

## A Hunger for Truth and Justice: Stieg Larsson's Crime novels

Interview with Tony Watkins by Christian Bensele, 23 March 2010 (full version)

*The three volumes of the Millenium Trilogy are spectacularly successful crime novels. Set in Sweden, investigative Journalist Mikael Blomkvist and computer hacker, institutional victim and social misfit Lisbet Salander get entangled in cases of mass murderers, human trafficking and government conspiracies.*

*Stieg Larsson, the author, worked for a Swedish news agency and was the editor of "Expo", an anti-fascist magazine. He was a world wide leading expert on anti-democratic, right wing extremist and neo-nazi movements. In 2004, aged 50, he died of a heart attack before he could witness the success of his books. 27 million copies have been sold in over 40 countries according to the Economist*

*([http://www.economist.com/culture/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=15660846](http://www.economist.com/culture/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15660846), March 22, 2010), making Stieg Larsson the second most sold author worldwide in 2008 (after Khaled Hosseini)" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/21/stieg-larsson-eva-gabrielsson>, March 22, 2010) Today, his books still rank in the top selling lists of Europe.*

*Christian Bensele asked writer and cultural commentator Tony Watkins on the significance of crime novels and the message behind Stieg Larsson's trilogy.*

**Tony, apart from teaching prophets on [Bible&Culture](#) you are the editor of [Culturewatch.org](#), which "helps you explore the message behind the media". You're also the author of a number of books about films like "[The Matrix](#)" or books like "[The Golden Compass](#)". You seem to spend a lot of time in cinemas or reading great book – and then thinking about them.**

Not enough!

**What do you hope to achieve, what is the significance of that work?**

Twofold really, on the one hand, part of the work of *Damaris* is to equip the church to understand the culture that we are in but *culturewatch* itself and much of my work is more focussed on helping people who are not Christians to begin to think a bit more deeply about the books, the films and the television that they are already watching. And to realise that they actually raise very fundamental issues, the big issues of life such as morality, happiness, freedom, love, spirituality, identity, religion, politics. These are the issues at the very centre of any fiction, any narrative. And the Bible and Christians have a lot to say about them.

**Do you also think that crime novels are similarly not just simply entertaining, do they also raise these fundamental questions?**

Yes, absolutely, I think there is an argument for saying that crime novels are the fictional form which takes the hardest look at where society is at the moment and raises the biggest questions over the dark side of human nature.

**But isn't that simply because they have to have a crime in them?**

Crimes have to be motivated by something. And the fact of a crime, particularly a violent crime raises questions about the importance and nature of a human being. The way that people respond to the crime also brings out a lot of comment on what it means to be human. At a number of different levels crime fiction is actually very important, it's not simply pulp fiction. But some of it is, of course.

**Yes, and they always have to entertain as well, they cannot just philosophise.**

Yes, absolutely.

**There is such a huge market, you can buy numerous crime novels at any book store, any train station. What makes crime novels so appealing to European readers?**

I think it's an appeal at several different levels. One is, actually people often just like a strong narrative. Crime fiction nearly always has a strong narrative drive. Another, more important attraction is the whole question of trying to work something out, the puzzles, the mysteries. That's why Dan Brown's books have such an appeal as well.

Tension of course is also hugely important. Crime novels are brilliant in tension, which is a big part of narrative drive. All media is about giving us feelings. Entertainment of whatever sort – fiction or crime fiction or television or music – is creating feelings in us. Crime fiction engenders feelings of mystery and intrigue, but also of fear, because of the possibility of what's out there and so crime fiction presents us with the dark underbelly of our society, with the fear of what can happen with us. It helps us to face those fears in the same way as fairy tales did.

**Do you think that the success of crime novels also shows us something about a fundamental hunger for justice, for truth?**

Absolutely, yes. Those are the two big drives of crime fiction, that we want justice to be achieved at the end. There is a longing for justice. And crime fiction is all about the pursuit of truth and the investigation of truth and the marshalling of evidence.

**Can we say that the fact that those novels are so successful shows us that society isn't as postmodern or relativist as we sometimes are afraid it is? That people still hunger for truth and justice?**

I think that's true. A lot of postmodernism happens at a fairly intellectual level and deep down most people still keep that longing. I think there have been a number of signs in the last few years of cracks appearing in the relativist paradigm. Partly this is the impact of crime fiction but there also have been a number of films about the second world war and what led to it, like Paul Verhoeven's *Black Book*, or *Good*, a film with Viggo Mortensen, or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. All of them say that the Nazi power was a real, unambiguous moral evil, there's no sense of relativising that away. Why are we revisiting this kind of territory? I wonder whether it is because people want to engage with stories but they have a very clear sense of "this is right and this is wrong".

**Maybe this is also one of the reasons why the Millennium trilogy was so successful all over the world. I looked at all the numbers again this week and it's extraordinary. Just in Sweden for example they sold 3 million copies and Sweden is a country of 9 million people. Staggering. And I also saw that "The Girl who played with fire" was the first translated novel which reached the No. 1 on the UK hardback chart.**

**How did you like the books, what's special for you about them?**

I thought they were great! They are very dark and there is some quite strong stuff in them but I thought they were very good. The issues that are dealt with and the way that the trilogy dealt

with them, was very compelling. There were also some weaknesses that might have been ironed out if Stieg Larsson hadn't died - the books were still being edited at that point. The quality of the writing is very good, it is a very direct straightforward writing, things move forward very quickly, he is very clear.

**Let's talk some more about Stieg Larsson, the author for a second. I found this quote by a friend and biographer: "If you smoke 68 cigarettes a day and drink 22 cups of coffee, and constantly think what problems there are you will also not be able to sleep. He never switched off. He wanted to save the world. A kind of Don Quixote."(Kurdo Baksi, [http://www.daserste.de/ttt/beitrag\\_dyn~uid,6qieqljnu6w60q8~cm.asp](http://www.daserste.de/ttt/beitrag_dyn~uid,6qieqljnu6w60q8~cm.asp), 24 March 2010) Do you think that Stieg Larsson was a hero in some way?**

A very flawed one perhaps – yes in some ways. He was very strongly anti-fascist. Some of his time he worked with an anti-fascist organisation in Sweden and that very much comes out in his book. There is a very strong feeling about the problems that Nazism still creates within Swedish society. Interestingly, Henning Mankell also picks up on this in the Wallander books, same as Io Nesbø with his detective Harry Hole.

**You mentioned that he was a very flawed hero, if he was a hero. Why do you use that word, "flawed"?**

Yes, I think that someone with his lifestyle is flawed at some level. And the books are so dark; you wonder what was going on in his mind sometimes, because he has really captured the darkness of society in a spectacular way.

**I also had to think of that darkness and all the themes that he raises like cowardice of journalists, violence against women, corruption, abuse of power, and more. Do you think that we – not only society as a whole, but also we as Christians – are turning a blind eye on the topics addressed in the books? Is the world maybe grimmer than we want it to be? Is our world different than what we want to acknowledge?**

I think we are very aware of how grim it is, of levels of corruption and so on. We often feel powerless in the face of it. There is a resignation among many Christians that Western European society is declining rapidly in terms of this moral sense and moral convictions and we don't know what to do about it. I am not sure that we are unaware of it. Certainly someone like Larsson is passionately concerned about those kinds of issues. At some levels he's got a very strong sense of morality. Integrity is a very big thing for him. And yet at the same time his characters are morally all over the place when it comes to sexuality.

**Before we move on to this topic, can I pick up on this strong sense of justice that he must have had – his friend described him as a sort of Don Quixote, and you said that some Christians have given up on society. Do you think that we need more Christians who don't give up – maybe they are Don Quixotes, maybe they fight against windmills – do you know any people like that? Do we need more?**

Certainly in the UK there are some great Christians who are getting involved, also in politics and campaigning, trying to deal with issues in society, e.g. the gun culture that is quite prevalent in some of Britain's inner cities. There are Christians who are very concerned about those kind of things but there are too many Christians who are prepared to just let the minority get on with it.

## **How can we incite them to change this attitude?**

I don't know really because I think that Christians ought to know enough already to know what to do. The problem of how do you move somebody's will is very difficult. Make them all read Stieg Larsson perhaps.

## **Some people would object to that idea.**

I think that's possibly true, they may well object. Maybe they need to face up to the issues a little bit more. There's a programme on BBC radio 4 called "Thinking Aloud", it's about sociology, primarily, and there was a three part series late last year about white collar crime in the UK and the phenomenal levels of corruption within business. It's estimated that it may cost the UK between 20 and 60 billion pounds and yet only 5 percent of it is ever sorted out, resolved and prosecuted. So there is an unwillingness of our culture generally to face up to the indwelling problems that there are. And Christians perhaps need to be confronted with the reality of that in order to feel a sense of passion about doing something.

**Can we get back to the topic of morality. In your article "[Moral Climate](#)" you ask questions about the foundations of ethics: "How are we to say that Nils Bjurman's sexual treatment of Lisbeth Salander is wrong, and that Blomkvist's sexual behaviour is right?" But the character of Blomkvist never uses force in relationships and thinks about satisfying other's desires. He sees himself as a tool. Bjurman uses the other person as a tool. There's a clear difference between the two. Isn't that enough of a distinction?**

I'm not convinced that Blomkvist is always about meeting other people's desires. Yes, he doesn't use force because in many ways he is representing the morality of Larsson himself, I suspect, he is the campaigning journalist trying to achieve integrity in the world. In many ways, he is Larsson's voice. But it's not all about the other person, it's about meeting his own desires, too. He has sexual relationships with three people in the course of the first book and it's not all about what he does for them, so I'm not sure it's enough of a distinction.

And even if it is, the fact that he has sexual relationships with three people means that he is not ultimately concerned about the needs of any one of them, because that would require faithfulness and monogamy, it would require a commitment that he doesn't go off having sex with other partners. And yet there is his ongoing affair with Erika Berger, his colleague at Millenium Magazine. She's married, her husband is quite happy with it and she knows perfectly well that Blomkvist has affairs with other people. That's just the way it is with them and I think it's not a good basis for building a solid relationship. That's not really meeting somebody's needs.

**You also wrote that "We are left with a situation in which the majority view holds sway, but that's not good enough. The majority view can be wrong." What is a viable basis for ethics then? What do you base your ethics on?**

There are two fundamental approaches to ethics, one is consequentialist and says that it is all about the end results. That is the basis on which Larsson is operating and his heroes. It is OK as long as it gets the right results.

If you go down a consequentialist line to start with, the danger is always that you're thinking too short term or your thinking about the consequences for "me and blow the rest of you" or your thinking about the consequences of a majority and the needs of a minority are put to one side. You just cannot evaluate what the consequences of a particular action are going to be. And so it makes it a very dangerous approach to ethics I think.

The other primary base is a principle ethics, a deontological approach to ethics which says that we have certain duties as human beings because there are fundamental moral principles. The Biblical view of morality is not that consequences are unimportant but there are fundamental principles of right and wrong which are a reflection of God's character. While there are difficult choices to make sometimes and while it certainly doesn't suit us sometimes, if these principles are a reflection of the character of God then they're also a reflection of the way in which we've been made in the image of God. And these actually then become the right ways to live at a pragmatic level, because they are right in principle. If the principles are the right ones then ultimately the best set of consequences will come about. If you have a principle approach to ethics, a deontological approach to ethics, the dilemma of how do we assess what dominoes are going to fall as a result of this action – that's not the question. It's whether this is the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do.

### **Does the image of God within us also help us distinguish between good and evil?**

Yes, conscience is also part of the image of God within us. There is an intrinsic sense within us of some things being right and some things being wrong. In Romans 2 it talks about that human beings know what God's law is because their consciences condemn them. So there is something intrinsic within us because of the way that we were made in the image of God.

### **Did you find anywhere in his books a reason for Larsson, why he thinks that human beings have value, why they shouldn't be treated like they are treated for example by Martin Vanger who just sees them as molecules or machines? Is there any basis for him why he thinks that human beings are more valuable than the bad guys in his books think?**

There is a strong sense that human beings do have a value and therefore shouldn't be treated that way but I can't think of whether there was a suggestion of what the basis for that might be. The value of a human life is presented as an intrinsic value. What basis does he have for his morality? A lot of his morality is good morality. But I don't think that he has a solid basis for it. He is an inheritor of the Christian tradition within Western Europe that has given us this strong moral framework and there are many people like Larsson, humanists, people like Richard Dawkins who live in the benefits of that Christian tradition and yet want to deny the basis of it. They don't realise that they've actually taken the foundations out from under their feet and are left with no secure place to stand

### **Even if people have good morals – no matter what they base them on – where can they find the strength to not exploit and violate others?**

In Larsson it comes out of a sense of moral conviction. Mikael Blomkvist is very much driven by moral conviction. Integrity is such a high value for him, journalistic integrity, business integrity. He is out to challenge all of that but where does the strength come from? Just his own inner convictions. What happens when his inner convictions begin to fade because he's worked so hard that he's become exhausted, where does he look to find new strength? He can only look back inside himself or confront himself again with the bad stuff that's there and see if it re-ignites the passion within him. That doesn't happen, I think, within the stories but I can imagine that could happen.

Biblically, that strength partly comes from the image of God within us. What does drive Blomkvist and what does drive Larsson is their intuitive sense of right and wrong. It is deep, deep within us.

For a Christian, it also comes from the work of the Holy Spirit within us who clarifies that intuitive moral sense and brings it to the surface and helps us to see it in sharper focus. And provides an inner dynamic to make acting on it possible.

Tony Watkins is a [speaker](#), writer and editor, working mainly with [Damaris](#). His main responsibility is as Managing Editor of [Culturewatch.org](#). Tony is the author of [Focus: The Art and Soul of Cinema](#) (2007) and [Dark Matter: A Thinking Fan's Guide to Philip Pullman](#) (2004), co-author of [Back in Time: A Thinking Fan's Guide to Doctor Who](#) (2005) and a contributor to a number of other books including [Matrix Revelations: A Thinking Fan's Guide to the Matrix Trilogy](#) (2003) and the [Talking About](#) books, of which he is the series editor. He also teaches "Prophets" on the [Bible&Culture](#) course.

### **Millenium Sales:**

2009, 21 mio ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium\\_Trilogy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium_Trilogy), March 22, 2010)  
In 2008 Stieg Larsson was second most sold author worldwide (after Khaled Hosseini) "The books have sold 22m copies in 42 countries" (according to Eva Gabrielsson, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/21/stieg-larsson-eva-gabrielsson>, March 22, 2010)  
26 mio worldwide: estimate quoted in USA today (Feb 2010) ([http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2010-02-23-larsson23\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2010-02-23-larsson23_ST_N.htm), March 22, 2010)  
27 mio in over 40 countries according to the Economist ([http://www.economist.com/culture/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=15660846](http://www.economist.com/culture/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15660846), March 22, 2010)

### **Millenium in the Topseller Lists**

Sweden: in March 2010, Volume 3 is still on place 19 of pocketbooks (<http://www.svb.se/topplistor/topplistor-mars-2010>, March 22, 2010) There are almost 3 mio. books sold for 9 mio Suedes.  
Austria: The 3 books occupy places 3, 5, 6 in March 2010. (<http://www.schwarzer.at/bestseller-taschenbuch.html>, March 22, 2010)  
Switzerland: last week they were number 3,4,5 in pocketbooks (<http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/bestenlisten/buecher-bestenliste/story/11915844>, March 22, 2010)  
Germany: ranks 1,2,4 (last week, taschenbuch) (<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/charts/0,1518,458623,00.html>, March 22, 2010)  
The German amazon page lists the three book as number 2, 3, and 4, the first volume has been in the top 100 for 775 days. ([http://www.amazon.de/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd\\_ts\\_b\\_nav](http://www.amazon.de/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd_ts_b_nav), March 22, 2010)  
France: Volume 3 ([Millenium T.3 ; La Reine Dans Le Palais Des Courants D'air](#)) gets listes under number 116 at <http://www.edistat.com/palmars.php>, March 22, 2010  
The French Amazon page lists Millénium, Tome 1 : Les hommes qui n'aimaient pas les femmes as number 48 after 921 days in the top 100. ([http://www.amazon.fr/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd\\_ts\\_pg\\_2?ie=UTF8&pg=2](http://www.amazon.fr/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd_ts_pg_2?ie=UTF8&pg=2), March 22, 2010)  
Spain: [Quelibroleo.com](#) lists volume 1 on place number 15, they have 78 book reviews for that book. <http://www.quelibroleo.com/libros-best-sellers.php>.  
[Libros.fnac.es](#) lists volume 3 on place 12 (<http://libros.fnac.es/l710/Top-de-Ventas-Libros>, March 22, 2010)  
Netherlands, The Millenium novels occupy ranks 1, 4, and 5 in March 2010 (source: <http://www.svb.se/topplistor/mars-2010-0>, March 22, 2010)  
in March 2010: ranks 1, 4, 5

*Britain: The UK Amazon page has the three volumes on the first three places, the first one has been in the top 100 for 501 days now.*

*([http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd\\_ts\\_b\\_nav](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd_ts_b_nav), March 22, 2010)*

*Nielsen Bookscan Fiction lists the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo on place 4.*

*([http://www.nielsenbookscan.co.uk/topsellers.php?country=uk&chart\\_name=fiction](http://www.nielsenbookscan.co.uk/topsellers.php?country=uk&chart_name=fiction), March 22, 2010)*

*Timesonline lists The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest on place 9, after 24 weeks on the list of hardback fiction.*

*([http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article4304928.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article4304928.ece), March 22, 2010)*

*“The Girl who played with fire” was the first translated novel which reached the No 1 on the UK hardback chart.*

*([http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article6242076.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6242076.ece), March 24, 2010)*

### **Millenium Trilogy: Contents**

*Volume I, Men who hate women (The Girl with the Dragon Tatoon): Journalist Mikael Blomkvist researches the history of tycoon family Vanger and uncovers with the help of computer hacker, institutional victim and social misfit Lisbet Salander their gruesome history and present.*

*Volume II, The Girl who played with fire: Wanted for the three murders, Lisbet Salander goes into hiding and helps Mikael Blomkvist uncover the real perpetrators and a lethal web of intrigues.*

*Volume III, The air castle which was blown up (The Girl who kicked the hornets nest): Lisbet Salander recovers in hospital and supports Mikael Blomkvist's fight for justice by investigating a government conspiracy.*

### **STIEG LARSSON: THE AUTHOR**

*1954 – 2004 (heart attack)*

*At 14 (or other sources say: in the student hall) witnessed a rape by his friends without stepping in. Feeling of guilt. Dedicated life to fight against social injustice (according to friend and biographer Kurdo Baksi)*

*1979 – worked for TT (Swedish news agency), graphics and essays, for 19 years*

*1982 – Scandinavian correspondent for British anti-fascist “Searchlight Magazine”*

*1991 – Book on Swedish extreme right radicals (as a co-author)*

*1995 – when seven murders committed by right wing extremists happened, Larsson established the Expo foundation and became the editor of “Expo”, an anti-fascist magazine. He was a world wide leading expert on anti-democratic, right wing extremist and neo-nazi movements*

*For 32 years he was in a relationship with Eva Gabrielsson. Since the law then required married couples to publicise their address and because of life threats they never married, which led to a controversy about the inheritance with Larsson's father and brother.*