

['The girl with the dragon tattoo'](#) from the Millennium Trilogy by Stieg Larsson



Reviewed by [Stephen Bowler](#) February 2010

Stieg Larsson's **The girl with the dragon tattoo** is a popular book. The publishers say they've sold 2.7 million copies in Sweden and over 12 million of the Millennium trilogy (of which this is the first) worldwide. They're shifting plenty here too: they must be as it only cost me £3.49, including postage. Clearly it's being read by a lot of people, but why might this be?

Well, for a start, it's a real page-turner; full of intrigue and action. The hero – Mikael Blomkvist – is a hip and clever journalist with a side-kick – she with the tattoo – even more Zen than he. Together they are sexy Swedish sleuths, dishing the dirt on the nastiest of ne'er do well's, laying low the corporate fat-cats.

Sandwiched between two slices of sub-plot, the meat of the drama concerns the disappearance of a young girl back in 1966. Our hero, Blomkvist, is hired by the head of the wealthy Vanger clan to solve the riddle. In so doing he reveals fantastic-dynastic monstrosities as well as more prosaic local oddities, with set-piece scenes that are positively cinematic – almost Wagnerian – in their inspiration and execution. With the help of Lisbeth Salander – the girl with the dragon tattoo – the monster is slain and justice done. In fact, with the help of Salander's digital wizardry, they slay two monsters, the better to clarify who it is that wields the wand.

The girl with the dragon tattoo is a big, lively read that thrills and teases in all the right places. It isn't hard to see why it sells by the pallet-load. The good guys come out on top and the bad guys get the spanking they deserve. Our hero gets to boff his beautiful (married) boss – she 'looked fantastic on camera' and slept with the bed 'covers down around her waist', which must have helped – as well as a Vanger and Salander. There's a smorgasbord of Swedish stuff – Ikea; herring; Volvo; 'huge anal plug' – but it's not all Nordic. There's an out-take in Australia (sheep: mercifully brief) and a coda in Zurich where it all goes a bit

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, but for the most part this is Cluedo on an island, complete with dungeons, tunnels and a nine-iron. By the end of the novel we heave a big sigh of relief and marvel that we couldn't have done a better job of saving Scandinavia from itself if we'd done it ourselves.

In many ways this is all as it should be. It's a rattling good read that fairly flies-by. All of which goes a long way to account for the book's appeal. But there are other qualities, I'd like to suggest, that might also account for the popularity of *The girl with the dragon tattoo*. Two seem significant and I sketch them out here more as prompts for discussion than finished arguments. Please note; I touch on plot lines you might not want to know about, if you've not yet read the book.

The first of the qualities is what one might term its strong arc of meaning. Characters and events unfold within a recognisable moral frame, rather than a mere jumble of events and objects. For sure, the frame is pitted and buckled – as the genre demands – but overall, its integrity remains. We do not go beyond good and evil, as Nietzsche once urged, but instead luxuriate within its normative parameters. The three bogey-men thrown-up in the course of the story all get their just desserts. The two heroes – the journalist Blomkvist and his trusty-but-really-the-key-to-it-all side-kick Salander – suffer the requisite number of set-backs and injustices, but only to be all-the-more vindicated by the time the curtain falls.

You see, it's really rather old fashioned. Like all good story-telling, the task is to shed light on dark places, through the comprehension and resolution of challenges that are essentially human in scale and import. Crime fiction condenses this pattern of events into a recognisable routine, which can be more or less hard-boiled, but as Christopher Booker suggests in [The Seven Basic Plots](#) (2004), this is really just another take on a basic theme underpinning almost all story-telling: of a search for maturity through a journey toward love and solidarity, away from the darkness and immaturity of ego.

Now, I'm not claiming that *The girl with the dragon tattoo* is the exemplary form of this elementary – and for the most part, entirely unconscious – structure. Larsson isn't George Eliot. But he did write a popular book, the appeal of which resides, I think, in an arc of meaning that most readers find enormously reassuring. Corruption, cruelty, and complexity abound, but only to enable the ingenuity and honour of the heroes to shine through. Some of those skills stray beyond realism, admittedly, but the central point stands, of characters with whom we can emotionally identify, precisely because their agency and moral compass is an idealised projection of our own. Compared to the [ridiculously exhibitionistic](#) nature of the [misery-memoirs](#), the false zaniness of [hysterical realism](#), and logic-chopped [pretentiousness of many modern novelists](#), for whom character and plot are *passé* and obscurity almost *de rigueur*, Larsson's symbolic order is a welcome reminder that most ordinary people prefer a story that goes somewhere rather than nowhere, toward the light rather than away from it.

Alongside the strong arc of meaning linking characters and plot in terms of old-fashioned

virtues, there are other, more contemporary signifiers accounting for the book's appeal. These are, in many ways, the antithesis of the purposive drive and agency just identified. This is the realm of what Christopher Booker terms the 'dark inversion', where the standard trajectory of story-telling is amended or abandoned in favour of less optimistic accounts of the human condition. Here, in Larsson's story, the telos is undeniably affirmative of man's ability to know and name the demons in his midst, and vanquish them through the intelligent use of reason: it would be a pretty poor detective story if it didn't. But what I want to stress here are the various qualifications to this narrative, such as render plot and character in terms that resonate beyond the genre.

Take, for example, the 'skinny kid' Salander ([Tracey Beaker](#) meets [Valerie Solanas](#)), how she signals a hesitant, qualified faith in the feminine, as a quality that might balance and complement the masculine. There is a convergence toward an androgynous middle ground, as the safest, least committed arena of identity. And whilst Blomkvist is 'a big hit with women' this is only because he personifies the free-floating, semi-skimmed metro-sexuality of late-modern man: he 'very much wanted to live with his family and see his daughter grow up, but at the same time he was helplessly drawn to Berger' – as if he wasn't responsible for anything below his waist. Which in a way, he isn't: our hero, so ethically tumescent in the boardroom, is less-than-priapic in the bedroom, where it's always the women pulling him to them, or pushing him 'down' there, or 'sitting astride' him: not once does his desire predominate. Cecilia Vanger has the measure of the man when she tells him that his appeal has "something to do with the fact that you're so undemanding." Philip Marlowe, he is not.

Of course, all this could be commentary on the sexual liberation of modern woman. But not here, in a book peppered with statistics and asides about rape, lapsing into graphic descriptions of abuse that paint a far-from progressive picture of women's position in society. Shouty statements, such as '46% OF THE WOMEN IN SWEDEN HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO VIOLENCE BY A MAN', do not suggest harmony between the sexes in Sweden. They're not meant to. Instead, it seems to me, the message is one that goes well beyond mistrust, to a deep discomfort with masculinity, itself a version of subjectivity.

With which I seem to be contradicting what I've said about the strong arc of meaning as the key to Larsson's popularity. Which is indeed my point: that the immediate appeal of this book is the agency of the main characters – arcing from challenge to solution through the medium of human reason rather than supernatural deliverance – but that the finished product must also acknowledge anxieties about the real-time, embodied, inter-subjective exercise of such reason, by men and women who might conceivably be just a little bit like ourselves. The dogged pursuit of justice with which the reader identifies – the 'dialectic of innocence and guilt' [as W.H. Auden put it](#) – is realised and affirmed on the outside – institutionally – but not on the inside, within the soul of those characters who are its formal champions, where contingency abounds. A tension-filled duality is affirmed, between a world of fantastic extremism and mysterious conspiracy on the one hand, and an [ethic of disengaged conformity and internal liberation](#) on the other.

Of course, one could see 'men' as the problem, but this would be to miss the deeper significance of masculinity, as cipher for publicly reasoned power such as once catalysed entire constellations of opinion, and is now feared for the same reason. So its cultural antonym kicks-in – the non-penetrative Blomkvist, 'extremely sceptical of political "isms"' but big on audit; privately 'undemanding' but publicly assertive; fearless critic of the 'despicable stock-market speculator' but entirely comfortable in the company and receipt of 'old money'. He'd never make it into a D.H. Lawrence novel.

But who reads Lawrence today? Almost nobody: too committed; too *Übermensch*. Instead we seem to have developed a taste for the opposite, for the wounded and the victimised, and Larsson is no exception. Take Salander, for example, who suffers abominably at the hands of her 'legal guardian' (though she is 24yrs of age?). For sure, she rams her revenge home – "Without a lubricant, right?" – but ultimately she remains, as her boss observes, 'the perfect victim for anyone who wished her ill.' And by the end of the book it is pathos that colours our understanding of her character, rather than joy at any transcendent achievement. The heartbreak symbolism of Elvis in the skip is perfectly pitched.

Salander's sylph-like presence is a reflection of her insubstantial status in the flesh, as confirmed on the final page - and in stark contrast to the ending of the movie version - when she *doesn't* get what she most desires. To conclude the book otherwise would have been to abandon the hyper-reality of *Manga*-maidenhood that has entertained us thus far. And so she remains defined by vulnerability, [by nature](#) [solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings](#), unable to transcend the [self-enclosed, guilty, isolated world](#) of Larsson's paranoid universe. Which is why he seems to connect so well with an audience, who want and need an arc of meaning, but one cognisant of their [loneliness](#)

The [political-psycho economy that produces a surplus of scenes of victimization](#) is now ubiquitous. But so is the real economy that forces individuals to assert their agency, or go down to Hades (or its real world equivalent – Jobcentre Plus). To connect both sides – the prose and the passion – of contemporary life is the lot of the modern novel. Larsson's success, it seems to me, rests here, in his ability to bring an apparent order to otherwise disordered circumstances, remedying the mysteries and injustices of the public realm whilst acknowledging an enduring pathos in our experience of the private.

Stephen Bowler shares a platform with Angelica Michelis for the Manchester Salon discussion entitled [Whodunit: what's the big deal with crime novels? in July 2010](#). You can read Stephen's review of the 2nd novel in the trilogy, by clicking on this [The Girl who Played with Fire](#) link, David Bowden's review of this 2nd novel, by clicking on this [The Girl who Played with Fire](#) link, and Angelica Michelis' review of the 3rd novel by clicking on this [The Girl who Kicked the Hornets' Nest](#)

link.