

Playing With Fire:  
Journalistic Ethics in the *Millennium* Novels

Katie Schaufelberger

## **Abstract**

The first two novels of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy examine moral extremes and shades of gray that surround the role of the journalist. Larsson looks at the question of how far a journalist should go for justice and answers it: as far as necessary, even so far that he or she becomes part of the story. The paper will examine how his characters, the classic but unlikely detective pair Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander, take on the dark sides of Swedish society over and over: the exploitation of and violence towards women, the immorality of big business, neo-Nazi groups, and other investigative journalists gone wrong. The paper will show how this activist model has been inserted in other popular and well-known representations of the journalist.

## **Introduction**

When Stieg Larsson wrote about the fictional journalist Mikael Blomkvist, in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2008) and *The Girl Who Played With Fire* (2009), he gave him much of his own biography, as a financial and political reporter and the publisher of *Expo* magazine. The result of this is the realism of *Millennium* as a publication and business in these novels. The inner workings of the magazine are brought to the forefront and involved in the plot, and its editors are gifted by turns with what one can easily imagine were Larsson's own rationality and risk-taking.

In the books, the reader meets Blomkvist, a dogged but fundamentally idealistic investigative reporter. He starts off determined to expose the villains of his world – corrupt financiers – and is left dealing with even more twisted crimes, murder and sex abuse. Lisbeth

Salander, his researcher, is his counterpart. She has a difficult history and a dark view of the world. The two characters affect each other with their own idealistic or negative worldview.

Erika Berger, the editor of *Millennium*, is the pragmatic journalist in these novels. She runs the business of the magazine coolly and competently. She is ambitious, and weighs her job options carefully. Larsson carefully analyzes her role as an editor versus reporter; in her character, editors are shown to be not the producers of journalism—in other words, not classic journalists in the sense that Larsson depicts them. Instead, they are the overseers who keep the whole process moving forward, so that news can reach society.

A number of smaller journalist characters populate these pages, as well. But while Larsson introduces an idealistic, heroic young journalist named Dag Svensson, he quickly balances him with a villainous, cowardly and criminal journalist soon after.

In these novels, the investigative journalist is the bandit for hire, the vigilante, the power broker. These journalists are persecuted for their work and chronically misunderstood, but prevail in the end.

### **A Classic Duo**

“You took a real hit in there today,” said the one from *Dragans Nyheter*, clearly a young part-timer. “How does it feel?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, neither Blomkvist nor the older journalists could help smiling. He exchanged glances with TV4. *How does it feel?* The half-witted reporter shoves his microphone in the face of the Breathless Athlete on the finishing line.

- Stieg Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* <sup>1</sup>

For Mikael Blomkvist, this finishing line represents the lowest point of his career. He is standing outside the room where a court has just ruled him guilty of libel and defamation<sup>2</sup> for breaking a story that he is certain is true, but that he can't substantiate.<sup>3</sup> How does he feel?

Angry. Ruined. "What hurt most was the humiliation. He had held all the trumps and yet he had lost to a semi-gangster in an Armani suit."<sup>4</sup>

Blomkvist is a hard-hitting investigative journalist<sup>5</sup> with an illustrious history of taking on corrupt Big Business.<sup>6</sup> In the Sweden depicted in Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* novels, this is no small feat.

Corruption lurks around every corner, and before the end of the two novels, Blomkvist and his unlikely partner, Lisbeth Salander, are confronted with many of society's dark secrets, including sexual abuse, misogynistic hatred of women, neo-Nazism, and dirty politics. "In the Larsson universe, the nasty trolls and hulking ogres" of old, mythological Scandinavia, writes *Vanity Fair* editor Christopher Hitchens, now "are bent Swedish capitalists, cold-faced Baltic sex traffickers, blue-eyed Viking Aryan Nazis, and other Nordic riffraff..."<sup>7</sup>

After his conviction, Blomkvist will spend two months in prison, and pay a large sum in damages. Because he is also the publisher and part-owner of *Millennium*,<sup>8</sup> a monthly newsmagazine, which is described as "left-wing" or "generally... critical of society,"<sup>9</sup> the magazine will have to cover his court costs.<sup>10</sup>

Thus we meet Blomkvist, one half of Stieg Larsson's popular crime-solving detective pair. We see that he is noble, concerned for his magazine and its reputation, and pained to think of losing the trust of his readers.<sup>11</sup> Since becoming a famous journalist, Blomkvist has been

given the nickname Kalle Blomkvist, after the fictional boy detective in Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren's mystery stories, which irks him, even as it fits him well.<sup>12</sup>

Blomkvist is a man of action, rather than just a writer. At the age of twenty-three, Blomkvist got his big break discovering the hideout of a bank robbery gang and calling the police, then getting front-row coverage of their bust.<sup>13</sup> "He comes off a little like the Practical Pig in *The Three Little Pigs*. So far he has been an excellent journalist," says his researcher Lisbeth Salander, who does a thorough background report on him for a client before meeting him.<sup>14</sup>

In these two crime mysteries, Blomkvist still is in on the action: wrapped up in an old family's intrigue, getting tortured by the villain, and chasing down Salander. Larsson has created a classic hero-journalist, and turned him upside down by putting him with the antisocial, edgy, misunderstood-genius researcher Salander.

Salander is a twenty-four-year-old computer hacker – much of her best research is done illicitly, through an internet connection.<sup>15</sup> She has a photographic memory, extraordinary mathematical skill, and "handled computers as if she had a pact with the Devil" (including hacking systems belonging to banks and police departments).<sup>16</sup> She belongs to an exclusive international community of hackers who help her out when she needs it, and even among these elite of computer crime, she is a legend who goes by the alias "Wasp."<sup>17</sup>

She does, of course, have the titular dragon tattoo, and others, which contribute to her unconventional looks. She has a wasp tattoo on her neck, and the dragon tattoo on her left shoulder blade.<sup>18</sup> She is described as "a pale, anorexic young woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrow."<sup>19</sup>

Before working with Blomkvist, Salander worked at Milton Security, doing investigations for private clients.<sup>20</sup> Her boss finds her to be the most thorough and complete researcher he's got, but he has no idea of her methods.<sup>21</sup>

Salander has a twisted personal history that comes out over the course of the two novels. Her father was a powerful criminal, and abused her mother for many years. Salander snapped one day, at the age of twelve, and stabbed her father.<sup>22</sup> When he returned, he hurt her mother again, provoking Salander to throw a gasoline-filled milk carton and a lit match into his car, where he sat, in retaliation.<sup>23</sup> A pretty tall order for a twelve-year-old.

In *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, Salander is nearly killed by her father, Zalachenko, who survived both her youthful attacks and now wants her dead.<sup>24</sup> But Salander is such a tough, viciously determined woman that even when he shoots and buries her, she survives, wakes up and literally digs her way out of the grave to enact her revenge.<sup>25</sup>

Revenge is extremely important to Salander: she holds people responsible, above all, and her primary targets are sex offenders. When she is raped by one court-appointed guardian, she takes explicit sexual vengeance on him later.<sup>26</sup>

Blomkvist finds out about all of this through her original court-appointed guardian, a good man whom she actually loves.<sup>27</sup> Even long before the reader has reached this part of the story, however, it has become clear where Larsson's affections lie: Though Larsson himself was a journalist, with a career that it appears Blomkvist's was modeled from, Salander is the star – a spectacular creation who starts off on the journalist's team as a researcher and quickly becomes his subject.

### **Intrigue at *Millennium***

For Blomkvist the golden rule of journalism was that there were always people who were responsible. The bad guys.

- Stieg Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*<sup>28</sup>

Larsson gives Blomkvist a traditional journalist's pedigree. He is forty-two years old and went to school in Stockholm for his journalism degree, traveling abroad and completing his military service before graduating.<sup>29</sup> Both of his parents are deceased, and his younger sister Annika is a lawyer.<sup>30</sup> Although he was initially interested in crime reporting, he is known for his work as a political and financial journalist.<sup>31</sup>

Blomkvist loathes many things about the world of financial journalism, and his fellow journalists, as Larsson writes a couple of tirades on their complacency:

The job of the financial journalist was to examine the sharks who created interest crises and speculated away the savings of small investors, to scrutinize company boards with the same merciless zeal with which political reporters pursue the tiniest steps out of line of ministers and members of Parliament. He could not for the life of him understand why so many influential reporters treated mediocre financial whelps like rock stars.<sup>32</sup>

This attitude makes it all the more painful for Blomkvist to accept that "editors would now hesitate to publish a story under his byline" after his conviction.<sup>33</sup> It also drives him to delve deeper into the supposedly libelous story to expose the truth.

Blomkvist is divorced, and he has a teenage daughter, Pernilla, whom he does not see often.<sup>34</sup> After working on his corrected, thorough expose of a crooked financier, he visits with her and realizes he has not spoken with her in months, and thinks he is a bad father.<sup>35</sup>

His wife divorced him because he cheated on her with a fellow journalist, Erika Berger.<sup>36</sup> Berger and Blomkvist have carried on a very unorthodox romance for years.

Berger is the editor-in-chief of *Millennium*. She is described as “an upper-class girl” and she met Blomkvist in journalism school.<sup>37</sup> Though she is married to an artist, she continues to sleep with Blomkvist, fairly out in the open, and her husband accepts it.<sup>38</sup> Blomkvist says they have “a connection as addictive as heroin,” though they are not actually in love.<sup>39</sup>

Sex and romance add interest to the dry business-related subplots in the novels. Blomkvist is quite the ladies’ man. Throughout *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, he has an affair with Salander, and by the sequel, he realizes that he has fallen in love with her. Salander is distrustful and a little jealous of Berger.

Berger is depicted as basically a good editor-in-chief overall. Blomkvist is impressed with her when she talks to another businessman about the magazine’s needs: “Signals passed between them that Blomkvist could not interpret, which might have had to do with the fact that he was basically a poor, working-class boy from Norrland and she was an upper-class girl with a distinguished, international family tree.”<sup>40</sup>

Blomkvist notes that Berger had first concentrated on television after journalism school, and wonders why she didn’t stick with it, as it would likely have been more lucrative than the magazine.<sup>41</sup> “She was tough, looked fantastic on camera, and could hold her own with the competition. She also had good contacts in the bureaucracy,” he observes.<sup>42</sup> These are all the traits he thinks she would need to easily receive “a managerial job at one of the TV channels at a considerably higher salary than she paid herself now.”<sup>43</sup>

The team of journalists is truly important to Berger. She is loyal to her colleagues at *Millennium* and sensible to the needs of the magazine first. When Blomkvist wants to accept a mysterious assignment to write a biography on a reclusive billionaire, Berger is furious because she will be left alone in the lurch to defend *Millennium* from the legal attacks of Blomkvist's shady financier subject, Hans-Erik Wennerstrom.<sup>44</sup> The magazine is also in crisis because it needs a buyer, and in the wake of Blomkvist's scandal, advertisers have begun to pull out.<sup>45</sup>

The magazine's art director watches the pair's confrontation awkwardly: "This isn't an argument, Malm thought. It's a divorce."<sup>46</sup> Their co-workers are all aware of their "arrangement." While Berger may not be professional in terms of her sex life around the office, she is crafty and manipulative, and finally agrees to let Blomkvist go because it will make Wennerstrom believe that she is no threat on her own: "I understand the logic when it's a matter of making Wennerstrom believe I'm a harmless bimbo on my own."<sup>47</sup> Berger is no bimbo.

It turns out that *Millennium* has a mole on its staff. Janne Dahlman is the managing editor, and Berger and Blomkvist complain about his negativity before Berger begins to suspect that he is reporting to other sources. Early on, she says, "I think I made a mistake hiring him. He's competent, but he does more harm than good. I don't trust him."<sup>48</sup> Naturally, her instincts are right on, and she soon begins to "have a nasty feeling he's not working for us."<sup>49</sup> It turns out that Dahlman has been reporting to Wennerstrom himself. The *Millennium* staff begin feeding him false information so that Wennerstrom will think the magazine is on the verge of collapse.<sup>50</sup>

Berger fields a job offer to become the editor-in-chief of a large daily newspaper in *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, and almost takes the job. It offers a much higher salary, and she is tempted by becoming "one of Sweden's big-time media players."<sup>51</sup> Berger, much more than

Blomkvist, is interested in money and power, perhaps cementing her status as an editor rather than a reporter.

The job offer causes her to reflect on her career path:

Berger liked being the editor in chief of Millennium. It had given her a status within the world of journalism that she considered almost undeserved. She had never been the producer of the news. That was not her thing—she regarded herself as a mediocre writer. On the other hand, she was first-rate on radio or TV, and above all she was a brilliant editor. Besides, she enjoyed the hands-on work of editing...<sup>52</sup>

Once again, Berger focuses on the power aspect of her job. Like most journalists, she equates writing ability with the title of journalist – which, to her, denotes actually ferreting out the new stories – and doubts herself because of it. And despite her “mediocre” writing skills, she excels at broadcast journalism, perhaps showing Larsson’s bias about the different media.

The thing Berger dreads most about accepting the new job is telling Blomkvist, because she values their partnership and is, of course, romantically entangled with him. Her concerns about telling him are another negative byproduct, harmful to the business, of sleeping with one’s co-worker.

In *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, Larsson introduces an idealistic young journalist as a counterpoint to all the lazy, crooked, or jaded reporters the reader has already met. Blomkvist is still the hero-journalist, but Dag Svensson represents a fresher, more single-minded prototype. Svensson is working on an investigation of the sex trade in eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup> Because *Millennium* has now expanded into the book-publishing business (with the publication of Blomkvist’s expose of Wennerstrom), Svensson’s work will be not just the focus of a themed issue of the magazine, but a book.<sup>54</sup>

Svensson is described as “around thirty and shamelessly fit.”<sup>55</sup> All of his reporting is grounded in academia, because he collaborates with his girlfriend, a criminologist and scholar who is working on a thesis on the topic.<sup>56</sup> He tells Blomkvist and Berger that Sweden is one of the countries that imports the most prostitutes per capita from Russia and the Baltics.<sup>57</sup>

Blomkvist has a positive impression of him right away: “...he felt at once that Svensson was the kind of journalist he liked—someone who got right to the heart of the story.”<sup>58</sup> Blomkvist later finds that Svensson is “a talented writer” whose work is easy for him to edit.<sup>59</sup>

Svensson plans for the book to include case studies of the johns, who include police officers, a judge, and “three journalists, one of whom has written articles on the sex trade.”<sup>60</sup> Larsson never misses a chance to call out the hypocrisy and corruption within his own trade.

Svensson continues about the journalist-john: “In his private life he’s into rape fantasies with a teenage whore from Tallinn—and in this case it’s not consensual sex play. I’m thinking of naming names. I’ve got watertight documentation.”<sup>61</sup> Not only is this hypocritical journalist a john, but he is one of the more violent and sick clients who is excited by rape.

We meet this man, a “freelance journalist” named Per-Ake Sandstrom, later in the novel. He is terrified of being discovered and recalls how he “had begged and pleaded... had *crawled* for that fucking pig [Svensson]” when Svensson confronted him for the story.<sup>62</sup> He is portrayed as being weak and cowardly, and Salander corners him in his home to question him.

The researcher’s interview techniques (though keep in mind Salander is not questioning him on behalf of *Millennium*) involve painting her face in a frightening mask, knocking him out, tying him up, showing him her gun, and threatening to Taser him if he screams (through a complicated process, this will cause him to hang himself because the rope is tied to the ceiling).<sup>63</sup>

She has a few other confrontations with misogynistic men throughout the novels, but perhaps Larsson had extra fun with this one given that the villain here is a journalist-gone-bad.<sup>64</sup> Needless to say, she gets the information she wants.

While Larsson wrote Blomkvist to be a fundamentally good man and ethical journalist whom the reader can root for, he attempts to give a balanced picture of journalism as a business by lamenting the lapses of financial and investigative journalists. Svensson's work continues with his setting up meetings with the johns to confront them for the book.

Svensson and his girlfriend are shot and killed for their work by some of the criminals they intend to name, who are working for the mastermind Zalachanko.<sup>65</sup> Journalism is a dangerous profession and passionate idealism is stamped out in this world, unless it is protected by razor-sharp instincts like Salander's. The journalism that makes it to press here has to come through a network like *Millennium's* –after *Dragon Tattoo*, the magazine is owned by wealthy businessman Henrik Vanger.<sup>66</sup>

Vanger's buyout of *Millennium* provides the first book with some journalists-interviewing-journalists scenes. The outside reporter asks questions with a salacious slant and Berger quickly puts him right: "That is inaccurate. Read our press release."<sup>67</sup> Vanger portrays his new acquisition in a noble light: "It would be deplorable if special interests had the power to silence those voices in the media that they find uncomfortable."<sup>68</sup> He is trying to send a signal to Wennerstrom that *Millennium* will not fold during the legal battle.<sup>69</sup>

Blomkvist reflects on how this will change people's attitudes toward the magazine. "The message was clear: in the future you will not be fighting with a magazine with a staff of six... You will now be up against the Vanger Corporation, which may be a shadow of its former

greatness but still presents a considerably tougher challenge.”<sup>70</sup> Involving a corporation has its own ethical issues, which Larsson points out.

A reporter tells Berger that because of Vanger’s ownership of the magazine, she cannot now credibly investigate his corporation. She snaps back, “Are you saying that no publication in Sweden that has significant economic interests behind it is credible?” and points out several other publications owned by corporate entities.<sup>71</sup> However, to herself she acknowledges that it is an ethical dilemma, and wonders, “What price did she put on her own credibility, and when had she been transformed from an independent editor into a corrupted one?”<sup>72</sup> Larsson once again takes an issue of journalistic ethics and places it under the magnifying glass of his fiction.

Berger realizes that this kind of ownership raises an ethical dilemma, but so much of Larsson’s novels are based on his heroes doing unethical things. Salander would be number one offender in terms of ethics: she hacks computers, embezzles money (from the bad guys), and punishes those who hurt her with whatever they did to her in kind (as when she ties up and tortures a court-appointed guardian who raped her).

Blomkvist sleeps with one of his sources as he investigates the Vanger family, and he actually ends up sleeping with two Vangers by the end of the second novel. He sleeps with Cecilia Vanger in *Dragon Tattoo*, even though she is technically a suspect in Harriet Vanger’s disappearance, which he is there to investigate.<sup>73</sup> Vanger is the seductress, the one who initiates the affair, but Blomkvist completely goes along with it. After they sleep together, Blomkvist interviews her about the family and what she remembers of Harriet.<sup>74</sup>

Larsson does not describe Blomkvist’s thought process at the time or any qualms he may have; when Cecilia Vanger brings it up later (and they continue the affair) she paints herself as

the seducer and mentions that she is older than he (fifty-six) a couple of times, as if these things absolve him of any guilt or part in their affair.<sup>75</sup>

Blomkvist had already told her about his ongoing affair with Berger, whom he calls his “occasional lover.”<sup>76</sup> Later, Cecilia Vanger admits that she has fallen in love with him: “I fell in love with you last winter. I didn’t mean to, but it happened.”<sup>77</sup> Blomkvist’s only responses are, “I’m sorry,” and “I thought it was lovely, too.”<sup>78</sup> Berger shows up for an awkward meeting immediately after this, driving home the image of Blomkvist as quite a ladies’ man. Vanger and Berger are both embarrassed and don’t know how to act around each other. Blomkvist assures Vanger that Berger won’t be staying in his room.<sup>79</sup>

Berger, for all her avant-garde juggling of two men (one of whom is her husband), is irritated at finding that Vanger and Blomkvist are sleeping together. “I’m really pissed off... I drive all the way up here and find you in bed with the town femme fatale,” she says.<sup>80</sup> Rather than being “pissed off” about all the negative ethical implications of it for her publishing partner’s investigation, she is jealous – suddenly a stereotypical catty female. “Candy within reach and I have to go on a diet,” she complains.<sup>81</sup>

Ultimately, Blomkvist’s affair with Cecilia affects his investigation. He recognizes her in a picture, standing in Harriet’s room on the day she disappeared.<sup>82</sup> He hesitates to tell anyone about it and doesn’t know what to do with the information: “She had been his lover. How could he be objective? He certainly could not imagine her as a murderer.”<sup>83</sup> He does not seem concerned about his lack of objectivity, however.

When he gives a report of what he has found to his employer, Henrik Vanger (also now his colleague as the owner of *Millennium*) leaves out the part about Cecilia. “The only thing he

kept to himself was Cecilia Vanger's face in Harriet's window. He had to talk to her before he put her in a position where he might be suspected of something," writes Larsson.<sup>84</sup> Cecilia Vanger is not the cause of Harriet's disappearance. In the end, she had nothing to do with it. But Blomkvist has no idea of that at the time, and he protects her, without confronting her about the picture, for several days, placing her interests above those of the man who is paying him to investigate the family.

As a journalist working on a story, sleeping with a source would be completely unethical. Even more suspect would be favoring or protecting a source to the detriment of getting the whole story. Larsson seems to focus on making his fictional hero seem chivalrous rather than ethical.

In the second novel, we learn that Blomkvist and Harriet Vanger, the main subject of the investigation, have become lovers. She is discovered at the end of *Dragon Tattoo* and works with *Millennium*, since her family now owns the magazine. Blomkvist is now involved with yet another colleague, and yet another member of the Vanger family.<sup>85</sup> Like Berger, Harriet Vanger is satisfied with just an "occasional rendezvous."<sup>86</sup> They only see each other "one night every three months after the magazine's board meetings."<sup>87</sup>

Harriet likes Blomkvist because he protected her family and did not expose what he learned about them in the press: "Blomkvist knew her history, and she was aware that he had compromised his principles in order to cover up the Vanger family's horrific secrets."<sup>88</sup> One of those secrets was that a family member, Martin Vanger, turned out to be a psychotic sexually perverted rapist and serial killer – he attacked Blomkvist and then killed himself. Salander persuaded Blomkvist not to even report it to the police.<sup>89</sup>

While Blomkvist may not always be objective in investigations or a completely lawful citizen who reports crimes to the police, he shares almost everything with Berger. He wants to tell her the truth about what happened with Martin Vanger, but Salander resists.<sup>90</sup> “She’s absolutely trustworthy,” Blomkvist tells her. “You’re a source. She would rather die than reveal who you are.”<sup>91</sup> He says that he won’t tell Berger if Salander doesn’t want him to, but “it’s not an option for me to lie to Erika, make up some source that doesn’t exist.”<sup>92</sup> In the world of *Millennium*, Salander would probably be safest as a source if she slept with Berger, since that seems to guarantee a lack of objectivity and protection of sources.

### **Blomkvist’s Predecessors**

Larsson died of a heart attack in 2004 at the age of 50, before he saw any of his books published or turned into the hugely successful international bestsellers they are.<sup>93</sup> He said that he wrote the books as a form of relaxation, a break from journalism.<sup>94</sup>

Larsson’s career path traces a similar arc to Blomkvist’s. Like Blomkvist, he completed his military service abroad and traveled widely before returning to Sweden to pursue journalism.<sup>95</sup> He became the editor-in-chief of *Expo*, an anti-fascist newsmagazine like *Millennium*.<sup>96</sup>

Larsson said that Salander was his imagining of who Pippi Longstocking would have become when she was older; that character is referenced multiple times in the text, to Salander’s chagrin.<sup>97</sup> She was created by Astrid Lindgren, the author who also wrote the character from which Blomkvist’s nickname derives. In Sweden, Kalle Blomkvist is a sort of Hardy Boys-type of child detective. And according to his father, the character of Salander was also somewhat

based off of Larsson's niece, "who is tattooed and has suffered from anorexia and dyslexia but can fix your computer problems," as Christopher Hitchens put it.

In remembering Larsson, those who knew him have painted striking parallels to Blomkvist. He is described as "an absolutely obsessive writer" who "made people angry because he claimed there were parts of the Swedish government and intelligence systems playing fast and loose with the constitution."<sup>98</sup> He was also an avid reader of crime fiction, and some of the authors he read are mentioned in the text as being read by characters.<sup>99</sup> His major influences include American author Sara Paretsky and English mystery writer Agatha Christie.<sup>100</sup>

### **Blomkvist and Other Journalists in Fiction**

The crime fiction genre, with the reporter as detective, began to grow and change by leaps and bounds at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>101</sup> "The birth of the crusading newspaper reporter and the intrusion of muckraking into political and corporate affairs" had a huge influence on modern-day crime fiction, making the journalist a popular figure solving the case.<sup>102</sup>

Reporters have received shining treatment in the genre overall, since the start – "turn of the century writers tend to treat them with the same kind of glowing optimism expressed toward the scientist or psychologist as the new modern hero."<sup>103</sup> The epitome of all of this optimism was the character of Clark Kent – Superman.

Blomkvist carries on a tradition of muckraking at *Millennium* with his tireless investigations of financiers, politicians, misogynists and killers, and Larsson lets him be a hero, but with a grain of salt. Salander always keeps him in place, referring to him as Kalle Blomkvist, his hated nickname, and rolling her eyes at his attempts to track her down, even as she

acknowledges his quick-witted progress. “He had stood faithfully in her corner like a steadfast tin soldier,” Larsson writes, and this is probably how Salander would have cynically thought of Kent’s earnest efforts on behalf of Lois Lane.<sup>104</sup>

Howard Good examines the 1999 film *True Crime*, focused on a “reporter-hero” who is an alcoholic screw-up, but similar to Blomkvist in his dogged investigation of a story and slight ethical lapses.<sup>105</sup> Steve Everett represents a classic male-reporter archetype – he is a womanizer who chronically sleeps with married women and “a muckraker who gets splattered by the muck he rakes up.”<sup>106</sup> Like Blomkvist, he starts on stories that get bigger than he ever thought they could.

Good writes, “the interesting thing about *True Crime* is that it raises the possibility that even a morally weak person can grope his way to a good act.”<sup>107</sup> Blomkvist is often recognized as morally good, even by Salander, who is extremely distrustful of everyone and men, in particular. Yet he juggles multiple women in romantic liaisons—though Larsson breezes through descriptions of affair-related conversations, and his women never really get too attached. He is flexible, to say the least, with his journalistic ethics, not always maintaining objectivity, and sometimes keeping secrets from those with whom he should be honest.

Gerry Boyle is an example of another journalist who began writing fiction. His protagonist is journalist-turned-detective Jack McMorrow, who student Joshua Talley writes “rises above the scrum, elevating the image of the journalist with each and every story he painstakingly investigates and reports.”<sup>108</sup> He sounds like Blomkvist – a generally noble journalist who is focused on doing good work.

Unlike Blomkvist, McMorrow is a “working-class hero,” not a journalism-school graduate.<sup>109</sup> However, both characters occasionally experience “ethical lapses.”<sup>110</sup> Both have recently experienced a fall from grace – McMorrow ends up at a smaller newspaper than where he started, and Blomkvist is convicted of libel. Both of these “falls” drive them into the deeper investigative work that makes them heroes.

Edna Buchanan is yet another author who started as a journalist. Buchanan drew from her life as a Pulitzer Prize-winning police reporter to create her fictional alter ego, crime reporter Britt Montero.<sup>111</sup> Journalism student Eric Berkowitz notes that Montero is always in on the action. Like Blomkvist, she ends up the captive of a murderer.<sup>112</sup> However, Montero does Blomkvist one better during her captivity – “...even while Montero trembles in horror, she tries to get an interview.”<sup>113</sup> To be fair to Blomkvist, he was being tortured for most of the time, until Salander rescued him.

American audiences refer to characters like this when they read Larsson’s novels, which they have in droves.<sup>114</sup> For Swedish audiences, Larsson’s works are in step with a cultural movement that uses literature and film to further discussion of the nation’s social issues, especially surrounding “the welfare state.”<sup>115</sup> Larsson’s characters deal with corrupt Big Business, crooked politicians, sex slave prostitution rings, and vast hatred for and victimization of women.

Andrew Nestingen writes that in modern literary works, “the background understanding involves new relationships that go through, under, and between national borders and that are shaped by notions of economic opportunity, the permeability of legal institutions, and an amoral underground trade in people.”<sup>116</sup> He discusses the ways in which popular culture in Sweden has

become a “forum for struggling over these changes by creating, discussing, and contesting the self-representation of the nation.”<sup>117</sup> Salander seems a direct manifestation of this struggle to change.

She has been extremely damaged by the system that was charged to care for her. Certainly if popular culture in Sweden now represents a nation of citizens trying to find their voice in a difficult, conflicted time, Salander’s violence represents a very strong reaction to it – and Blomkvist, an older-world model, has loosened his ethics to fit the times, yet remains at heart the moral, caring hero his audience can root for.

## **Conclusion**

Larsson’s life as a journalist informed his writing choices and influenced the kind of journalists he portrayed. For the international audience that read his works, the business concerns, political intrigue, and internal workings of *Millennium* seem realistic, and in some ways they are, as they paralleled Larsson’s own experiences. However, the unethical choices and drama that spice up the storyline – Blomkvist’s affairs, a source taking over the magazine, the journalists physically facing the murderers – are not as realistic.

Larsson used these mechanisms to create two engrossing and thrilling stories. His love of murder mysteries also affected the plotlines. While these aspects might be viewed as unethical or outlandish by real journalists, to an audience familiar with other fictional journalists, they are typical. Blomkvist simultaneously presents a noble image of the journalist and a slightly laughable one – particularly when viewed through the eyes of Salander, who sees his nobility as something of a joke given the society they live in. When a journalist is the hero of a fiction work,

they seem to have a license to do anything. They become action figures, extremely involved in their subjects.

Larsson actually did receive death threats for his work in *Expo*. He put his life on the line for his work. Fictional journalists are often living high-stakes lives – and with this author, some of the fictional extremes were proven to be the real-life consequence of good work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stieg Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, trans. Reg Keeland (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 17

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 42

<sup>6</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 43

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “The Author Who Played with Fire,” *Vanity Fair*, December 2009 (<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2009/12/hitchens-200912>).

<sup>8</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 16

<sup>9</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 42

<sup>10</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 16

<sup>11</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 17

<sup>12</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 42

<sup>13</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 12

<sup>14</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 42

<sup>15</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 30

<sup>16</sup> Stieg Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, trans. Reg Keeland (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 32

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 29

<sup>21</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 31

<sup>22</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 437

<sup>23</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 438

<sup>24</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 483

<sup>25</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 493

<sup>26</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 203

- <sup>27</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 432  
<sup>28</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 72  
<sup>29</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 42  
<sup>30</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>32</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 53  
<sup>33</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 17  
<sup>34</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 459  
<sup>35</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>36</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 47  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>38</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>39</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 51  
<sup>40</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 164  
<sup>41</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 54  
<sup>42</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>43</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>44</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 98  
<sup>45</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 112  
<sup>46</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 98  
<sup>47</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 100  
<sup>48</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>49</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 270  
<sup>50</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 419  
<sup>51</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 166  
<sup>52</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>53</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 70  
<sup>54</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>55</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>56</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 71  
<sup>57</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>58</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 72  
<sup>59</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 161  
<sup>60</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 72  
<sup>61</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>62</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 359  
<sup>63</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>64</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>65</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 173  
<sup>66</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 215  
<sup>67</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 211  
<sup>68</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 212  
<sup>69</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>70</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 213  
<sup>71</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 215  
<sup>72</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>73</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 175

- <sup>74</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 186
- <sup>75</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 224
- <sup>76</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 175
- <sup>77</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 225
- <sup>78</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 225
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>80</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 227
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 245
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 256
- <sup>85</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 95
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>89</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 362
- <sup>90</sup> Larsson, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 433
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>93</sup> Jake Kerridge, "Stieg Larsson: A Profile," *The London Telegraph*, Sept. 10, 2009. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8483574.stm>).
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>95</sup> Graeme Atkinson, "A dedicated anti-fascist and good friend: Stieg Larsson, 1954-2004," *Searchlight*, December 2004
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Hitchens, "The Author Who Played With Fire"
- <sup>98</sup> *The London Telegraph*, Sept. 10, 2009
- <sup>99</sup> Finlo Rohrer, "In search of Stieg Larsson," *BBC News Magazine*, Jan. 28, 2010. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8483574.stm>).
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid
- <sup>101</sup> LeRoy Lad Panek, *The Origins of the American Detective Story* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2006), 2.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>103</sup> LeRoy Lad Panek, 117
- <sup>104</sup> Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, 451
- <sup>105</sup> Howard Good, Michael J. Dillon, *Media Ethics Goes to the Movies* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publisher, 2002), 127.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>108</sup> Joshua Talley. 2004. "The Stringer." Image of the Journalist. 11 (<http://ijpc.org/IJPC%20Student%20Journal%20Josh%20Talley%20McMorrow.pdf>).
- <sup>109</sup> Talley. "The Stringer." 2
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Eric Berkowitz. 2004. Giving Everything For One Good Quote. Thesis, University of Southern California. 1 (<http://ijpc.org/Student%202006%20papers/Eric%20Berkowitz%20-%20Edna%20Buchanan%20-%20%20Giving%20Everything%20for%20One%20Good%20Quote%20--%20Britt%20Montero.pdf>).

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Berkowitz. Giving Everything For One Good Quote. 15

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "The Author Who Played With Fire"

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

---

Bibliography

1. Larsson, Stieg, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Random House, Inc., 2008.
2. Larsson, Stieg, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Random House, Inc., 2009.
3. Christopher Hitchens, "The Author Who Played with Fire," *Vanity Fair*, December 2009 (<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2009/12/hitchens-200912>).
4. Jake Kerridge, "Stieg Larsson: A Profile," *The London Telegraph*, Sept. 10, 2009. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8483574.stm>).
5. Graeme Atkinson, "A dedicated anti-fascist and good friend: Stieg Larsson, 1954-2004," *Searchlight*, December 2004 (<http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/index.php?link=template&story=118>).
6. Finlo Rohrer, "In search of Stieg Larsson," *BBC News Magazine*, Jan. 28, 2010. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8483574.stm>).
7. LeRoy Lad Panek, *The Origins of the American Detective Story*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006.
8. Howard Good, Michael J. Dillon, *Media Ethics Goes to the Movies*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publisher, 2002.
9. Andrew Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.