

The Moral Geography of Stieg Larsson: Experiencing Stockholm in the Footsteps of Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander



By Dan Burstein

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A NEW BOOK BY WESTON-BASED AUTHORS DAN BURSTEIN AND ARNE DE KEIJZER WILL BE PUBLISHED IN JUNE BY ST. MARTIN'S: *THE TATTOOED GIRL: THE ENIGMA OF STIEG LARSSON AND THE SECRETS BEHIND THE MOST COMPELLING THRILLERS OF OUR TIME.*

AS INDICATED BY THE TITLE, THE BOOK IS A READER'S GUIDE TO THE "MILLENNIUM TRILOGY" WRITTEN BY SWEDISH AUTHOR STIEG LARSSON, WHOSE DEATH IN 2004 ON THE EVE OF MASSIVE SUCCESS FOR HIS BOOKS (OVER 50 MILLION SOLD WORLDWIDE) HAS TURNED HIM INTO ONE OF THE MOST TALKED ABOUT FIGURES IN RECENT LITERARY HISTORY. ADDING FUEL TO THE LARSSON FIRE IS THE BITTER DISPUTE THAT HAS CONTINUED TO PLAY OUT BETWEEN HIS LIFETIME PARTNER AND COMPANION, EVA GABRIELSSON, ON THE ONE HAND, AND LARSSON'S FATHER AND BROTHER, WHO HAVE INHERITED EVERYTHING.

THE TATTOOED GIRL TELLS THE FASCINATING STORIES BEHIND WHAT HAVE BEEN RIGHTLY CALLED THE "HOTTEST BOOKS ON THE PLANET:" *THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO*, *THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE* AND *THE GIRL WHO KICKED THE HORNET'S NEST*. THESE THREE BOOKS, ALREADY MADE INTO A SERIES OF SUCCESSFUL SWEDISH FILMS, ARE NOW BEING TURNED INTO HOLLYWOOD FILMS BY DIRECTOR DAVID FINCHER (*THE SOCIAL NETWORK*). THE HOLLYWOOD VERSION OF *THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO* WILL DEBUT IN DECEMBER, STARRING DANIEL CRAIG AS JOURNALIST MIKAEL BLOMKVIST AND ROONEY MARA AS LISBETH SALANDER. WESTON'S CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER IS HENRIK VANGER, THE PATRIARCH OF THE TROUBLED VANGER FAMILY.

BURSTEIN, DE KEIJZER, AND THEIR SPOUSES, JULIE O'CONNOR (AUTHOR OF



DOORS OF WESTON: 300 YEARS OF PASSAGEWAYS IN A CONNECTICUT TOWN) AND HELEN DE KEIJZER (CHAIR OF THE WESTON COMMISSION ON AGING), TRAVELED TO STOCKHOLM TO RESEARCH LARSSON'S LIFE, DEATH, AND THE ISSUES THAT CONCERNED HIM.

WEIGHTY AS LARSSON'S THEMES ARE (VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, THE RISE OF NEO-NAZIS IN SWEDEN, AND MORE), HIS PLOTS ARE TRANSPORTING, COMPELLING AND, AS STEPHEN KING SAID, "UNPUTDOWNABLE." LARSSON LOVED STOCKHOLM, AND IN PARTICULAR, THE ISLAND OF SÖDERMALM, WHERE MUCH OF THE ACTION TAKES PLACE.

IF STOCKHOLM IS IN YOUR TRAVEL PLANS — OR IF YOU ARE A FAN OF *THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO* — YOU WILL BE FASCINATED WITH THIS EXPLORATION OF THE CITY IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FICTIONAL MIKAEL BLOMKVIST AND LISBETH SALANDER, AND THE WORLD OF THEIR CREATOR, STIEG LARSSON.

ABOVE: FICTIONAL NEWSPAPER FRONT PAGES USED IN THE SWEDISH MOVIE "THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO." "LISBETH, 28 HUNTED FOR THREE MURDERS" AND "MIKAEL BLOMKVIST SENTENCED TO PRISON."

I am waiting for my luggage in Stockholm's Arlanda airport, contemplating my upcoming plunge into the cold of late autumn Sweden and the dark world of Stieg Larsson. I intend to walk the streets Stieg Larsson walked for the 25 years he lived in Stockholm, particularly his beloved Södermalm, where much of the action in the *Millennium Trilogy* is set. Many noir genre crime writers bring their cities to life even as their characters deal in death. Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles or Sara Paretsky's Chicago come to mind. But the attention to detail in Larsson's fictional Stockholm is more like James Joyce's vision of Dublin in *Ulysses*. The city itself is one of the stars of the show.

Luggage in hand, I move through an exit corridor featuring a portrait gallery of the most famous Swedes of modern times: Greta

offices of the fictional Millennium magazine are said to be on Götgatan in the heart of Södermalm, approximately where we find the real life offices of Greenpeace today. The evil characters generally inhabit other parts of Stockholm, such as Östermalm, known for the highest priced real estate and the wealthiest citizens in Stockholm. And, if Södermalm is good and Östermalm is evil, then Kungsholmen, which lies between them, is a middle ground from which new good characters can be discovered and developed. Monica Figuerola keeps in shape by running along Kungsholmen's Norr Mälarstrand, facing Södermalm, but not quite in or of it. Blomkvist's location mirrors hers: his apartment, with its spectacular view of Stockholm's harbor (which you can replicate, more or less, from the heights of Monteliusvägen, a stop on the tour), literally faces Kungsholmen, with

the court house and other state institutions in full view. Even after Blomkvist has bedded her, even after he has witnessed her dedication to the constitution and to clearing Salander of murder charges, he still has to open his own mind up to his natural skepticism of the powerful Swedish state bureaucracy across the water.

Larsson had deep affection for Södermalm, appreciating its working class history and wanting his key characters to have their roots on this southerly island of Stockholm. Södermalm developed historically as a bit of a wild west, bohemian area; a kind of Greenwich Village of Stockholm. Even as recently as the 1970s and '80s, it was considered a "rough" area.

Several of the writers and thinkers we interviewed in the fashionable cafe of the Hotel Rival (a renovated 1937 art deco treas-



Garbo, Björn Borg... and Stieg Larsson. Just a few years ago, Larsson would have been unknown to arriving tourists. But now he is a giant Swedish celebrity and a major national export industry. Package tours bring groups from France, Italy, Spain, the UK and the United States to Sweden specifically to go on "Millennium" tours. The City Museum of Stockholm, for many years a sleepy institution frequented primarily by school groups, is now host to the official guided "Millennium" walking tour of Södermalm. The tour is currently offered in nine languages, with more being added each season.

Any tour of a city is a lesson in geography. But this one is a window into Stieg Larsson's "moral geography." One of the first things the museum guide explains is that the majority of the "good" characters — Mikael Blomkvist, Lisbeth Salander— live or work in Södermalm. The



ure, now owned by ABBA's Benny Andersson) recalled that in their youth, their families discouraged them from going to Söder, as the locals call it. Over tea at the cafe in the Hotel Rival, Paolo Roberto, a real life Swedish boxing and martial arts champion who makes appearances in two of the Larsson books, told us that in his youth as a gang leader he was considered the third most dangerous man in Sweden. Now he imports Italian olive oil, writes cookbooks, and promotes sports and media events, from his Söder office.

Even though Södermalm has been gentrified and the real estate prices have shot up, the area retains a neighborly feel and a more diverse personality than other parts of the city. Each shop reflects the unique taste of its owner. We step

VIEW FROM SÖDERMALM'S MONTELIUSSINGAN PATH WITH THE TOWER OF BIRGER JARL AND THE RIDDARHOLM CHURCH.



into an art gallery showing visual work in postmodern colors. Nearby is a shop selling teas of the world, next to one selling beautiful hand knit baby items. We look at the avant-garde jewelry creations of Efva Attling, who married popular singer Eva Dahlgren as soon as Sweden's marriage law changed to allow gay marriage.

August Strindberg, a leading novelist, playwright, and essayist of the late 19th century, set his path-breaking 1879 novel, *Röda rummet* (*The Red Room*), in Södermalm. The novel is a biting satire of bourgeois life in the Stockholm of Strindberg's day. Larsson's novels provide a kind of update of Strindberg. If the two could time travel to a meeting with each other, however, they would undoubtedly argue over their view of women. Strindberg famously declared that, "Every healthy man is a woman hater." Larsson, whose Swedish title for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was "Men Who Hate Women," saw himself as standing against the all too pervasive results of Strindberg's philosophy.

The opening of *The Red Room* is set in the Mosebacke area, which is also featured prominently in the *Millennium* novels. In Mosebacke Square, Lisbeth will walk past Nils Sjögren's statue, "The Sisters," multiple times. In the center of the square, this artwork depicts two women fused together. Sjögren sculpted it on commission from the city using a mix of classical techniques from Greek mythology and heaviness more typical of the Stalinist era in which he did much of his

work. Does Lisbeth think about her twin sister Camilla when she walks past this sculpture?

One end of Mosebacke Square is dominated by the Södra Teatern, a theater that dates back to 1859. Upstairs and toward the back of the theater is a bar that spills out in the summertime onto a beautiful beer garden with a spectacular view of the city. In the Södra bar, Annika Giannini (Blomkvist's sister, who is serving as Lisbeth's lawyer) meets with Lisbeth after the victorious trial is over. Södra Teatern and Mosebacke Square are just a few steps from the penthouse apartment at Fiskargatan 9 that Lisbeth Salander purchases with 25 million kronor from the vast fortune she has cyber-siphoned out of the accounts of a financial criminal.

Like most things in Larsson's work, setting a luxury apartment at Fiskargatan 9, with its breathtaking day and nighttime views, is not the product of a random walk on the local map. Almost every building, landmark, and street address is selected for its subtle layers of nuanced meaning. Fiskargatan 9 turns out to be the former address of Percy Barnevik, once CEO of the giant Swedish-Swiss conglomerate ABB, who was involved in a major financial scandal when he retired from the company and received a huge bonus. The obviously upscale apartment building at that address, with its distinctive green roof, turret-style architecture, and commanding views of all of Stockholm, is the ultimate symbol of Södermalm's gentrification. (When the building was first constructed, it was known as the "scandal house," because it blocked the previously ubiquitous view of the Katarina church nearby).

Larsson's point of mentioning Barnevik and the provenance of Lisbeth's apartment is another manifestation of his class-conscious mentality — setting the girl with the dragon tattoo and goth wardrobe down in the very same digs where Percy Barnevik, captain of Swedish industry, once lived.

Lisbeth tries to live incognito at Fiskargatan 9. The name on the door is not Salander, but V. Kulla, an allusion to Pippi Longstocking's fictional home, the Villa Villekulla. (The idea of a grown-up Pippi Longstocking was said by Larsson to be "the spark" that inspired him to create the Lisbeth character.) Indeed, another highlight of our visit to Stockholm would be a pleasant cold fall day spent indoors at Stockholm's Junibacken, a museum and children's center devoted to children's book author Astrid Lindgren, Pippi Longstocking, and all

the other characters she created. Located in Djurgården, Junibacken was built with Lindgren's active involvement.

Moving from Lisbeth's apartment at Fiskargatan 9 to the apartment of Mikael Blomkvist at Bellmansgatan 1, we find there are many good Larssonian reasons for why Blomkvist lives at this specific address. The actual address in Stockholm houses a very charming and picturesque building, approached from a third story bridge. It is the perfect setting for Blomkvist, and might have even made a great home for



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Stieg Larsson and Eva Gabrielsson had Larsson lived to see the royalties from his books.

Bellmansgatan is named for Carl Michael Bellman, a Swedish poet and composer of the 18th century. Bellman is a central figure in the Swedish song tradition. Many of his songs allude to bars, restaurants, and other spots well known in the Södermalm of Bellman's day, just as Larsson's novels allude to more contemporary locations. Larsson sets several scenes in the brasserie and nightclub called Kvarnen, for example. And while Kvarnen is not old enough to date back to Bellman's time, it does have more than a century of local history and legend.

Södermalm is home to many fine restaurants, but, in keeping with Stieg Larsson's relatively proletarian tastes, we find Blomkvist and Salander mainly catching fast food on the run. They both have an apparent passion for Billy's Pan Pizza, which is mentioned seven times in *Fire* and at least once in every book. Having read about this unique Swedish delicacy in Larsson's novels, I looked forward to tasting it. (However, after I bought a Billy's Pan Pizza at the 7-Eleven on

Götgatan, which is where Mikael and Lisbeth frequently get their supplies of cigarettes, fast food, and other necessities, and heated it up in the hotel microwave, I was severely disappointed).

Ironically, as I was buying my Billy's, I noticed Swedish tabloid headlines in the 7-Eleven featuring stories about trouble between Noomi Rapace (the brilliant actress who played Lisbeth in the Swedish films), and her husband heading toward splitsville. They would officially divorce a month later in December 2010. Photos of Noomi as Lisbeth were staring out at me, much the way Lisbeth sees a bad photo of herself splashed across the tabloids along with giant headlines accusing her of triple homicide.

Considering Larsson's anti-Nazi stance, it is not surprising that Jewish characters figure far more prominently in his novels than in the actual population of Stockholm (the Jewish population is thought to be around 10,000.) Jan Bublanski, the thoughtful, determined police inspector who ends up doing a good job on the Salander case despite all the obstacles put in his way is Jewish, and (sometimes) attends services at Adat Jisrael on St. Paulsgatan. This temple is perhaps the most nondescript I have ever seen anywhere in the world. In Norrmalm, the Great Synagogue of Stockholm is as attractive and imposing a building as Adat Jisrael is low-key. But even this outward facing symbol of Jewish life in Sweden must surround itself with security gates in an era of neo-Nazi threats.

Larsson's novels reflect a keen interest in the geography of islands. In *Tattoo*, he creates a fictional island, Hedeby, where the Vanger family lives. It is cut off from the mainland for a period of time on a September day in 1966, owing to an accident on the bridge, and it is at this moment that Harriet Vanger disappears, creating the basic mystery of the book.

In *Fire*, Lisbeth travels to Grenada. And, if we follow the clues Stieg Larsson left with his friend and our co-author, John-Henri Holmberg, we understand that the manuscript for the fourth novel was likely to be set in an extremely remote island of Canada's Northwest Territories, Banks Island.

Södermalm is Stieg Larsson's ultimate personal island, a place where he knew virtually every block and every building, where he had drunk coffee in every coffee bar. Kaffebar, one of his favorites, which is mentioned several times in the books, is now known as Mellqvist Kaffebar. Some of the people who work there still remember Larsson sitting at a table with his laptop, coffee cup in hand, typing away at what would become the Millennium Trilogy.

It is in Södermalm that Lisbeth and Mikael achieve vengeance and justice and find answers and truth. And they are now ready to launch their next adventure together on the next geographic and moral island they find themselves on... in the fourth book we are all waiting for. ❁

Dan Burstein is the author of 14 books, many of them with his co-author and partner, Arne de Keijzer. He previously wrote SECRETS OF THE CODE, the world's bestselling guidebook to The Da Vinci Code. Over four million copies of the "Secrets" series of books are in print in more than 30 countries. Dan is also a venture capitalist and managing partner of Millennium, a New York based venture firm.