



***Contemporary French and Scandinavian Crime Fiction: Citizenship, Gender and Ethnicity.* By Anne Grydehøj. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2021. 272 pages.**

France has always been recognized as a major location for crime fiction and its developments over time, but a surprise has been the recent growth and international status of the genre in Scandinavia. While Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö were widely read in the 1960s-70s, the rich and varied growth of the form in the north was really started by Henning Mankell's impactful series about the Chandleresque police detective Wallander, beginning in 1991, and Peter Høeg's very successful *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992: all novel titles are given in English; dates are those of first publication in the original language).

Even more intriguing has been the way in which this new Scandinavian crime fiction has been used by a range of authors to critique the modern status of the social and cultural situation in that region. In the newly sociopolitical crime fiction only France has been a parallel, as is explored in this new, scholarly, and conceptually powerful study by Anne Grydehøj, a new element in the substantial coverage of world crime fiction offered by the University of Wales Press.

Her general introduction notes that France was using crime fiction as social criticism with the “neo-polar,” Jean-Patrick Manchette's name for his series of nine novels, 1971-81, which explore and critique what is effectively police oppression on ordinary people—Grydehøj links him to the 1960s philosophical radicalism of Guy Debord and others. More state-critical than the near-contemporary exposé by Sjöwall and Wahlöö of the conflicts of class and capitalism across Sweden, the popularity of the French sociocritical thriller—no longer just a mystery—no doubt led to the great interest the French had in the growth of crime fiction critical of what they called “the dark side” of Scandinavian society. They wittily called the form “le polar polaire” and applauded its radical growth in the 1990s, and especially after the huge success of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy from 2005 on.

In Part One, Grydehøj offers a general account of the conflict between the past social collectivity and the modern individual identities and communities in France and Scandinavia. She finds these very alike, but there is difference. French writers are seeing the modern focus on personal value as conflicting with the national “Republican universalism,” which assumes a country of unified and similar people—a concept rejected by gay, feminist, lesbian, immigrant, and other dissenting groups. The novels tend to focus on members of these groups and increasingly use them as detectives, especially police, exposing more oppressions of the kind these characters, and the authors, themselves feel. Scandinavian writers express much the same sense of dissonance based on these ultra-modern, anti-state groupings, but they see the enemy as the old-style egalitarian welfare state, itself under right-wing attack by the 1990s: Leif Persson even gave his 2002-07 crime trilogy the overall title *Fall of the Welfare State*. Here as in other chapters, Grydehøj exemplifies her argument by focusing on two novels: those chosen as examples of this new “identity crisis” mode are the French *Bien connu des services de police* (2010, “Well-known to Law Enforcement,” untranslated) by Dominique Manotti (actually Marie-Noëlle Thibault), and the Danish Arne Dahl's *Europa Blues* (2001).

Part 2 deals with “Gender and Genre” in two chapters, the first dealing with “Gender and Sexuality in the femikrimi and the polar au féminin.” Grydehøj notes that the polar noir, like the roman polar and the American thriller from which it is descended, was very male-oriented. But in France a “polar au feminine” was appearing in the 1990s, as by Maud Tabachnik in *Un été pourri* (1994, “A Rotten Summer,” untranslated), and in Scandinavia there were by the late 1990s what were there called “The Queens of Crime,” like Liza Marklund and Camilla Läckberg, as well as the

Norwegian Anne Holt, whose novel *Blessed Are Those Who Thirst* (1994) is with Tabachnik's the basis of close discussion. They both focus on crime, often physical, against women, but also on female resistance to this negative force.

The second chapter in this "Gender and Genre" section deals with the way prostitutes are represented as both especially harassed and strongly resistant—the Scandinavian novel, Katerina Wennstam's *Smuts* (2007, "Dirt," untranslated) uses in part a male central and negative figure while Virginie Despentes' vigorous *Baise-moi* (1994, untranslated but filmed in 2000 as *Kiss Me*) uses two prostitutes as the inquirers: they are themselves violent, even murderous.

Part 3 of the study moves to the experiences of immigrants in the modern socially unified state, but here, as the French and the Scandinavian accounts of this area differ considerably, the two chapters separate the two traditions. Chapter 5, "Bled and Banlieue in French Crime Fiction," debates the conflict between the modern high-rise, low-status "banlieues," in the outer suburbs of Paris, and the "bled," the Arab village from which these immigrants come. The first novel discussed, Roger Fodjo's *Les poubelles du palais* (2011, "The Waste-Bins of the Palace," untranslated), goes back in time to explore the treatment of an Algerian woman slave at the court of Louis XIV, showing how modern problems have a long history, while Rachid Santaki's *Anges s'habillent en caillera* (2011, "Angels Dress in Riff-Raff," untranslated) is based in the modern immigrant-rich, but also immigrant-tormenting, banlieues: Santaki in both origin and theme is what is called in France a "beur" writer, a word of Arabic origin meaning "Arab," especially "Algerian."

Where the French novels explore the multiple colonial origin and the substantial communal presence of immigrants, the Scandinavia immigration was more recent—for labor from the prosperous 1960s on, and after that flow slowed, basically refugees from the 1990s. As a result, in chapter 6, "Self and Other in Scandinavian Crime Fiction," without the long and strong French presence of immigrants, the authors, Grydehøj comments, are basically "writing the other," and the first novel discussed, Roy Jacobsen's *Marions Slor* (2008, "Marian's veil," untranslated) investigates "the associations and preconceived perceptions attached to images of the (Muslim) Other." The second is Paul Smith's *Mordet på imamen* (2008, "Murder of the Imam," untranslated)—but "Imam" is just a nickname for an immigrant misfit living in a rural Swedish village. Two of the detectives are women, a Somali and a Chilean, but the Somali woman is so good "she surpasses ethnic Swedes in their 'Swedishness'"—these immigrants have learned to fit in completely, unlike the unfortunate "Imam."

Having in this way shown a difference between the two domains on the topic of immigration, unlike their previous substantial overlapping on sociology and gender, Grydehøj sums up. She sees the French writers as dealing with "internal contradictions and weaknesses of the French republican model," while the Scandinavians are dealing with agents from outside who are either themselves bad or need to be treated properly, not as so often excluded from a system that is inherently functional. She also states that while for the French the detective figure is "considerably manipulated," Scandinavian fiction "maintains the centrality of the detective, despite his or her frequently unstable and ambiguous role." The French, she concludes make "displacement" the basis of their critique and their debate is constructed on "alternate social models," while for the northern authors critique is made through the inquiries of the novel and will "evoke a fundamental humanism."

So the polar and the polaire are to some extent polarized, with national differences—but there is also substantial and also admirable social critique in the recent crime fiction of both countries. They are not quite alone in this. America was the first to offer such a process in crime fiction, with its African-American authors from Chester Himes with *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) and rich later developments like Walter Mosely and Barbara Neely (spelt that way at the author's insistence). It also offered the important early 1980s feminists, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky, as well as native Americanism from Tony Hillerman, 1970 on. Few other countries have contributed to criminographical radicalism. Perhaps on class there is Ian Rankin in Edinburgh

and Glasgow's Denise Mina, and some English authors have immigrant awareness, like Victor Headley and Mike Phillips. In Australia there have been some admirable recent statements on behalf of the indigenous First Peoples, as in Philip McLaren's *Scream Black Murder* (1995) and Nicole Watson's *The Boundary* (2011), but nothing of any weight on the massive and very influential world-wide immigrations to the country from the late 1950s on. An incisive new international role has been played by world-wide post-colonial crime fiction, as by the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (*Petals of Blood*, 1977) and India's Vikram Chandra (*Sacred Games*, 2006).

Grydehøj's admirable and informative book draws attention to some of the recent sociocritical achievements of world crime fiction—but also, by implication, reveals the continuing sociopolitical limitations of most of this massive, and so massively important, genre.

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