
'The girl who played with fire' from the Millennium Trilogy by Stieg Larsson



Reviewed by [Dave Bowden](#) May 2010

Second parts of trilogies are notoriously hard work: by definition they are to some extent shorn of the structural unity offered by a clear beginning and an end. In a trilogy you are never more aware of the etymology of the term 'plot', which despite its exciting connotations of coups and insurrections, actually derives from cartography. Of course, an adventurer or explorer may observe that the most exciting journeys are those which have no direct course: but they'll normally tell you that from the comfort of dry land. The success of a middle work lies in its unresolved uncertainty: C.P. Cavafy may urge travellers in 'Ithaca' to 'pray that the road is long/full of adventure, full of knowledge', but he wouldn't be advising that if Odysseus had been swallowed by the Cyclops before he made it home.

Part of the appeal of Stieg Larsson's Millennium books, you feel, lies in its sense of completion. We'll never know what his intentions were – there's a fourth book lurking around, it's suggested – but the three books have a sense of finality and coherence to them. By the end of *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornets' Nest* all the many loose threads are tied together neatly (in case you haven't guessed, this article has spoilers written all over it, so you have been warned). You don't have to be a student of Jacques Lacan's *The Purloined Poe* to recognise that detective fiction has its roots in psychological uncertainty: Freud even has Sophocles' *Oedipus* as the original private eye, tracking down the villain who brought Thebes to ruin. The detective is the

Enlightenment hero solving the mysteries and bringing order to the evils thrown up by modernity.

Just as the millennial crossover success of children's authors such as J.K. Rowling and Philip Pullman – good old-fashioned storytelling - is often explained as a reaction against the excesses of postmodern literary fiction, so can read the success of Millennium as a return to the certainties of the detective-hero. Lisbeth Salander, as Stephen Bowler observed in his [review of the first book](#)

, is a cartoonish avenging angel: endlessly resourceful and unstoppably omniscient in her fight against the evils of men. Mikael Blomkvist is more human and frail with his messy affairs and disorganised working practices, but is no less an agent of moral absolutes and campaigning zeal.

Yet *The Girl Who Played With Fire* is the most troubling book of the three. A beginning and an end should have a sense of certainty: the bit inbetween is where the texture comes in. But there is no room for shades of gray in Larsson's cartoon universe. Ironically, given the Biblical references of the serial killer Martin Vanger in the first book, Larsson has a remarkably Old Testament view of the world. Man bears not the mark of Cain, but the tattoo of Salander, as a reminder of the potential evil they pose to women. It is an ongoing battle to regulate this original sin. Admittedly, being a progressive Scandinavian type, lots of sex is of course okay: but preferably only as long as it keeps within the strict boundaries of sex between women (Lisbeth/Miriam) or sex with women who make all of the first moves and the men don't do anything macho like expect commitment (as in the Blomkvist-Berger-Becker three-way). As Mia, the murdered researcher, observes, 'It's not often that a researcher can establish roles along gender lines so clearly. Girls – the victims. Boys – the organisers' (87). She's referring to sex trafficking, but it could be the book's alternative title.

But while Larsson's right-on views are no secret, here he struggles to reconcile them with the

demands of creating a kick-ass icon of female vengeance. In his attempt to emphasise Salander's vulnerability in the first book much was made of her underdeveloped, girlish body and the apparently endless series of dirty old men driven to distraction by it. Here she keeps the schoolgirl body and vulnerability, but this time PHWOAR! LOOK AT HER KNOCKERS! Larsson dedicates much of the first sixty odd pages to showing off Salander's silicone-enhanced bosom, and occasionally returns to the theme during the odd lesbian S'n'M romp later on. The extent to which the author's eye lingers over Salander's body is unseemly: he seems to want to simultaneously titillate the reader and rebuke them for reading this filth. Indeed, the way in which the gutter press focus on the lesbian S'n'M aspect of Salander's lifestyle seems to be one of Larsson's main gripes. Perhaps instead of reading this book you'd rather I'd have gone out and bought a copy of Searchlight instead, Stieg?

It does seem harsh to judge a writer on work unpublished in their lifetime: fiction is not created in a vacuum, and these now very public books existed only as private manuscripts until his untimely death. Maybe initial literary success would've tempered his propagandists' militant instincts: he undoubtedly had a talent for spinning a good yarn, and this book is as insanely gripping and readable as the others. But the intriguing political critique which Larsson brought to 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' starts to unravel here. I'm not sure I buy [Bowler's contention](#) that we should ignore the excesses of the plot in favour of Larsson's more serious criticisms of the legitimacy state institutions. Larsson seems much more ambivalent about abuses of power not carried out by psychopathic wife-beaters and child-rapists. In the third book, our campaigning hack has no qualms about jumping into bed with a nice, tough security officer for the greater good. Here, when Salander hacks into the account of an estate agent who was mildly condescending to her and reports him for tax evasion (68) you can't be sure that Larsson entirely disapproves. True, Larsson attacks the relics of the bad old Cold War state; but the modern one shan't repeat the same mistakes as long as we have, say, more women in power. And if you have nothing to hide...

This seems to be the great irony of Larsson's books: that for all their moral clarity and roots in political critique, it is difficult to know whether their success is down to being read as depressing depictions of the rotten society in which we live, or as a fantasy of how it ought to be. It is too extreme to be both, and it is telling that, in the search for meaning, there have been far more [column inches](#) dedicated to his colourful political background and contested legacy than the content of the

texts themselves. But, of course, what Larsson had planned for these books – whether they were even intended to be a trilogy at all – will remain the greatest mystery of all.

Dave Bowden will be chairing the Manchester Salon discussion entitled [Whodunit: what's the big deal with crime novels? in July 2010](#)

, when Stephen Bowler shares a platform with Angelica Michelis

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You can read Stephen's review of the 1st novel in the trilogy, by clicking on this

[The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo](#)

link, and Angelica Michelis' review of the 3rd novel by clicking on this

[The Girl who kicked the hornet's nest](#)

link.