

Caboodles Book Club Kits

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson



Reviews

Booklist Reviews 2008 August #1 The first U.S. appearance of another major Swedish crime writer is cause for celebration but also disappointment: Larsson, an acclaimed journalist as well as the author of the award-winning Millennium trilogy, of which this is the first volume, died in 2004. The editor of a magazine called Expo, which was dedicated to fighting right-wing extremism, Larsson brings his journalistic background to bear in his first novel. It is the story of a crusading reporter, Mikail Blomkvist, who has been convicted of libel for his exposé of crooked financier Wennerstrom. Then another Swedish financier, a rival of Wennerstrom, wants to hire Blomkvist to solve the decades-old disappearance of his niece from the family's island compound in the north of Sweden. If Blomkvist works on the project for a year, his employer will deliver the goods on Wennerstrom. Blomkvist takes the job and soon finds himself trying to unlock the grisly multigenerational secrets in a hideously dysfunctional family's many closets. Helping him dig through those closets is the novel's real star, the girl with the dragon tattoo, Lisbeth Salander, a ward of the state who happens to be Sweden's most formidable computer hacker and a fearless foe of women-hating men. Larsson has two great stories (and two star-worthy characters) here, and if he never quite brings them together (the conclusion of the Wennerstrom campaign seems almost anticlimactic after the action-filled finale on the island) the novel nevertheless offers compelling chunks of investigative journalism, high-tech sleuthing, and psychosexual drama. What a shame that we only have three books in which to watch the charismatic Lisbeth Salander take on the world! *Copyright 2006 Booklist Reviews.*

Kirkus Reviews 2008 July #2 First U.S. publication for a deceased Swedish author (1954–2004); this first of his three novels, a bestseller in Europe, is a labored mystery. It's late 2002. Mikael Blomkvist, reputable Stockholm financial journalist, has just lost a libel case brought by a notoriously devious tycoon. He's looking at a short jail term and the ruin of his magazine, which he owns with his best friend and occasional lover, Erika Berger. The case has brought him to the attention of Henrik Vanger, octogenarian, retired industrialist and head of the vast Vanger clan. Henrik has had a report on him prepared by Lisbeth Salander, the eponymous Girl, a freaky private investigator. The 24-year-old Lisbeth is a brilliant sleuth, and no wonder: She's the best computer hacker in Sweden. Henrik hires Mikael to solve an old mystery, the disappearance of his great-niece Harriet, in 1966. Henrik is sure she was murdered; every year the putative killer tauntingly sends him a pressed flower on his birthday (Harriet's custom). He is equally sure one of the Vangers is the murderer. They're a nasty bunch, Nazis and ne'er-do-wells. There are three story lines here: The future of the magazine, Lisbeth's travails (she has a sexually abusive guardian) and, most important, the Harriet mystery. This means an inordinately long setup. Only at the halfway point is there a small tug of excitement as Mikael breaks the case and enlists Lisbeth's help. The horrors are legion: Rape, incest, torture and serial killings continuing into the present. Mikael is confronted by an excruciating journalistic dilemma, resolved far too swiftly as we return to the magazine and the effort to get the evil tycoon, a major miscalculation on Larsson's part. The tycoon's empire has nothing to do with the theme of violence against women which has linked Lisbeth's story to the Vanger case, and the last 50 pages are inevitably anticlimactic. Juicy melodrama obscured by the intricacies of problem-solving. *Copyright Kirkus 2008 Kirkus/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.*

PW Reviews 2008 July #2 Cases rarely come much colder than the decades-old disappearance of teen heiress Harriet Vanger from her family's remote island retreat north of Stockholm, nor do fiction debuts hotter than this European bestseller by muckraking Swedish journalist Larsson. At once a strikingly original thriller and a vivisection of Sweden's dirty not-so-little secrets (as suggested by its original title, *Men Who Hate Women*), this first of a trilogy introduces a provocatively odd couple: disgraced financial journalist Mikael Blomkvist, freshly sentenced to jail for libeling a shady businessman, and the multipierced and tattooed Lisbeth Salander, a feral but vulnerable superhacker. Hired by octogenarian industrialist Henrik Vanger, who wants to find out what happened to his beloved great-niece before he dies, the duo gradually uncover a festering morass of familial corruption—at the same time, Larsson skillfully bares some of the similar horrors that have left Salander such a marked woman. Larsson died in 2004, shortly after handing in the manuscripts for what will be his legacy. *(Sept.) Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.*

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Author Biography

Stieg Larsson was an investigative journalist, an activist who worked to counter the actions of right-wing radical groups in Sweden, and an author whose crime novels, published after his death, became award-winning best sellers. Born in Västerbotten, Sweden, he was raised by his grandparents in a country environment in northern Sweden. In 1977, he began working for the Swedish news agency Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå. His position was that of graphic designer, and he held this job until 1999. Larsson was known for his activities as a member of Kommunistiska Arbetareförbundet (Communist Workers League), and as the editor of Fjärde internationalen, a Trotskyite journal. He was also one of the leading fans of science fiction in Sweden, and the editor of several science-fiction fanzines.

Prior to the success of his novels, Larsson was known mostly for his opposition to racism and right-wing radicalism in his native country, Sweden. In the 1980s, he was one of the founders of an anti-violence project known as "Stop the Racism," and he later founded the Expo-foundation. Expo-foundation was similar to the British Searchlight Foundation, which was established to expose racist, totalitarian movements and organizations. As the leader of Expo, Larsson did much to gather information about, and expose, racist and right-wing extremist groups in Sweden. He also worked as chief editor of Expo magazine, which was published by the Expo organization. He was well-known as a lecturer and debater on topics relating to racism, and as such, he was the target of death threats from some of his political enemies.

In 1977, Larsson wrote a last will and testament requesting that all his money be donated to the Communist Workers League; however, as the will was not legally witnessed, it was declared invalid following his death, and his estate was directed toward his father and his brother. The disposition of his will caused some controversy, as his long-time partner Eva Gabrielson, who found the document, was given nothing of his estate--a circumstance which, in the minds of many, underlined a weakness in Swedish inheritance law.

Beginning in 2001, Larsson had spent much of his free time writing fiction. It was a hobby for him, and he had finished two complete novels and was at work on the third by the time he bothered to approach a publisher about getting his finished work into print. He died suddenly of a heart attack, however, before any of them were published. The three books together are referred to as the "Millennium" series. They were published posthumously, and they have proven extremely popular in Sweden, across Europe, and even in the United States, after being translated and published in English. At the time of his death, Larsson had partially finished the fourth novel in the series, as well as synopses of a fifth and sixth book. His ambition had been to write ten books to complete the series.

The first book in the "Millennium" series is *Män som hatar kvinnor*, which means "Men Who Hate Women." When the book was translated into English, publishers felt the literal translation of the original title would turn readers away from the book, so it was titled *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The title character is Lisbeth Salander, a twenty-four-year-old woman who has been raised as a ward of the state since the age of thirteen. Pierced, tattooed, anorexic, highly intelligent, sexually voracious and socially inept, Salander has a history of being victimized. She works as a professional computer hacker, doing investigations for the head of a powerful security firm. It is in this capacity that she meets Mikael Blomkvist. Her employer has ordered her to investigate Blomkvist, who investigates corruption in the world of business and finance. As the story begins, Blomkvist has been found guilty of libel and defamation in a lawsuit brought by the subject of one of his articles, and he is sentenced to a prison stay of several months. He is presented with a way out by Henrik Vanger, a member of a wealthy family who wants Blomkvist to investigate an unsolved murder and write a biography of his family. Blomkvist's assignment takes him to Hedestad, where his path crosses with Salander's. The two of them eventually work together to unravel the past.

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Author Biography

Reviewing the book for the London Times, Joan Smith called it “a memorable debut.” She felt that Salander was the most problematic part of the book: “She isn’t so much a character as a revenge fantasy come to life, powering her way through the novel like the heroine of a computer game and undermining its gritty realism.” Other reviewers, however, found Salander one of the strongest points in Larsson’s creation. Bill Ott, a contributor to Booklist, called it “a shame that we only have three books in which to watch the charismatic Lisbeth Salander take on the world!” Wanda Williams, a reviewer for Library Journal, also found Salander “a compelling character.” Michiko Kakutani, reviewing the book for the New York Times, said that Blomkvist and Salander “make a very odd pair indeed--picture Angelina Jolie teamed up with a young Robert Redford--but their peculiar chemistry is what fuels this novel.”

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2010. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2010. <http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.librarycatalog.pima.gov/servlet/BioRC> Entry updated: 08/04/2010.

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Discussion Questions

1. Who do you consider the novel's protagonist, Lisbeth or Mikael? Why?
2. What point was Larsson trying to make with the themes running through this novel? How do issues such as violence against women, journalistic integrity, and more general notions of trust tie in with each other throughout the book?
3. What function do the sex-crime statistics on each section's title page serve?
4. Reread the passage from Mikael's book on page 103. What is its significance in terms of the plot?
5. On page 156, Henrik tells Mikael, "If there's one thing I've learned, it's never engage in a fight you're sure to lose. On the other hand, never let anyone who has insulted you get away with it. Bide your time and strike back when you're in a position of strength --- even if you no longer need to strike back." Over the course of the novel, who puts this advice to the best use? How, and why?
6. How does the involvement of several Vanger brothers with Swedish fascist groups cloud Mikael's investigation into Harriet's disappearance? What role does Harald play?
7. Why does Henrik become an investor in Millennium? Does his plan succeed?
8. Discuss the character of Lisbeth. Some think she is a "perfect victim" (p. 409), others find her intimidating, and Mikael wonders if she has Asperger's, but the reader is allowed to see exactly how her mind works. How do you see her? How do you think she sees herself?
9. What do you think about the way Lisbeth turns the tables on Bjurman? Is it admirable, or a sign that she's unstable?
10. On page 254, Lisbeth says her new tattoo is "a reminder." Of what?
11. Several times in the novel, Mikael's journalistic ethics are challenged. Do you consider him to be ethical? In your opinion, is anyone in the novel truly honorable? If so, why?
12. After reserving judgment for most of his investigation, Mikael determines that Harriet was, in fact, murdered and that he's hunting for a killer. What prompts this decision? How does this affect the rest of his investigation?
13. Discuss the role of parents in the novel. Who is a good parent, and why? How might Harriet's story have changed if her mother had behaved differently? What about Lisbeth's? Is Mikael a good father?
14. Blackmail is used several times in the novel, for different ends. Who uses it most effectively, and why?
15. On page 507, Mikael tells Lisbeth that to him, friendship requires mutual respect and trust. By those standards, who in this novel is a good friend? Is Mikael? What about Anita?
16. Discuss Henrik's request that Mikael never publish the Vanger story. Is it a reasonable request? Does Mikael's acquiescence change your opinion of him? Do Lisbeth's demands mitigate his ethical breach?
17. What ultimately drives Lisbeth to take action against Wennerström on her own? Does she go too far?
18. Reread Mikael's statement about the media's responsibility at the top of page 575. Can you think of a situation in the American media that is analogous to the Wennerström affair?
19. Discuss the ending. Was it satisfying to you? Why or why not?

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