

# An Unlikely Heroine: Stieg Larsson's Legacy is "Lisbeth Salander"

By Laura Vasilion  
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When Swedish author Stieg Larsson was a teenager, he stood by in silence while friends gang-raped a teenage girl. For the rest of his life, Larsson was haunted by the shame and guilt of his part in that incident. It is not a surprise, then, that when he began working on his bestselling *Millennium Trilogy*, published after his death, he named his strange, damaged heroine after the girl he never forgot: Lisbeth.

It has been rumored that Larsson intended to write many more books than the three in his wildly popular series. That he never got to see his any of his completed work in print or witness their incredible international popularity seems a cruel joke. Then again, rumor also has it that Larsson wrote the books for himself, never intending for anyone else to read them.

Sadly, we'll never know.

What we do know is that Larsson modeled his main character, "Lisbeth Salander," after the victim of his youth, imparting her with qualities taken from "Pippi Longstockings," the irreverent, rebellious child with superhuman strength in the popular Swedish children's book by Astrid Lindgren. By giving his Lisbeth the same tenacity, strength, and unwavering desire to right the wrongs in her life as Pippi, the little red-haired girl in the storybook, perhaps Larsson hoped to cleanse his soul of that tragic moment in his young life.

Larsson's gripping tales have now been brought to the screen by the Danish director Neils Arden Opley (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) and the Swedish director Daniel Alfredson (*The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*). In all three films, Lisbeth Salander is played with convincing edge by a virtually unknown Swedish actress (Noomi Rapace) who was once a teenage punker herself and had similar issues with the same staid Nordic conventions as Larsson's Lisbeth. Her male lead is "Mikael Blomkvist," played by Michael Nyqvist, a seasoned Swedish actor familiar to many Scandinavian film lovers. Nyqvist is the perfect Blomkvist, handling the character with equal parts restraint and intensity.



Noomi Rapace as "Lisbeth Salander"



Michael Nyqvist as "Mikael Blomkvist"

## **The *Millennium* Trilogy Experience**

In the first movie, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (known internationally by a more exact translation of the Swedish title *Men Who Hate Women*), the original focus is Blomkvist. Blomkvist, an investigative journalist at *Millennium* magazine, has been found guilty of libel and is waiting to begin his jail sentence when aging industrialist "Henrik Vanger" (Sven-Bertil Taube) hires him to investigate the 40-year-old murder of his 16-year-old great niece (whose body was never found). Blomkvist takes the assignment and arrives on the Vanger family estate to find doors locked to him. The strange members of the Vanger dynasty intend to keep their secrets.

When Blomkvist asks Henrik who he suspects the murderer could be, the old man tells him the murderer could be anyone and everyone, explaining, "You don't know my family. You don't know what they are capable of."

Dead ends escalate into death threats as Blomkvist presses on with his investigation. Eager to solve the mystery and concerned for his safety, Blomkvist contacts a security firm and asks for help. They assign Blomkvist the best researcher they have: Lisbeth Salander.

Wrapped up in the diminutive boyish body of a punk kick-boxer, Salander arrives in the bleak, snowy Swedish countryside on a motorcycle, resplendent in multiple body piercings, Goth makeup, and leather jacket. Never cracking a smile, barely speaking, she moves in with Blomkvist and gets to work.

Blomkvist, who has met Salander before, is intrigued by the socially-repressed but brilliant researcher/computer hacker he has hired. Salander, mistrustful of all men, is disturbed by her growing attraction to the much older Blomkvist. Blomkvist is just as surprised by his attraction to the taser and mace packing punker with the stilted personality. Working at increasing personal peril, they solve the mystery of the missing girl together.



From *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

As the second film, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, opens, Salander and Blomkvist are now estranged. Blomkvist is back in Stockholm at *Millennium* magazine, but Salander has gone into hiding. Details of a sex trafficking ring operating in Sweden are brought to Blomkvist's attention by two student journalists. When the students are found murdered, Salander is implicated in their murders... and one more. Although they haven't spoken in a year, Blomkvist has a gnawing feeling that Salander is not the murderer. Working with the police, he digs deeper into her troubled past and learns she is being stalked by someone, someone intent on having her committed to a mental institution for the rest of her life... or worse.

Tied to her by the intense events depicted in the first film, Blomkvist is determined to find Salander before the authorities do. But it isn't easy to find her when she doesn't want to be found. Those who try are in for a bumpy ride: Lisbeth Salander doesn't like being backed into corners!

What Blomkvist doesn't immediately realize is that Salander has been keeping track of everything from the place she feels most safe: cyber space. Because of their estrangement, Salander is unwilling at first to let Blomkvist in on the bizarre and traumatic experiences of her past. But when she realizes she has nowhere else to turn, she finally relents, and Blomkvist is pulled deeper into her disturbing world.

From *The Girl Who Played with Fire*



From *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*

In *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (the final installment of the *Millennium Trilogy*), Salander is fighting for her life—literally and figuratively. Once again, the personal demons in her world are colliding with events Blomkvist is researching as an investigative journalist for *Millennium* magazine, and even Salander doesn't know the full extent of her own part in a national cover-up begun at the end of the Cold War. All she knows is that she has never been able to trust anyone: the epic dysfunction of her past makes Greek tragedy seem like comic farce. But Blomkvist's unwavering loyalty to this strange girl with the dragon tattoo is mirrored, at last, by Salander's cautious

acceptance of his friendship and support. And lucky for Salander, not only is Blomkvist's sister "Annika" (Annika Hallin) an accomplished attorney, but the judge presiding at her commitment hearing (Ylva Lööf) is a woman too.

### ***The Millennium Trilogy Take Away***

What makes the *Millennium Trilogy* so compelling for me is the tightly-woven, complex storytelling, superb acting, and stunning filmmaking. I can think of no better way to spend eight hours than completely absorbed in the these breathtaking films.

At its core, the *Millennium Trilogy* deals with the victimization of women and contains violent and graphic depictions of that victimization. As the original title of the first movie (*Men Who Hate Women*) states upfront, it is about men whose hatred of women is so deep and profound that they justify all forms of abuse: physical, psychological and sexual, from rape to torture to murder. In my opinion, there is no comfortable way to get around this fact and still do the subject matter justice.

Watching these movies, we delve into the darkest side of humanity, the domain of equally disturbing films also done with artistic brilliance (such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Silence of the Lambs*). While I recoiled during the most violent and abusive scenes, I was completely captivated by the characters, story, and filming of the *Millennium Trilogy*.

In one graceful scene, Salander sits on the windowsill of her dark, virtually empty apartment and looks out into the blue winter twilight of Stockholm. Her isolation and loneliness is thereby evoked by the film's director without a word of dialogue.

Set against the beautiful yet icy bleakness of Sweden, the orderly Nordic landscape is the perfect backdrop for Salander's strangely redemptive story. Both Salander and Sweden evoke sadness and awe in almost the same breath. Perhaps that's what explains Salander's ability to dissolve into the Swedish landscape so easily when she goes into hiding.

I was surprised by how much I liked these films because the savagery and brutality goes well beyond my usual comfort zone. I was okay with that because I believe that is exactly what Larsson intended. In a world where the victimization of women is a daily occurrence, Salander is a vessel for the collective cruelty leveled against women even in a place like Stockholm which appears to epitomize "civilization" at its most benign.

I was also struck by subtle ways the films' two directors made me aware of not just the abuse of the films' women, but by the ways they are frequently ignored by the films' men. In the *Hornet's Nest*, two men are sitting in a comfortable Swedish living room plotting revenge and murder. We barely notice that one man's daughter has quietly walked in with food and tea. After she leaves, the other man turns to him and says, "I didn't know you had a daughter. You never mentioned her." These two men have known each other for over 30 years.

Abused by powerful men and abandoned by society in general, Salander has learned to shut down emotionally and build reserves of strength for the battle that is her life.

Relying on her photographic memory, computer hacking talents, catlike agility, and skills with everything from mace and tasers to axes and nail guns, Salander is both fierce and quietly vulnerable.

Near the end of *Hornet's Nest*, Salander is washing off her Goth masque in a courthouse bathroom after her first day of speechless testimony. Looking into the mirror as a policewoman watches, she stares at her fresh-faced reflection. In this scene, Salander seems genuinely surprised to see the naked vulnerability she has spent her whole life running from and covering up.

Another favorite scene takes place at the start of *Hornet's Nest*, when Salander is in the hospital recovering from multiple life-threatening injuries. The young doctor examining her (played by actor Aksel Morisse) is gentle and protective. At one point during a very one-sided conversation, he looks at her and says, "You are the most interesting patient I have ever had." For a brief moment there is the beginning of a smile on Salander's face. It is the most restrained smile I have ever seen on screen. I will never forget it.

I can think of no fictional character that comes close to Lisbeth Salander. Perhaps she's a bit like a female *Dirty Harry*. But unlike Harry, Lisbeth exacts justice without becoming a vigilante. Her targets are always specific: villains who have hurt her and the people she cares about. Wrapped up in the boyish body of a punk kick-boxer with multiple piercings and black Goth makeup, Salander may be the most unlikely of heroines, but she is a genuine heroine for our age.

Although I enjoyed the Mikael Blomkvist character (and Nyqvist's portrayal of him), I was mesmerized by Noomi Rapace playing Lisbeth Salander. Whenever she was absent from the screen, I couldn't wait for her return. With so few words and so little emotion expressed, she said much more with her icy stares than characters with three times her dialogue.

And now that the *Millennium Trilogy* is over, I will miss her.

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Laura Vasilion is a freelance writer from the Chicago suburbs with more than 20 years' experience writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, *Des Moines Register*, *Readers Digest*, *Entrepreneur*, and many business and trade publications. As a staff writer for the magazine DIETARY MANAGER, she writes features and two monthly food columns.

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For more examples of her work, see:

- <http://www.lauravasilion.com>
- <http://stories.inspiredbyiceland.com/story/199003>

**Editor's Note: All photographs downloaded from Rotten Tomatoes.**