses the erosion of social welfare, trust and equality through plotlines centred on the state-sanctioned neglect and abuse of vulnerable social groups such as children, immigrants and women. By contrast, the Nordic press retains high levels of trust and independence in this '"newspaper region", with high circulation and extensive readership' (Harrie 18, 7). Unlike in the UK where 'hating [the] press has long been a British pastime' and recent fiction accordingly 'present[s] journalists as having lost their way ethically and personally' (Lonsdale 244, 10), the Nordic press retains a position of trust as a powerful watchdog, a 'fourth estate' designed to check state power by publicising abuses of authority, informing the public and facilitating public debate (Edgar 75).[3] Writing on the Swedish press, for example, Philip Dring commends its 'mixture of libertarian theory embracing issues such as freedom of information, wedded to a strong influence derived from notions of social responsibility,' and its 'series of checks and balances' (320).

Typically crusading, investigative reporters, fictional Nordic journalist-investigators are motivated by a desire to uncover, prevent and end social injustice, rather than solely punish criminal behaviour or secure sensational stories; in the process, they take on some of the social and caring functions traditionally performed by the welfare state. While police detectives and social workers are often depicted as absent, shadowy or corrupt figures, the journalist-investigator emerges as an alternative guardian of social justice who may, as Stougaard-Nielsen argues, articulate a certain 'welfare nostalgia' (115–21). However, the journalist-investigator also signals a shift towards a civil society in which societal wellbeing is safeguarded by responsible citizens engaged in public debate. Yet the press's role as an upholder of communal responsibility is to an extent compromised by ethical dilemmas and commercial considerations that spotlight troubling tendencies within crime fiction and crime

reportage: both kinds of writing are underpinned by narrative structures of anticipation, suspense and sensational revelation and premised upon the reader's emotional and financial investment in the lurid excitement of 'fascinating stor[ies]' (Larsson, *Tattoo* 106) and 'amazing scoop[s]' (Marklund, *Prime Time* 411). While, then, recent Nordic crime fiction seeks to reinvent the detective figure for a new, media-savvy world suspicious of state power, it is alive to the ethical questions inherent in crime writing.

'[N]ot all that different': journalism and detection

A journalist's job, reporter Janne Vuori establishes in Tuomainen's eco-thriller *The Mine* (2015), is 'not all that different from' a detective inspector's: 'coming up with new information is part of the job description' (222, 165). With the exception of civil engineer Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, the Nordic authors discussed in this essay are themselves all journalists, and their journalistic experience informs their fiction. However, the figure of the journalist-investigator also foregrounds the formal affinities and shared roots of crime reportage and crime fiction. Popular New Journalistic human-interest stories about real crime had emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth century simultaneously with the literary genres of sensation and detective fiction, whose fictional depictions of contemporary and domestic crime were often dismissed at the time as lowbrow 'newspaper' fiction (Weaver 62; Rubery 48). In its mission to 'inform, surprise, challenge, shock, even inspire, as well as entertain' (Harcup 4), journalism in turn borrowed many of the familiar conventions of popular crime fiction, including 'an emphasis on narrative style, investigative strategies, interviews, "human interest", and a more assertive and visible role for the reporter' – all useful formulae 'within the urgent context of daily newspaper production' (Weaver 63). The 'self-conscious intertextuality' that Rachael Weaver identifies between nineteenth-century crime fiction and

crime journalism, with 'each form of writing acknowledg[ing] and rehears[ing] its relationship to the other' (63) still holds true for Nordic crime fiction, which has been aware of its relationship to journalism ever since the 'documentary mode' adopted by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlööin the Martin Beck series (*Roman om ett brott*, 1965–75) (Stougaard-Nielsen 40). As Stougaard-Nielsen notes, Nordic crime fiction is characterised by its 'blending of genres, fact and fiction,' and 'melodramatic' and 'social-realist' elements, deliberately playing with intertextual connections, foregrounding elements of 'social realism and critique' and referencing real crimes, events, locations and people (39–41). Heather O'Donoghue similarly singles out this 'distinctive bringing together of contrastive elements of fact, pseudo-fact and traditional fiction' (54) as typical of a genre that, Nestingen argues, frequently contains autobiographical elements drawing on the authors' professional experiences (200, 210).

Nordic crime fiction featuring journalist-investigators foregrounds journalistic techniques and practices and the challenges presented by the ongoing transformation of the media landscape. The importance of journalism to Larsson's fiction, for example, is emphasised by the naming of the trilogy after Blomkvist's 'original and outspoken magazine' *Millennium*, which is 'viewed as critical of society' (*Tattoo* 247, 54). However, the other texts considered in this essay also place their journalists carefully: Jungstedt's Johan Berg, for example, works for Sweden's Regional TV News, Tuomainen's Vuori investigates for the 'serious but also populist' daily *Helsinki Today* (26), Enger's Henning Juul is employed by the internet-based newspaper *123news*, Egholm's Dicte reports on crime for the Aarhus *Dagbladet*, and Marklund's Bengtzon works on the crime desk of the tabloid *Kvällspressen*. The introduction of these fictional periodicals allows the authors, themselves journalists, to comment on the hectic activity of the newsroom and the constant pressure under which journalists work. However, it also allows them to showcase the journalists' investigative and

research skills and the usefulness of newspaper archives in solving historic cases. In Larsson's *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*, Marklund's *Red Wolf* and Jungstedt's *The Dead of Summer*, for example, historical newspaper clippings hold the solution to the crime. The authors further spotlight the affinities between journalism and fiction through a range of formal strategies, including the use of fictional newspaper articles and headlines to advance the plot, the deployment of dates as chapter headings to foreground temporality, recourse to seriality to recall periodical publication patterns, and an informative, pared-back, dialogue-driven writing style to mimic journalistic language and interviews.

The journalist-investigators' ability to read 'distinctively journalistic evidence' (O'Donoghue 48) also foregrounds the shared character traits of journalists and detectives. Nordic journalist-investigators are driven by a combination of social conscience, compulsive inquisitiveness and a flair for explosive revelation, a combination of traits that the journalistic profession is particularly well-suited to accommodate but that also characterises many other fictional detectives. While Blomkvist is 'not a private detective,' he is nonetheless a 'very careful reporter' (*Tattoo* 129, 56) who possesses 'an almost intuitive gift for deciding which story was hiding a skeleton in the closet' (*Fire* 116), while his investigative team at *Millennium* are so able as to form almost a private 'intelligence service' (*Nest* 494). Berg has 'an infernal ability to dig up . . . details' (*Dangerous Game* 87), while Bengtzon is 'a demon at ferreting out information' (*Vanished* 251), thanks to her ability to 'listen, watch, observe' (*Exposed* 233). Juul is a 'stubborn' (*Killed* 152) 'reporter who wants to get to the truth' (*Scarred* 153) and 'likes research, likes finding out information about people' (*Burned* 138). However, the journalist-investigators' relentless pursuit of the truth also borders on the obsessive, while their indeterminate social position and access to criminal sources often put them and those close to them in danger. Thus, Blomkvist is described as 'obstinate and almost pathologically focused' (*Fire* 116), while Bengtzon appears to her colleagues 'smart,

impulsive and ambitious, but in a way that wasn't altogether healthy' (*Exposed* 243); both risk their lives in pursuit of stories. A troubled figure 'who walks in the shadows' (*Pierced* 427), Juul is wracked with 'rage, self-loathing and self-pity' (*Burned* 46) and bitterly acknowledges that 'people around [him] have a tendency to end up dead' (*Killed* 252).

Driven by their 'professional interest in finding out what happened' (Evans, Moore and Johnstone 128), Nordic journalist-investigators see journalism as a vocation to which they have been called early in life and advocate 'responsible, investigative, socially engaged journalism' (Marklund, *Bomber* 216). This is perhaps particularly pertinent given that Nordic crime fiction, according to Stougaard-Nielsen, explores the 'dark side of the welfare state' and articulates a certain 'welfare-nostalgic longing for values belonging to an inclusive, egalitarian and socially just society' (8, 119). In supposedly egalitarian Nordic societies, with their traditionally low crime rates, long-standing traditions of communal care, responsibility and mutual trust, and high expectations of moral integrity in figures of authority, the uncovering of incompetence, indifference, unethical conduct, corruption and outright criminality by those in positions of power – all central themes in the investigations of the journalist-protagonists – may come as more of a shock than it would in societies with higher rates of crime and corruption. Thus, Berg's journalistic career had started with 'a school newspaper' for which he wrote 'with passion and idealism' because he was 'angry about . . . social injustices' in the local community (*Unseen* 176, 175). Vuori regards journalism as 'a calling' that offers 'a way of bringing order to the world' (240, 197); while he may deny being an 'eco-warrior' or 'keeping the red flag flying,' he is unstoppable when he receives an anonymous tip-off regarding an 'environmental catastrophe' in the making at the Suomalahti nickel mine in northern Finland, viewing 'the truth' as 'the purpose of journalism' (16, 34, 6, 61). Both conscientiously seek to fulfil Chris Frost's definition of a good journalist – 'someone who gathers, in a morally justifiable way, topical, truthful, factually-based

information of interest to the reader or viewer and then publishes it in a timely and accurate manner to a mass audience' (11) – while upholding the International Federation of Journalists' *Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists*, adopted in 1954 and last amended in 1986, which stresses the press's commitment to truthfulness and accuracy, objectivity and impartiality, fairness and accountability, support for freedom of information and freedom of speech, and protection of sources (Harcup 149–50). However, so involved do the journalist-protagonists become in the cases they investigate that their reportage frequently blurs the boundaries between journalistic impartiality, socially conscious public engagement and personal investment.

'[A] guardian of robust morality': the crusading journalist and social justice

Nordic journalist-investigators are typically crusading investigative reporters, exceptional 'guardian[s] of robust morality' who wish to promote social justice and publicise abuses of authority (Larsson, *Tattoo* 55). Their investigations into the stories of individual characters introduce recurring themes of family dysfunction, the neglect and abuse of children, violence and discrimination against women, intolerance of immigrant communities, financial greed and corruption, and the failure of the authorities to act with integrity. The prevalence of such themes foregrounds Nordic crime fiction's distrust of the welfare state's ability to look after its citizens and supports Evans, Moore and Johnstone's contention that detective fiction represents 'a form of sociological enquiry, able to shed light on the relationship between the individual and society,' particularly recent 'scepticism about . . . the legitimacy of the state provided [*sic*] forms of welfare provision within liberal democracies' (20, 6). While many other detectives are of course also concerned with exposing societal corruption, the journalist-investigators, as members of the 'fourth estate' and upholders of public debate, are

exceptionally well-placed to scrutinise state power and publicise abuses of authority (Edgar 75). Because they work for high-impact media outlets, distributing their cases on television, online and in high-circulation dailies and magazines, the journalist-investigators are able to reach substantial audiences. As 'compulsive storytellers' (Lonsdale 2), they are also uniquely placed to piece together and relate compelling tales of societal neglect and human suffering.

Marklund, fittingly, describes the press as an 'alarm clock' (*Exposed* 76) whose task is 'to promote the freedom of the press and to question those in power' (*Prime Time* 194). By facilitating public debate, the fourth estate of the socially conscious press emerges as the foremost upholder of democracy and the principles of equality, fairness and social justice as the fictional journalist-investigators again and again expose the failure of the safety net of the welfare state. One common plotline investigated by the fictional Nordic press concerns dysfunctional families whose children turn to crime after being let down by parents, teachers and social workers alike. In one of the most uncomfortable explorations of the life chances of children taken into social care in this corpus, Dicte makes contact with her adult son Peter, whom her Jehovah's Witness parents had forced her to give up for adoption, only to discover that he is in prison for murder following a childhood spent in homes for troubled children (season 1, episode 7: 'Life and Body'). Their tense relationship spotlights questions of parental responsibility and the importance of nurture through the pointed contrast between Peter and Dicte's daughter Rose, who has grown up in a loving home. Even the socially conscious, independent-minded journalist has in her youth failed in her social duty, and her son has in turn been failed by the state, but in her later life she never flinches away from responsibility.

The relationship between childhood family dysfunction, parental neglect and inadequate social care, and subsequent adult alienation and criminality is a recurring theme in the fiction of Jungstedt, who describes her 'prime ambition' as 'trying to say something about

relationships between people, how childhood affects us and trying to understand how a person can commit the worst of crimes' (Peacock 173). Through Berg's ability to uncover the backstories and motivations of criminals, Jungstedt's fiction shows how victims can turn into victimisers. In *Unseen*, the first of the Berg novels, several women are found '[h]acked to death,' with underwear stuffed into their mouths (25). Instead of rape, the investigation – aided by Berg's ability to connect with the witnesses – uncovers a historical case of school bullying in which 'a girl gang … harassed a boy' who felt that his 'whole life was destroyed' by this teenage humiliation, compounded by a lack of maternal affection, until he has decided 'to take out everybody who ever tormented' him (331, 355, 356). The failure of the police to interpret the first murder correctly leads to others, as indeed it does in Sigurðardóttir's *Why Did You Lie?*. The plot of this novel revolves around a historical child abuse investigation by reporter Stefán, which 'would have been groundbreaking because no one wrote about child abuse' in the 1980s (383). However, since 'Icelanders are past masters at forgetting . . . collective amnesia sets in and people have nothing but a dim memory of something negative,' the case is not pursued after the paedophile kills Stefán, whose death is treated as a suicide by a naïve, incompetent police team (215). This initial failure to interpret the case correctly affects not only the lives of the victims of abuse but also results in a vicious cycle of misery and violence. Intimidated into silence (the 'lies' of the novel's title), the child witnesses to Stefán's murder attempt to forget their involvement, until journalist Thörstur, one of the original witnesses, reopens the investigation decades later. Meanwhile, Stefán's son Helgi's life has descended into a 'human tragedy' with an alcoholic mother, leaving him ready to seek revenge against those whom he perceives to have wronged him (362). Poignantly, one of the revenge murders committed by Helgi leaves a teenage boy, as vulnerable and confused as Helgi had been, an orphan likely to be taken into care. In this case, the well-intentioned

journalistic investigations of Stefán and Thörstur fail because of police incompetence, which then breeds future problems.

By questioning the efficacy of social welfare, Nordic crime fiction moves beyond a search for an individual perpetrator and a view of crime as 'a discrete event' to focus instead on long-term causal relationships between crime and society's neglect of and violence towards vulnerable and minority social groups (Evans, Moore and Johnstone 80). While texts such as *Unseen* and *Why Did You Lie?* show the perpetrators themselves to be '*products* of abusive relationships and cultures of corruption,' Nordic crime fiction does not, however, suggest that experiencing neglect or abuse will inevitably result in a career of crime (Evans, Moore and Johnstone 80; original emphasis). In *The Bomber*, Bengtzon investigates the murder of Christina Furhage, the head of the Stockholm Olympics, whose employees worship her as 'an example to us all: hard-working, intelligent, resilient, funny,' but whom the reporter finds to have been self-centred in the extreme (168). Among the suspects is Furhage's estranged son, who despite a traumatic history of maternal rejection and foster care has nonetheless grown into a nurturing father after voluntarily seeking 'counselling . . . to break the vicious circle of bad parenting in the family' (382). Indeed, Bengtzon herself remains a warm, compassionate figure in spite of her dysfunctional family connections and difficult relationships with partners who are either controlling and violent or unsupportive and duplicitous. While tracing potential pathways to crime in childhood experiences of neglect and abuse, Nordic crime fiction therefore also suggests alternative, socially responsible outcomes in plotlines that refuse to reduce individual lives to simplistic formulae. As a tabloid reporter trained to prioritise human-interest material, Bengtzon is well-placed to tell such alternative stories.

Spotlighting the vulnerability of neglected children to grooming and sexual abuse allows Nordic journalist-investigators to report on failings in communal responsibility. In

Jungstedt's *Unspoken*, Berg investigates the murder of Fanny, a 'solitary' mixed-race girl of fourteen whose depressed, 'alcoholic mother . . . th[inks] only about herself' (238, 183). Fanny's feeling that '[n]o one cared about her' drives her to an abusive relationship with a paedophile whose friendship with Detective Superintendent Anders Knutas and high standing in the Visby community protect him from suspicion (183). '*Nobody is prepared to deal with a child who goes astray, not even within their own family,*' Knutas reflects uneasily (239; original emphasis). A poignant exchange between police inspector John Wagner and Dicte on a case of paedophilia that results in the death of Nicole, a twelve-year-old girl from a troubled family background, further illustrates the genre's interest in societal and collective responsibility. When Nicole goes missing, her dysfunctional family, the police and the press remain uninterested until the girl is found dead. However, while Nicole is found to have been groomed and sexually exploited by a paedophile who has dumped her outdoors on a cold night, his punishment is relatively light because he is not legally responsible for her death from hypothermia. '[S]everal people are to blame,' Wagner tells Dicte, 'Her father, stepmother, teachers, neighbors, social workers, doctors and school principals,' only for Dicte to retort angrily: 'What about you and me, Wagner? Are we to blame, too? Could we have done something different?' (season 2, episode 6: 'Presence and Absence'). In this interpretation, the blame for the deaths of Fanny and Nicole rests collectively with those who should have had their wellbeing at heart – parents, friends, social workers, teachers – but persistently looked away. The girls should have attracted help before they became headline news as murder victims.

'[C]hanging reality': the welfare state and civil society

The journalist-protagonists' investigations have the potential to 'chang[e] reality' by exposing societal failings and inequalities and promoting more inclusive and active models of citizenship (*Red Wolf* 370). The marginal figure of the sex worker, who is often also an immigrant, is central to a number of Nordic crime novels. In 'Personal,' Dicte becomes personally involved in investigating a human trafficking racket that is forcing East European prostitutes to act as surrogate mothers, but her editor is not keen to devote column space to this particular demographic. The clients who are so desperate to become parents that they are willing to break Denmark's laws against surrogacy are effectively responsible for the prostitutes' plight and even murder. In *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, the second novel of Larsson's trilogy, the *Millennium* team seek to expose 'the suppliers and the client base' of trafficking in East European prostitutes (77). Since buying sex is a crime in Sweden, the clients, who include high-ranking civil servants, policemen and members of the legal profession, are 'sex criminals' (77). Yet 'the girls involved are so far down society's ladder that they are of no interest to the legal system,' particularly when they happen to be poorly integrated immigrants (79). Indeed, Martin Vanger, the sadistic serial killer of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, knowingly targets 'new arrivals, immigrant girls who had no friends or social contacts … prostitutes and social outcasts' because '[n]obody misses them,' his '"death book"' in which '[h]e had catalogued and graded his victims' the only record of their existence (425, 409, 425). Only the socially conscious press, represented by *Millennium*, will take the side of these outcasts, the trilogy's self-professed focus on 'violence against women, and the men who enable it' evident in the Swedish title of the first volume, *Män som hatar kvinnor*, or *Men Who Hate Women* (*Nest* 677).

Bengtzon's investigations repeatedly spotlight questions of gender equality, but some of her male colleagues find 'this whole women and children angle . . . bloody monotonous' (*Vanished* 120); indeed, Bengtzon's own experiences of misogyny in the workplace show the

Nordic ideal of gender equality to be but a chimera (for a discussion of British women journalists as outsiders, see Lonsdale 185–209). In *Exposed*, her first case, Bengtzon investigates the murder of Josefin, a young woman who had dreamed of becoming a journalist but had instead drifted into working as a stripper. As a sex worker, Josefin is invisible to the authorities and finds it difficult to seek protection against her abusive partner and employer. Viewing Josefin not only as a stripper but as 'a daughter and a sister and a friend and a schoolgirl,' empathetic Bengtzon wants to show the 'nuances' of her short life, which distortedly doubles Bengtzon's own: at the end of this novel, in an alternative ending to Josefin's parallel path, Bengtzon kills her possessive partner in self-defence after years of abuse (247). This traumatic personal history, which mirrors the stories of countless women whose lives and deaths Bengtzon investigates, will inform all her subsequent journalistic work. *Vanished* continues the theme of domestic abuse through Bengtzon's investigation into the Paradise Foundation, an organisation that claims to be able to help victimised individuals by 'erasing their histories completely' so that they are able to begin new lives (49). The novel poignantly spotlights the desperation of women unable to escape abusive relationships. With the state granting new identities but rarely, victims of abuse are forced to seek private redress by putting their faith in schemes such as that run by Paradise, which Bengtzon exposes as a scam.

This theme is also taken up repeatedly in the *Dicte* series, the final season of which introduces Dicte's half-sister Maj, an online sex worker. Maj is stalked by her violent, psychotic former partner Kenneth but no one is willing to listen to a woman who is perceived to be untrustworthy. After establishing that Kenneth is not only a stalker but has in fact murdered a previous partner, Dicte pushes Kenneth to his death from a rooftop in an act that blurs the boundaries between self-protection, vigilantism and murder. A similar scenario sets up Tuomainen's eco-thriller *The Mine*, in which hitman Emil, the father of the novel's

journalist-protagonist Janne Vuori, first kills to protect the woman he loves from a violent former partner when the police only 'shrug their shoulders' (203). In keeping with the novel's pitch-black humour, Emil's final job brings him into collaboration with his journalist son; while the journalist investigates the actions of Finn Mining Ltd, which is 'wilfully destroy[ing] and pollut[ing]' Finland's 'clean, untouched nature' in order to 'increase profit margins' (98, 16, 195), the contract killer methodically dispatches the company's corrupt board one by one. Their joint efforts – through high-impact public revelations and silent assassinations – put in place far more effective checks on industrial and environmental ethics than any official state intervention.

Enger's Henning Juul novels develop this theme of the inadequate welfare state by foregrounding the failings of social justice and social care, uncovered by Juul's journalistic investigations. Juul reflects that '*Norway is an attractive country for criminal gangs because we're an affluent nation . . . [w]ith a chronically understaffed police force*' (*Pierced* 438; original emphasis). The series repeatedly demonstrates the risks of such understaffing. In *Scarred*, a retired teacher is found brutally murdered in a care home but no one has seen anything because, as Juul establishes, staff are so over-stretched that patients, 'people who helped build this country,' are often left unattended (223). The murderer, an embittered former pupil, turns out to have entered the care home as part of a group of volunteer helpers whose services are only needed because of inadequate staffing. In *Pierced*, a reluctant killer, himself a victim of blackmail who feels unable to seek police protection, is able to commit murder inside a prison because of lax security measures. The series connects the personal with the political by making Juul's estranged sister Trine Secretary of State for Justice. Although she is to an extent redeemed in the final novel, Trine's life exhibits a persistent pattern of choosing to overlook troubling events that a stronger, more responsible person, such as her otherwise utterly dysfunctional journalist brother, would have reported: Trine

fails to report her father's incestuous tendencies as a teenager, hushes up murder and social injustice as a young legal advisor, leaves her brother to care for their alcoholic mother as an adult, and weakly facilitates the arson that kills her nephew in order to protect her political career. Nor is she the only public official in the series who puts personal advantage before public duty: as Juul discovers through a trusted informer inside the police force, the police records of the events leading up to the arson have been tampered with from within the force by an officer who feels his family to be in danger from the criminal underworld.

In extreme cases, the authorities emerge as 'morally bankrupt and exceedingly violent' figures who are 'to be feared' rather than relied upon as providers of equality and security for all (Stougaard-Nielsen 210, 57). The second and third novels of Larsson's trilogy investigate teenage Lisbeth Salander's unlawful institutionalisation in a wide-ranging cover-up operation that involves the Security Police, the medical profession and even the guardianship service as Salander's 'constitutional rights are … violated by the very people who ought to be protecting her' (*Nest* 282). As Blomkvist discovers and explosively reveals, the figures responsible for Salander's wellbeing exercise their powers in deliberately 'reprehensible, indefensible' ways that are designed to strip a 'defenceless' individual of her personal identity, freedom of choice and right to her own body (*Fire* 30–1) as she is ignored, incarcerated, raped and tried by the 'hostile force' of the state (*Tattoo* 211). The police officers who act with integrity – the female detective Sonja Modig, the Jewish inspector Jan Bublanski – are themselves outsiders, driven to seek allies not inside the state but at *Millennium* and the private security sector.

By investigating, uncovering and reporting the failings of the welfare state, the socially conscious journalist-investigators of Nordic crime fiction enable public debate and uphold the principle of social justice. In extreme cases such as Blomkvist's investigation into Salander's past, the press uses its 'trust capital' (*Tattoo* 55) to 'expose' 'institutions . . . that

lack parliamentary oversight' so that 'constitutional democracy' can be 'protected' (*Nest* 432). More often, media investigations uncover instances of public incompetence, indifference and lack of resources that have allowed vulnerable individuals to fall through the safety net of social care, indicating underfunding rather than sinister design to be the chief reason for the decline of the welfare state. Indeed, as O'Donoghue notes, crime fiction could be seen 'as a literature of complaint, of social protest, a campaigning tool' (46). However, journalist-investigators also uncover instances in which private citizens – parents, neighbours, acquaintances, passers-by – have failed as human beings because of their lack of empathy. These instances appear to signal a shift away from passive reliance on the welfare state towards a more active model of civil society in which individuals are held responsible for communal wellbeing. The civil society, as Nestingen notes, has traditionally been relatively weak in the Nordic region, and so Nordic crime fiction's interest in individual accountability, as raised by journalist-investigators, may therefore spotlight a significant societal realignment (7).

'Too complicated for easy distinctions between right and wrong': the ethics of investigation

For the press to act effectively as a fourth estate, it must be independent and governed by a strict code of professional conduct regarding ethical questions, objectivity and the fair treatment of sources (Niblock 86). While the image of the crusading journalist-investigator may seem idealistic and even utopian, Nordic crime fiction also offers a nuanced discussion of the conflict faced by journalists between 'public interest' and 'the profit motive of the news industry' (Niblock 81). Ethical dilemmas and discussions about questions of objectivity, bias and balance are at the heart of this body of fiction. In countless cases, the

journalist-investigators' means of uncovering important information are shown to be downright unethical, and they make poor parents and partners because of their dedication to their work. Vuori may succeed in tracking down elusive and compromising material that helps him prevent an environmental catastrophe, but his quest also involves sleeping with a witness, shielding his contract-killer father and entering the mining complex at the centre of the investigation without permission, which results in the death of a co-investigator. Blomkvist's investigation, meanwhile, relies on expert hacker Salander's 'thrillingly cutting-edge skills and resources' (O'Donoghue 39). 'I've already breached so many rules of professional conduct … that the Journalists [*sic*] Association would undoubtedly expel me if they knew about it,' Blomkvist sheepishly acknowledges; however, he appears more troubled by the eventual withholding of information about the Vanger Corporation – his roles 'as a journalist and . . . as a human being' incompatible – than he is by Salander's illegal activities in cyberspace (*Tattoo* 448, 538). In this context, as Peter Messent observes, '"justice" becomes a complex and ambiguous business, involving choices, costs, and compromises' that are not black and white (232). 'The truth ha[d] never seemed particularly clear to him,' Helgi muses in *Why Did You Lie?*: 'Experience ha[d] taught him that most things in life [we]re too complicated for easy distinctions between right and wrong' (61).

For Jungstedt, '[e]thical questions are always key,' and her fiction frequently addresses the ways in which 'the press deals with the victims of crime' (Forshaw 52). Journalists, Berg recognises, 'have a huge responsibility' (*Unknown* 67) to exercise their 'journalistic judgment' (*Unseen* 48) when deciding which details of the crime to divulge to the public, possibly against the wishes of the police. Even when the journalist-investigators and their police contacts have a mutually beneficial working relationship, as is the case with Berg and Knutas, Bengtzon and Inspector Q, Juul and Detective Investigator Bjarne Brogeland, or Dicte and Wagner, the connection is always 'ambivalent' (Jungstedt, *Unknown*

77), 'a complex dance for two; each partner depending on the other for results' (Enger, *Burned* 50). Knutas reflects on his difficult relationship with the press that while 'giving away too many details . . . might harm the investigation' (*Unknown* 195), at the same time '[j]ournalists were good at digging up their own information, and they were also available to relay information to the public when the police occasionally needed help,' resulting in an 'interdependent relationship . . . between the police and the media' (*Unspoken* 179). However, Dicte's blunt statement following Wagner's death that '[h]e and I used each other' is also correct, since the co-operation between Dicte and Wagner was driven by mutual professional gain (season 3, episode 3: 'In Wagner's Footsteps').

The press treads a fine line between the public's right to know, its own commercial considerations, respect for victims of crime and their families, and the need to cooperate with the police. While Berg repeatedly decides to report against the distinct wishes of the police because 'the information is of such general interest that it had to be made public' (*Unseen* 165), he equally often refuses to interview vulnerable individuals such as Fanny's alcoholic mother because of his 'journalistic integrity,' no matter how sensational the story (*Unspoken* 308), and frequently 'feel[s] a bit sleazy' about his job, as if he were 'tak[ing] advantage of other people's grief' (*Fourth Victim* 253). Nonetheless, Berg maintains that 'it was possible to report the news without trampling on others' (*Killer's Art* 122). In spite of working for a tabloid, Bengtzon is similarly aware of journalistic ethics and maintains that '[y]ou don't always put everything in the paper' (*Prime Time* 329). These ethical journalists are, however, contrasted powerfully with their wolfish peers. 'There is hardly any decency left among reporters,' Juul ponders (*Pierced* 426). Berg's colleagues in the hectic newsroom are distinctly relieved to hear of a sensational murder that 'could save the broadcast!' as long as 'our' reporter could 'ge[t] out there and b[e] the first on the scene' (*Unseen* 29, 28). In the rush for human-interest material, serious news stories are frequently pushed aside in favour of

sensational and entertaining features, 'pander[ing] to the most voyeuristic desires of the audience by exaggerating and dramatizing relatively unusual crimes' (Jewkes 225). Knutas sees reporters as 'starving wolves, ravenously casting themselves upon each titbit of information the police handed out. Their hunger was insatiable . . . Their craving for scandal knew no bounds' (*Dangerous Game* 112).

As Andrew Edgar points out, the notion of the press as an independent fourth estate is compromised by the expectation that news must entertain and sell (79), and the journalist-investigators therefore become 'caught between the demands of their production processes and the interests of their public and sources' (Niblock 85). Bengtzon's editor Schyman reflects uneasily on the tabloid press's commercial imperatives: '*Death and destruction . . . Terror and tragedy, murder and mayhem, that's what puts the daily bread on the table*' (*Prime Time* 79; original emphasis). The threat of libel action hangs permanently over *Kvällspressen*, with a nuanced commentary on the 'tasteless' media frenzy that surrounds sexual, violent and sensational crime (*Prime Time* 80). Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* famously commences with Blomkvist's costly conviction for libel, foregrounding that even this most crusading of investigative journalists who works for a magazine that 'is depicted as a force for social change, independent and largely divorced from big business conflicts of interest,' is subject to commercial considerations (Niblock 86).

These reflections spotlight a final, troubling similarity between crime fiction and crime reportage: both kinds of writing are underpinned by a narrative structure of anticipation, suspense and sensational revelation and premised upon the reader's investment in the excitement of the story. While the journalist-investigators are motivated by a search for justice, they also thrive on 'the adrenalin rush' of the investigation in ways that are unhealthy, obsessive, selfish and even dangerous to them and those around them (Jungstedt, *Double Silence* 300). The investigative process is also disturbingly voyeuristic. Larsson's *Millennium*

Trilogy exposes the systematic sexual exploitation, torture and murder of women in the Swedish national 'home' – events that are described as repulsive, but described nonetheless, and indeed exploited further in the continuation novels sanctioned by the Larsson estate and produced by David Lagercrantz. In *Why Did You Lie?*, Helgi ends up selling his (false) version of the events as an exclusive, benefiting financially from the murders he has committed. Marklund captures the dilemma between the duty to inform, sordid voyeurism and commercial considerations perceptively in *Prime Time*, where the '[f]abulous stuff' that the 'whole world would be wanting' to read about only sees the light of day because the celebrity interviewee is blackmailed to talk by another tabloid (346–7). Confronted with '[s]ex shots taken on the sly' of the novel's murder victim, a famous TV presenter whose success has provoked such envy that a jealous rival has murdered her, Bengtzon is 'ashamed of her reaction' of sexual arousal but also puzzled by uncertainty as to what to do with the pictures: 'Publishing them was out of the question . . . Deleting them would be like a journalistic crime' (226, 225, 171). Furthermore, problematically, while the journalists decide that '[t]he true course of events couldn't be described without dishonouring the deceased,' these events are, of course, described in the novel (186). The readers' investment in the crime narrative – as engaged consumers – makes them complicit in the continued production of gruesome, titillating and voyeuristic material often centred on crimes against the vulnerable.

'Get[ting] a message across': conclusions

While Nordic crime fiction is characterised by bleak, wintery settings, dysfunctional characters, shocking abuses of authority and an ambivalent attitude toward the welfare state, the genre also registers a commitment to social justice and collective responsibility through plotlines that consistently empathise with vulnerable social groups. As an alternative

detective figure, the socially conscious journalist-investigator is uniquely placed to expose social injustices and influence public opinion in favour of progressive measures that support social welfare and promote collective responsibility. For Nordic crime writers, many of whom are themselves journalists, crime fiction holds out the possibilities of social influence, commercial success and access to 'a much wider audience, than … real-life investigative journalism' (Henderson 1051). Marklund admits: 'I am absolutely a political writer. I use my novels to get a message across. I've tried to say the same thing in all kinds of ways over the last 25 years – in radio programs, TV documentaries and numerous articles and columns. The books are just another tool. It's my profession to study and reflect upon social issues' (Forshaw 90–1).

That message, despite the genre's depiction of what Evans, Moore and Johnstone term 'a coherent and consistent vision of darkness at the heart of the modern' (39), is not entirely bleak. Nordic crime fiction contains many elements associated with noir fiction, including a bleak, cynical mood, discovery of corruption at the heart of the state, flawed, self-destructive or victimised protagonists, instances of sexual and physical violence, and a lack of ethical clarity (Simpson). On the whole, however, the ideological premises of Nordic crime fiction featuring journalist-investigators are more optimistic than those that characterise noir because the protagonists believe in and strive to secure social justice. Thus, the message of Enger's exceedingly dark Henning Juul series is, according to the author, 'Don't give up. Don't you ever give up' (Brunsdale 296). While identifying failings in social welfare, the genre also stresses the importance of public debate and an engaged civil society, marking a significant societal shift across the Nordic region. Its perceptive promotion of journalist-protagonists as representatives of the fourth estate, its nuanced exploration of ethical questions and its discussion of the relationship between individual responsibility, communal accountability and social welfare establish Nordic crime fiction as a complex, globally significant genre: gloomy

yet also hopeful of social change; commercial yet socially engaged; locally inflected yet of universal relevance.

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Notes

[1] Other, less developed examples include Swedish Camilla Ceder’s trainee journalist Seja Lundberg in *Frozen Moment* (2009) and *Babylon* (2010); Norwegian Torkil Damhaug’s novel *Fireraiser* (2011), part of the *Oslo Crime Files* series, in which the local journalist Dan-Levi Jakobsen becomes fatally tangled in a case of Neo-Nazism, arson and murder; and Finnish Karo Hämäläinen’s *Cruel Is the Night* (2013), in which the financial reporter and would-be-murderer Mikko hypocritically boasts that as a journalist he has ‘a responsibility to the entire human race and its future . . . I call attention to the evils of the world and cause change . . . I am moral where my readers don’t have the energy and the establishment doesn’t bother’ (19). Egholm’s *Three Dog Night* (2013; *Tre hundes nat*, 2011) and *Dead Souls* (2014; *De dødes sjæles nat*, 2012), two spin-off novels featuring Dicte’s illegitimate ex-convict son Peter Boutrup, are available in English translations by Don Bartlett and Charlotte Barslund.

[2] The 2019 *World Happiness Report* (https://worldhappiness.report/ 24) ranked the Nordic countries as follows: Finland (1); Denmark (2); Norway (3); Iceland (4); Sweden (7). The European Social Survey (https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/) records consistently high levels of welfare state performance for Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland (Iceland is not included). In the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2018* (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf 10), the Nordic countries were ranked as follows for gender equality: Iceland (1); Norway (2); Sweden (3); Finland (4); Denmark (13).

[3] Nordicom's *Newspapers in the Nordic Media Landscape 2017* reports the following levels of public trust in media: Radio: Denmark 76%; Finland 82%; Sweden 82%; EU28 59%. Television: Denmark 71%; Finland 78%; Sweden 72%; EU28 50%. Written press: Denmark 57%; Finland 70%; Sweden 60%; EU28 46% (Harrie 18). The Nordic countries achieved the following rankings in the 2019 *World Press Freedom Index* (https://rsf.org/en/ranking): Norway (1); Finland (2); Sweden (3); Denmark (5); Iceland (14).