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***Scandinavian Crime Fiction,* or: A Few Words on Snow, Myth, and Murder**

c r i t i c s :
Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech,
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Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen's book, published in 2017 and not yet translated into Polish, should offer a solid knowledge base for both the scholar of Scandinavian literature and culture and the average amateur reader who is simply a devoted fan of the crime genre. Stougaard-Nielsen ruthlessly deconstructs the idyllic myth of the welfare state. He lays bare the mechanisms of the depraved capitalist system lurking beneath its veneer and tells the story of the historical demise of ideas such as egalitarianism, progress and prosperity.

We should begin with an observation that may seem obvious: Stougaard-Nielsen is by no means original in the array of examples from literature and film he chooses to include in his book. In this sense, he is no different from his predecessors. The book *Nordic Noir: The Pocket Essential Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction, Film & TV*, published four years earlier by Barry Forshaw, analyzes the poetics of the Scandinavian school of crime fiction by referencing the exact same pool of novels and television series. Both authors invoke the classics of the genre (Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell) as well as Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö – the couple who forged a mode of social critique

dressed up as “Scandi noir” in the 1970s. We could say the same of the book *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, edited by Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen, and offering a multifaceted analysis of the genre. All these authors cover the same stylistic conventions and motifs that, taken together, have become the proper territory of Scandinavian crime fiction. In so doing, they paint a picture of the genre's broader cultural, literary and social context. They also all address the question of neoromantic trends (mentioned by Stougaard-Nielsen only twice in the context of the Gothic novel), Icelandic and Finnish prose (omitted wholesale from *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*), as well as issues of queer culture that continue to be relevant today.

The analytical method adopted by Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen follows a somewhat different route. He embeds each novel discussed in its socioeconomic context. He sketches a portrait of an ethnically homogeneous Scandinavian society and reveals the great potential in analyzing the language of crime novels. To give an example: he cites a passage describing homes that once “leaned on each other” and demonstrates how this anthropomorphizing device highlights the impression of bygone times that may have

been tougher, but were at least rooted in a sense of community. Several times, the author will hint at an intriguing idea without following up on it (as in his analysis of the symbolism behind the hero's name (Varga Veuma) in Gunnar Staalesen's series, or Staalesen's allusions to Nordic mythology). These promising interpretive seeds could undoubtedly have enriched the overall effect of *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, but they are abruptly curtailed to leave room for the author to reiterate – for each subsequent novel – the same set of theses asserting the claim that the poetics of the Scandinavian crime novel and its protagonists' worldviews are all tools for delivering a critique of the social welfare state. Perhaps his most developed section is the analysis of Peter Høeg's novel *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. Smilla, the book's protagonist, is a glaciologist of Greenlandic descent who lives in Denmark yet feels a foreigner. The author continues the trend popular in the '90s to adopt a voice that conveys the foreigner's experience of the welfare state. In this decade, Scandinavia was undergoing sweeping demographic, political, and cultural changes. The collapse of the economy, influx of refugees, and sharp rise of unemployment all contributed to an identity crisis experienced among Scandinavians. They suddenly had to confront the question: "what is my place in this new, dynamic reality?" And since Scandinavian-born populations turned a blind eye to these feelings, we can only presume that it was in fact the newcomers arriving from abroad who found themselves blocked at this major impasse. Stougaard-Nielsen draws our attention to the symbolism of the color white, which figures here as an ambiguous color that can be found on the façade of Smilla's building and simultaneously signifies the systemic veil thrown over the socially abject (associated with the ethnic Others living in white ghettos, if we follow the author's analysis). Stougaard-Nielsen also looks into the meaning behind the names of the concrete housing blocks painted in white, described in Danish as "det hvide snit," which

literally translates to "white cuts" and metaphorically evokes the act of lobotomy. This last term ultimately becomes a form of slang to describe the buildings. This contemptuous phrase was meant to foreground the foreigner's status as a second-class citizen cast out by society. Stougaard-Nielsen does not, however, develop this notion further but leaves it suspended in a sphere of meanings to be guessed at.

A critical reading of *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* yields the unshakeable impression that one crucial concept for the scholar (although it is never explicitly addressed in the text) is myth. This concept brings up a set of issues of social consciousness, and for all its capaciousness, it cannot be summarized in any concise definition. I will, however, allow myself to invoke two descriptions of this feature of social life which, in my opinion, figures as a line prompter hidden in the wings of Stougaard-Nielsen's book, quietly guiding the author's line of reasoning but never showing his face. The first quote comes from Robert Morrison MacIver's *The Web of Government* and designates two categories of tools mobilized to amass power: techniques and myths.

Techniki to wszelkiego rodzaju umiejętności i sposoby dowolnego manipulowania rzeczami i ludźmi traktowanymi jak rzeczy. Mity zaś to „przeniknięte wartościowaniem przekonania i pojęcia, które ludzie posiadają, według których i dla których żyją. [...] każde społeczeństwo jest powiązane systemem mitów, zespołem panujących form myślowych, które określają i podtrzymują wszystkie jego czynności. Każda cywilizacja, każdy okres, każdy naród ma swój charakterystyczny zespół mitów. W nim leży sekret społecznej jedności i społecznej trwałości, a jego zmiany tworzą historię wewnętrzną każdego społeczeństwa”¹

¹ R.M. MacIver, *The Web of Government*, New York 1947, pp. 4-5.

The welfare system wielded a similar power to establish societal bonds in the 1950s, when it was still a relatively new phenomenon. Its task was to shape a society that would be modern, socially democratic, and advanced. In principle, the northern periphery of Europe was to provide an ideal model of the nation that its southern neighbors would ultimately strive to emulate.

Yet for Maclver, myth was a neutral concept, so there is little sense in assessing the accuracy or falsehood of a given myth. It would seem that for the author of *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, the model of the Scandinavian welfare nation qualifies as a false myth, and it is at this juncture that the two authors' paths diverge. While adopting a traditional conception of the function of myth and conceding its role to sanctify the existing social order, the school of Nordic Noir might suggest, rather, that the welfare nation model falls squarely within this field. In the noir genre, Scandinavian writers found an inexhaustible wellspring of inspiration for spawning increasingly inventive, macabre tales that were singularly expressive of their circumstances.

The second definition of myth I find compelling was conceived by George Schöpflin. He emphasizes the enormous symbolic strength implicit in myth and its effects:

Mit jest jednym ze sposobów, w jaki zbiorowości – (...) zwłaszcza narody – ustalają i określają podstawy swego istnienia, własne systemy moralności i wartości. Tak rozumiany mit jest zbiorem wierzeń zbiorowości o sobie samej, przybierających formę opowieści (...). Członkowie zbiorowości mogą zdawać sobie sprawę, że mit, który akceptują, nie jest w pełni ścisły, lecz ponieważ mit nie jest historią, nie ma to znaczenia. Ważna jest treść mitu, nie ścisłość jego historycznych danych.²

In the golden age of the Scandinavian welfare state, society dreamt up this kind of narrative to make sense of their situation. Among Scandinavian populations, a trend emerged to fulfill one's social duty by assisting the police in their investigations. This cooperation between civil servants and civilians therefore became an instrumental piece of the welfare myth's functionality. Yet little by little, this myth was compromised as its dystopian character came to light. The society of the future suddenly found itself trapped within a state of unending imprisonment, escalating xenophobia, and a bureaucratic system that was slowly encroaching on social life. Stougaard-Nielsen tries to furnish proof that crime novels lucidly reflect this crisis of identity experienced by the Nordic nations.

Scandinavian Crime Fiction demonstrates that Scandinavian writers working in the mode of crime fiction force their readers to confront the illusion lingering in the wake of the welfare system fantasy. For Stougaard-Nielsen, the crime novel becomes an effective tool for describing societies in the throes of drastic change. It should come as no surprise, then, that this genre has found its proper home in Scandinavia, of all places, and in a century witnessing escalating globalization, conflict, and inequality. To shed light on the ramifications of the welfare state crisis, the author focuses on lone wolf protagonists: detectives, victims, and evildoers alike. For all of the above are united by a sense of being stranded within the superficial morass of consumerist reality dominated by the interests of the middle class. In this context, the authors themselves become particularly relevant. Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, for instance, two forerunners of the genre who based their ten-volume Martin Beck series on actual crimes, used the genre to convey their far-left views of the depraved world of the new proletariat spawned by consumerist society. The authors portray the dilemmas of the welfare state citizen who must constantly struggle for status

² G. A. Hosking, G. Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, New York 1997, pp. 19-20.

and has no choice but to participate in a career-centered model of social existence.

The very idea of the welfare state system first took shape in an era that witnessed the radical restructuring of urban space and public life in the years following World War II. At the time, sweeping plans were being drawn up to remodel the citizen and her role in her environment. Urban planners attempted a comprehensive overhaul of agglomeration systems throughout all of Scandinavia. Public transportation, office buildings, and residential buildings were to play a role in shaping the “pure society of the future,” eliminating inequalities and subverting archaic traditions and their monocultural model of living. Yet it was not long before fully autonomous “ABC towns” (such as Vällingby in Sweden) were proven to be misguided ideas, for instead of bringing their populations together, they enforced segregation, and instead of engaging them in collective life, they led to alienation.

Stougaard-Nielsen takes the Norrmalmstorg bank robbery in Stockholm in 1973 as the symbolic starting point of the systemic crisis of these northern nations. He argues that this event marks a fundamental blurring of the borders between good and evil that had once seemed so fixed. Upon their release, the hostages spoke of their captor in almost glowing terms. Rather than framing him as a criminal, they saw him as a victim of the system – perhaps a bit lost, but at the end of the day, a good man (we encounter a similar motif of the hero ill-fitted for the new reality and lured by the freeing power of crime in Anders Bodelsen’s *Think of a Number*). The robbery, which played out live on television, triggered a surge of popularity for crime stories in Scandinavia. Crime became a mass spectacle, and the illusion that the welfare state is equipped to eradicate all evil was shattered. Citizens ceased to place their trust in institutions, which in turn burst the bubble of security and protection they had once taken for granted. A wave of anxiety

ensued that was easily converted into xenophobia and nationalism later on, in the 1990s. And so, towards the end of the 1970s, the idea of the “People’s Home” (*Folkhemmet*), postulated in 1928 by Per Albin Hansson, chairman of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Sweden, collapsed. To settle accounts in its wake, Nordic Noir was born. Narratives conceived in this emerging genre raise issues of financial crisis, (un)stable families, the search for self-identity, societal bonds, and reasserting the role of the nation in late modernity.

Alongside myth, another critical category for the crime novel is nostalgia. Scandinavian novels are steeped in a deep longing for a once-powerful social order, a feeling of belonging, and values that have since been lost. Yet as Stougaard-Nielsen indicates, these things are features of an invented past painted in the light of a “false nostalgia” for an idealized image of reality as it never, in fact, existed. This kind of counterfeit perception of the past becomes visible in Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s *The Man on the Balcony*. In this text, the couple offers a critique of consumerism and expresses nostalgia for local tradition and mom-and-pop stores. Later on, twenty-first century crime novels reorganized this paradigm and did away with its nostalgic mood and its idealization of the authenticity and social unity of bygone times. In lieu of interpersonal bonds, they propose a post-welfare model of individualism and the re-negotiation of traditional gender roles. In the crime novel model that has emerged over the last two decades (most visibly in television production), emancipated women have decided to reject the imperative to conform their priorities to society’s expectations (take, for example, the journalist Annika Bengtzon from Liza Marklund’s series, or the cold and recalcitrant heroines of the television series *The Killing* and *The Bridge*).

In spite of the somewhat redundant and perhaps chaotic nature of *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*,

the book as a whole conveys a certain coherent portrait of the Scandinavian crime novel. The genre consists of elements such as: nostalgia, realism, action set in snowy or rainy landscapes, social critique (with a scope that looks beyond local concerns and attends to issues like capitalism and neocolonialism), a critique of the prison system and social welfare system, an authenticity established by referencing actual crimes, the promotion of socialist ideas, and finally, lone wolf heroes skeptical of the justness of national institutions.

As I mentioned earlier, Stougaard-Nielsen's book might offer a valuable point of reference for research on the Scandinavian crime novel. The question is merely: to what extent? At a moment when this genre has grown vastly popular and the volume of bibliographic publications on the subject is equally vast (in relation to the genre's short timeline), there is still a need for basic analyses and preliminary overviews that are presumably already available in multiple articles and publications, not least those by Barry Forshaw.

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KEYWORDS

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JAKUB STOUGAARD-NIELSEN

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ABSTRACT:

This article is a review of Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen's book *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. The author takes a firmly critical position towards the welfare state in practice and as an idea. He demonstrates that it is the consequence of the rampantly developing capitalist system and merely intensifies class differences rather than effacing them. Stougaard-Nielsen analyzes examples of Scandinavian crime fiction from both literature and television and presents them in their expansive cultural and economic contexts. The author identifies crime fiction's capacity to reflect the identity crisis of Scandinavian society and in so doing, expose the idea of the welfare state as a false narrative.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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