

PREFACE

Scandinavian crime fiction is one of the distinct subgenre of crime fiction. It has been credited with revitalizing the genre of crime fiction as readers and critics alike have shown renewed interest in it. Crime writers from this region have come into prominence with the production of dark stories set against the backdrop of a gloomy landscape. The volume of work from this region is astounding and begs the question as to the reason for their popularity. Critics have traced the answer to this is in the intrinsic literary merit of Scandinavian crime fiction.

At a time of a political crisis spurred by the assassination of the Swedish Prime Minister, followed by a breakdown of the utopian welfare state, Scandinavian crime fiction reworked the genre of crime writing to create an innovative sub-genre. The assassination of the prime minister made the Scandinavian writers and artists confront the fact that their friends, neighbours, or even family—people they know to be good, whom they could never conceive of as perpetrators of horrific crimes—could be pursuing dishonest lives without their knowledge. This unique attitude towards crime explains why Nordic crime writers sympathize with the criminal as well as the detective and the victim(s) in their stories. It also explains the shift in focus from the plot to the characters in the crime novel. In the BBC documentary “Nordic Noir: The Story of Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” author Karin Fossum explained that, if a murder had happened in her tiny Norwegian town, she likely would have known the victim, the victim’s family, and/or even the murderer personally. She would know the murderer as a “good person before they committed this one act.” With this consciousness, Fossum, like other Scandinavian crime writers, aims to depict all parties involved in the crime with this same moral complexity. Audiences will find, then, that these stories are not the same “good vs. evil” mysteries one would expect from Sherlock Holmes or an Agatha Christie novel.

I have chosen select crime novels of crime novelist from each of the five Scandinavian countries for an in-depth analysis in this thesis. These are novels from the crime series of Henning Mankell, Karin Fossum, Arnaldur Indridason, Matti Joensuu and Jussi Alder-Olsen. These five crime novelists have all received critical acclaim for their crime novels and are representatives of the subgenre. Mostly written from the 1980s onwards to the present times

they provide a counter-narrative to the state projected image of an idyllic nation. I have therefore tried to analyse their work in the light of socio-political realism to chart the features of this sub-genre. The Scandinavian crime novel deliberately negotiates this space of utopia vs. disenchantment and this can be traced in the works of all the five authors discussed in this study.

Chapterization:

Chapter one is divided into three subsections. It begins with a brief definition and introduction to crime fiction tracing its historical and social background. The next section places Scandinavian crime fiction in the larger historical trajectory of crime fiction to show how contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction burst into the scene as a response to various crisis. The last section of this chapter introduces the five authors who have been taken up for a detailed study in the rest of the chapters. Henning Mankell from Sweden, Karin Fossum from Norway, Jussi Alder Olsen from Denmark, Arnaldur Indridason from Iceland and Matti Joensuu from Finland are introduced in this section along with their background details. Chapter two foregrounds the socio-political realism that lies at the heart of the Scandinavian crime novel. It charts out various historical events which had a distinct impact on the shaping of the crime novel form this region. By looking into the crucial events of the five countries that make up Scandinavia, this chapter sheds light into how Scandinavian crime fiction is negotiating the change that these previously homogenous societies are facing. It looks into the question of how Scandinavian crime fiction propels the individual into a moment of crisis to shed light into the larger questions that have hitherto remained in the background. In keeping with the theme of realism, chapter three makes a detailed study of the central protagonist. The lead detectives of all the crime series discussed in this study share a distinctive trait which makes them different from their predecessors. They are drawn as human characters who have their own moments of darkness. They are detectives who realize the futility of their quest as they constantly exposed to the dark underbelly of crime. Most detectives of Scandinavian crime fiction are part of the police force which further discloses the workings of the bureaucracy. They are characters who reveal the disillusionment with the policies of the state. Following the detailed study of the central protagonist, chapter four shifts the focus to the figure of the

antagonist. Like the way the detective is drawn as a human character, the criminal in Scandinavian crime fiction is presented as neither good nor bad but rather as an individual who is a product of the failures of the state. The presence of the antagonist itself reveals the failure of the welfare model which is supposed to look after the well being of the individual. Hence, monster figures are rare in Scandinavian crime fiction. One aspect of the welfare model which has been brought under critical light by the Scandinavian crime novel is the role and position of women. Crime fiction has always been a masculine genre as it focuses on the physical strength and rationality of the detective/criminal. Chapter five makes a detailed study of the women characters in the works of the five selected authors who present female character not only as lead detectives but also as antagonist figures. This sheds critical light on the position of women in an egalitarian society. Atmosphere and setting are critical in any work but one cannot have Scandinavian crime fiction unless it is set in the cold northern landscape. Chapter six is an analysis of the landscape which provides ample space for a murder to happen. The chill landscape is an apt location for a gruesome crime to occur. But the role of the landscape and atmosphere goes further to mirror the thoughts of the characters. The harsh conditions become an apt reflection of the dark journey of the detective as well as the criminal. Chapter seven examines the ending of the Scandinavian crime novel. The ending is crucial to any story but it has added relevance when it comes to a crime novel as all loose ends are to be tied in the end with the criminals brought to justice. The ending of Scandinavian crime fiction mirrors the chaos of contemporary times. The final chapter is a conclusion which sums up the different features of Scandinavian crime fiction which make this a unique subgenre within the larger genre of crime fiction.