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Dark, Difficult, Depressing: Nordic Crime Novels in the Eyes of the Beholder

Pamela Schultz Nybacka

Let us imagine you were to pick up a crime novel by an author from a small and obscure country up in the far north of Europe. Would you imagine the plot set against dark nights and solitary snowy landscapes? Chances are that you would not have to rely much on either genre conventions, or film director Ingmar Bergman's (1918–2007) artful portrayal of Scandinavian guilt-ridden spleen, to envision a certain atmosphere tainted with "Nordic Noir." In fact, this strand of literary hue has become widely popular and played a decisive role in the market for crime literature in Europe since the 1990s. Successful Swedish crime author Viveca Sten claims after meeting her readers abroad that "the Nordic crime novel is now an export product equally famous to Volvo or Swedish steel" (Åkerlund 2018). For example, in Germany across the Baltic Sea, the categories of *Morden im Norden*, *Skandinavienkrimi*, and *Schwedenkrimi* have become parts of a literary brand in themselves.

From a consumer culture theory perspective, brands can be viewed as text that symbolically conveys the manner and modes for reading and partaking in its meaning. Like texts, the meaning of brands is co-created

P. Schultz Nybacka (✉)
Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden

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(co-authored) by a network of stakeholders: the producer (author), popular media, the audience, and others (Holt 2004). The commercial success of the crime genre can only be explained by regarding it as a packaged category on a market, created in an interplay between publishing companies, authors, booksellers, and readers (Berglund 2016). Literary agents have also had a central role in creating the success of Nordic crime literature (Berglund 2014). Like texts, brands cannot be conveyed immediately to an audience, but are always mediated (Lury 2004). Patterns of resonance are part of meaning production and perception of culture (Assman 2012), including brands. Resonance relates not only to cognitive or symbolic functions, but belongs also with emotions and affect: recognition before cognition (ibid.). A cultural perspective on brand resonance involves aesthetic aspects of the brand (Schroeder, Borgerson & Wu 2014).

Like texts, however, brands are also encountered on a threshold, mediated and organized by other texts. Consider, for example, how a text is interpreted by its title, headlines, author's name, and so on. In other words, texts need other texts to even be read as text. This phenomenon is what Gérard Genette (1997) called how text belongs with the *paratext*, namely the internal and external texts that make texts what they are. This concept has become pivotal to the study of marketing within literature and publishing studies (Squires 2009); developing in other media studies (Gray 2010a, b); conceptualized in marketing theory and advertising (Hackley and Rungpaka Hackley 2018); and used in consumer culture theory (Schultz Nybacka 2018). In this chapter, I will use a case of popular genre literature and Nordic Noir to build an argument around how brands are formed and read in both visual and textual terms, as *brand paratext*. Nordic Noir is exemplary in this matter: it has reached unprecedented success on national and international literary markets. In Sweden, the crime novel has become the most popular genre in fiction amongst adults (second after the category of books for children and young people), and it is symbolically framed and communicated by specific takes on the literary genre, book covers, and other paratextual means. Arguably, the brand paratext could be especially important when the literary work is traveling across cultural thresholds.

In order to understand the attraction of Nordic Noir as seen in consumer culture, it will be helpful to regard the brand paratext reflected by its nearest beholders: northern European neighbours in the form of the

German and German-language book markets. This way it becomes possible to discuss the visual mediation and reverberation of the literary brand and discern certain Nordic qualities.

The purpose of the chapter is to explore how Nordic Noir and especially *Schwedenkrimi* resonate as a brand through the brand paratext, related to readers' narratives of meaning outside the text and to visual communication through the book covers and other texts. The main argument is that brands resonate culture and thrive on the paratextual threshold. This argument will be underscored by using illustrative examples: interviews with three German-language crime readers and Swedish publishing professionals (editor, literary agent), illustrations of brand paratext in the form of book cover texts, and descriptions of images that serve to construct the genre as Nordic. Secondary data is used to put the study in historical and contextual perspectives. Taken together, we gain insight into the perceived aspects and qualities of Nordic Noir in the eyes of the beholder.

Theoretical Concepts

The concept of "resonance" carries strong connotations with sound and acoustic phenomena; it is derived from the Latin *resonare*, "to resound," and *resonantia*, which means "echo" (Assman 2012). In cultural mythology, echo or resonance has negative or bleak connotations, because it is dependent on a primary cause. Assman (2012) argues for a positive view of resonance, as it brings a prolongation and recurrence of a sound, either by a "synchronous vibration from a neighbouring object" (ibid., p. 18) or by reflection from a surface. These modes of interplay and mediation have inspired my study to the extent that Germany and the German-language book markets constitute the neighbour, who reverberates the meanings of Nordic Noir. There has to be some sort of impact, such as a clash, for resonance to occur. If there were no response or reverberation, the primary activity would simply vanish into thin air.

Drawing also on the reflection of a surface as mediation, this chapter complements and extends the acoustic view of resonance with a visual view, taking visual consumption and aesthetics into account (Schroeder 2003). In building a theory of media paratext, Gray (2010a) departs from

an assumption of consumption as highly speculative, especially when cultural goods are concerned. We cannot know beforehand what entertainment or other value we may have in consuming a book or a film; it all depends on how we view the expectations and prospect of value through various media paratext, typically promos, spoilers, and others.

The book cover is a prime example of how visual paratext and other genre indicators have become privileged as marketing tools, and they develop with the type of product and its form, as well as its links within a broader cultural industry (Matthews and Moody 2007). For example, book covers have developed with the paperback format that is circulated in wider and more popular forms of bookselling (ibid.). Here, geography plays an important part: "books are culturally sensitive things: imagery that might have a subtle resonance in one country can appear meaningless gunk in another; the one-size-fits-all-approach, common in global design, just doesn't seem to wash when it comes to book covers' (Shaughnessy 2004, p. 18, quoted in Phillips 2007, p. 20).

This means that an analysis of paratext as a way to explore how brands resonate cannot be performed by means of simple comparison, surface to surface, of the original cover and its translated version. Instead, I argue we need to frame a visual analysis of surface matters against a complementary analysis of neighbouring reverberations.

Literary Genre and the Phenomenon of Nordic Noir

Literary genre brands like Nordic Noir, *Schwedenkrimi*, and *Skandinavienkrimi* have become part of an overall Nordic brand in Germany (Böker 2018a). A literary genre like crime denotes conventions of content and form, but above all it is a function on the market that enables publishers, booksellers, authors, and readers to communicate their expectations to each other, both visually and textually (Squires 2009; Steiner 2009; Berglund 2016). A crime novel that excels in quality can only do so within the norms of the genre, according to Tzvetan Todorov (2015): to "improve" it would imply that it is a work of "literature" and not a crime novel as such.

How, then, do crime novels relate to Noir? Todorov's classical definition is that crime novels can be categorized into puzzle detective stories and (broadly) thrillers—and the suspense novel as a hybrid. The puzzle detective novel exists on two distinct levels of time, one that belongs with the specific crime and one with its solution at a safe distance. The crime novels that emerged with Noir in the USA after World War II collapsed these narrative planes. They no longer looked back in time, but instead looked to the future. Noir also connected more with the specific environment, its customs and persons. Curiosity and tension are what will engage the readers. Also, the detective became truly vulnerable, everything was put at risk, and anything could happen.

The emergent phenomenon of Nordic Noir has received attention in the leading Swedish business journal *Dagens Industri*, not least because of its exports to Germany: "Darkness, snow, woods, the Nordic mentality and how our societies are organized society, fascinates" (Åkerlund 2018). The allurement amongst German readers belongs with several factors, according to Böker (2018a, b). First, it is important to readers that the books take place in Scandinavia in order to get a fairly simple view of the culture and nature in the region. Moreover, readers expect the narratives to be critical of society, and contain a human and a humane side, creating interplay between idyllic and brutal elements. These are all qualities of bestselling Scandinavian crime fiction.

The crime fiction scene is vivid across the Nordic countries. For present-day authors, the road to international success inevitably leads across the Baltic Sea, through Germany and its German-language neighbours. With reference to high sales in Germany, literary agents can pitch authors to English-language publishers in the UK and across the world. Danish crime novelist Jussi Adler-Olsen explains that the German market allows for translations from many languages, so if you are successful as an author there, it means you are holding up very well to international competition, including from English-speaking bestsellers (Böker 2018a).

Literary sociologist Karl Berglund (2016) has conducted a thorough survey of specifically the Swedish crime novel and its production and circulation during the boom in the 2000s. His analysis includes both the textual and visual aspects of crime novels published in paperback, and it

is sensitive to issues of brands and branding in literature. For instance, he points to different paratextual conventions that form the branding of male and female crime novelists and their symbolic meaning and value on the Swedish market. He also observes how paratext no longer seems to cater to the "text," but rather to the author and to the author's brand: "The author is not dead at all—the author is the new text" (ibid., p. 181).

In order to achieve success in Germany, Swedish crime author Viveca Sten says she works hard, engaging in activities outside the text: book tours, talks, and interviews. She explains: "The fun part is that I get to be a part of raising the image of Sweden. Foreign readers find it interesting to get a glimpse of our everyday life. In many cultures the Swedish dads' role in the family, and that children live every second week with divorced parents seems very exotic" (Åkerlund 2018). In this way, crime novels resonate differences across cultural and societal borders.

The Historical Background to the Interest in Nordic Noir

Previous research into the UK reception and experience of Nordic Noir points to the perceived mixture of new exoticism and accessible difference. This has provided fertile ground for so-called Nordientalism, trained on an "imagined elsewhere" with Nordic social values, sustainability, and design—all consumable through Nordic Noir (Stougaard-Nielsen 2016).

The interest in culture that portrays the Nordic countries has a tradition in Germany. There is a longstanding fascination for all things Scandinavian, and it is related to the neoromantic literary Nordic movement at the turn of the twentieth century with dramatists, novelists, and poets: Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Selma Lagerlöf, Knut Hamsun, Hans Christian Andersen, and so on (Böker 2018b).

The first crime authors to gain recognition outside the Nordic countries and a foothold in the German market were the Swedish couple Maj Sjöwall & Per Wahlöö in the 1960s and 1970s. The books in their series were also the first Swedish crime novels to be turned into films, and since then the industry has become more oriented toward brands. They even

sold the rights to Beck, their main character (Sjöholm 2011). Today, Sjöwall and Wahlöö are the only Scandinavian crime authors to be selected for a *Zeit Edition* box in the series of the most famous "Kult-Krimis." The use of the word "cult" suggests that they are symbolic objects that are repeatedly worshipped by fans in the know.

The contemporary boom of Scandinavian literature started, according to Böker (2018a, b), not with crime fiction, but with the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder's all-age novel *Sofies Verden* (1993), followed by Danish Peter Høeg's novel *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1994). Though they were altogether different books, both novels had elements of mystery, intertwined with existential questioning and search for identity, and written in a literary style. The latter was lavishly marketed, with colourful ads where the standard used to be black and white, but there was no mention of Høeg being from Denmark. The brand of Scandinavia was yet to be formed by the bestsellers that soon followed (Böker 2018b).

However, I argue that there are three circumstances that have contributed to the later success of Nordic Noir. The German market for books and print had a longstanding tradition of interest in matters of Noir, both real and fictive, across all media.[1] Even early twentieth-century films by the German Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau have also contributed to the specific aesthetics of Noir (Gohlis 2016). The German audience is therefore sensitized to the visual framing of Nordic Noir.

Second, since the 1980s, actors on the German book market had cultivated regional crime to the extent that "the concept of the regional crime novel has become so ubiquitous that it seems as if there is no longer a single town with more than 10,000 inhabitants that does not have its own team of fictional detectives" (ibid.).[2] In other words, when Nordic Noir became popular as a regional marker, the German book market was already primed for it.

[1] Famous examples of German crime literature are Friedrich Schiller's *The Criminal from Lost Honour* (1786) and E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (1819). Ever since the nineteenth century, Germans have translated successful French and English literary works, including those from the USA (Gohlis 2016).

[2] Compare for instance the German concept of *Provinzkrimi*. One example could be Rita Falk's humoristic *Weisswurst-Connection* alongside enticing titles such as *Sauerkrautkoma* etc.

Third, regionalization became a force to reckon with in Europe after the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Iron Curtain in 1989–1991. Being on the periphery of Europe, the Nordic countries had cultivated inter-relations and a northern identity. The North was to emerge as a progressive third way, distinct from western capitalism and Eastern European socialism. And in contrast to the catholic and conservative South, the North presented itself as democratic, protestant, industrious, and egalitarian. This sense of nordicity is not additional to national identities, but integrated in them all, and pitted against other forms of European identity (Joenniemi and Lehti 2003). When the division between West and East became less emphasized, there were hopes for a new northern region that would bring together the countries on the Baltic Sea. Several initiatives from the Nordic countries at that time aimed at enhancing their role as a blueprint for the northern region, and thereby increasing their own security, economic growth and development, and political strength within the European Union (EU) and Europe as a whole (Smith 2003). This self-serving attitude was to be contrasted and problematized in popular literature.

From Nordic Naivety to Noir and the Emergence of *Schwedenkrimi*

The specific fascination for Swedish crime in Germany could be explained by the striking contrast with the previous image of a particularly naive country. A famous example is the German-produced series of 64 parts (by 2015, and including films) *Inga Lindström*, a pseudonym for the writer Christiane Sadlo (1954–). The series is set in a small, idyllic village somewhere in the Swedish countryside. The portrayal is stereotypical and romantic, with a blonde heroine in focus. Here we are reminded that some part of the neighbourly fascination for the North most probably belongs with a sense of "white nostalgia," whereby UK consumers could easily project their highly problematic desires of a homogeneous ethnicity in a globalized world (Stougaard-Nielsen 2016).

An explanation for the Lindström series' popularity and success is that Sweden, due to its 250 years of lasting peace, appears as an idealized version of Germany, at least one that might have been, if the country had

not been at war twice in the twentieth century. The Lindström series is closely associated with the *Bullerbü* phenomenon, with reference to Astrid Lindgren's extremely popular children's books on Bullerby, set in Småland. The German *Bullerbü* concept is an idyllic setting, where only small conflicts arise. This context forms the background to the present-day situation, where the branded understanding of the Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, has shifted thematically from blissful naivety to Noir.

The second wave of Nordic crime novels brought more attention to Swedish authors. After Sjöwall and Wahlöö, the author to gain an international reputation was Henning Mankell (1948–2015), also from Sweden. Mankell's series of Wallander books published in the 1990s portray how global injustices and criminality no longer can be held at bay in Ystad, a small town in the south of Sweden. Where the *Inga Lindström* series showed Sweden under everlasting sunlight, Mankell's portrayal of "Wallander land" in contrast was as dark as a winter's day. His works were critical of society and the media—constantly posing questions about the interplay of world affairs and local everyday life (Sjöholm 2011). Mankell was also a playwright and a poet, and thus he had some literary credibility and cultural capital that were unusual in the category of crime fiction.

German critics usually assess the literary qualities and the extent of societal criticism in crime novels, but they do not explicitly mention whether the novels are from Scandinavia. Instead, this fact is widely marketed and advertised by the publishers (Böker 2018). Mankell's first German book covers resembled paintings, according to Jessica Brogren at the Leopard publishing company, co-started by Mankell and his longtime publisher Dan Israel (interview with the author, May 17, 2018). This artful way of branding symbolically accrued a sort of literary quality on new markets. On the subsequent paperback versions, the endorsements show how women's magazines came to acknowledge Mankell's literary qualities. Even today, the endorsements through critical acclaim on Mankell paperback editions are made by publications like *Journal für die Frau* and *Brigitte*. Hence, it could also be argued that the covers sought to connect with a well-read female audience.

The third wave of Swedish crime specifically spells Stieg Larsson (Böker 2018a). This wave started with the publication of Larsson's Millennium trilogy in 2005 and continues even to this day (Åkerlund 2018). Taken

together, Mankell and Larsson have sold 120 million books (ibid.), films notwithstanding. In the course of writing this text, the international film adaptation of Larsson's second book *The Girl in the Spider's Web* has hit cinemas and is expected to renew interest in the series. If anything, the third wave has been widened to include several new authors and been extended by the additional Millennium series of David Lagercrantz.

Literary agencies have been instrumental in the marketing of the genre and its exports. Anna Frankl at Nordin Agency, one of Sweden's most successful literary agencies, describes how they create presentations of their authors for their printed catalogues and website. In terms of building the author's brand, they use book trailers, reviews, interviews, and similar materials in order to present the author from many angles (interview with the author, August 31, 2018). This reflects how brands are both mediated in society and created by means of visual and textual materials: brand paratext.

Larsson's case, however, proved to be a particular challenge. His literary agent at Norstedts, Linda Altrov Berg, explains the circumstances: "His works were sold to a number of countries—and then he *died*. It is not self-evident to sell a dead author" (interview with the author, October 15, 2018). Presumably, it was not just Larsson's critical take on the development of society that caught the world's attention in terms of Noir, but also his untimely death. It may have highlighted the premise of Noir: that the future is uncertain and the hero is vulnerable. Anything bad could happen to anybody, at any time.

Nordic crime is now established as a genre on the world market, Anna Frankl observes, just like American "romance" (Åkerlund 2018). It is captured in the paratext, especially by visual means:

> Typical for a Schwedenkrimi, is according to me, a good puzzle crime novel with a police as a main character, preferably a series which readers can follow, and in Germany it will have a red cottage with white corners on the cover, regardless whether it is cosy crime or hardboiled.

The genre brand of *Schwedenkrimi* then helps to communicate with booksellers and readers. Frankl, however, does not believe the German market makes a clear distinction between the Scandinavian countries:

"Schwedenkrimi is for me simply Swedish or Scandinavian crime novels. It could just as well be Norwegian or Danish, I don't think they make such big difference" (interview with the author, August 31, 2018). Even so, empirical studies show that Swedish crime fiction is by far the most widely accessible and is sold in Germany. More than 70% of Scandinavian bestsellers are Swedish (Böker 2018a). This could suggest that the *Schwedenkrimi* brand does have a certain resonance and impact.

Quality and Ambience

Recently, Scandinavian crime has become established as an upmarket genre, claims Frankl: "this means that one can produce a hardback version and get higher profit-margin" (Åkerlund 2018). In terms of selling Swedish crime novels abroad, Frankl maintains she does not make any special claims specifically to German publishers, compared to other buyers. It all comes down to the unique qualities of the book; generally, though, she will stress that it is "well-written and atmospheric." Hence, it seems the ambiance is an important part of the sale.

There are two authors from Sweden that have helped to establish Nordic crime as more literary than other crime: Håkan Nesser and Arne Dahl, the latter a pseudonym for novelist and poet Jan Arnald. Nesser was the second bestselling Nordic author after Mankell in 1993–2014 (Böker 2018a). Nesser's books are credited with German reviews, even with the critic's name mentioned (*Hamburger Morgenpost*; Jürgen Deppe, *NDR Kultur*). Arnald was one of the first authors in Sweden to switch literary genres specifically in search of a larger audience, and Dahl was a secret identity for some time. Today, his authorship counts as one of the biggest successes abroad. Like Nesser, his style combines crime/thriller elements with literary qualities. The Dahl books have reviewer quotes ranging from local to national media, mostly newspapers in both Sweden (*Smålandsposten*, *Sydsvenskan*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*) and Germany (*Spiegel Online*, *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, *Ruhr Nachrichten*, *Westdeutsche Zeitung*, *Münchner Merkur*). One review by Ruhr Nachrichten spoke of Dahl's work *Gier* as the "newest masterpiece of Swedish art of crime" (*schwedischer Krimikunst*).

The Swedish literary agent Anna Frankl explains her perspective on the relationship between crime novels and Noir:

> For me a crime novel is more of a puzzle story, preferably with a police as a main character. The Noir concept is broader; here is everything from psychological suspense to detective mysteries. The main character can be an ordinary person, a detective or a spy. Everything is possible. Both exist within the suspense genre and some crime novels could absolutely fall within the concept of Noir.

Frankl's characterization of Noir shows how the suspenseful narrative is widened and also includes more ordinary aspects of society and life.

This shifting relation between crime and normalcy is reflected in readers' view of Nordic Noir specifically. One woman describes how Håkan Nesser is her all-time favourite crime novelist and she characterizes his books as "difficult … depressive" ("*schwer … depressiv*"). It takes time to get into the books. One of the series is played out in an altogether fictive country/city with a certain atmosphere, peopled by many different types of characters. This could suggest that the ambiance in the texts of Nordic crime is not as tied to geography as one might have expected. In fact, the German publishing house btb Verlag launched the German Nesser editions with stereotypical covers of red wooden cottages (Böker 2018a). There are also other qualities. Especially, the reader describes her fondness for Nesser's characters: "they are not really criminal … just "normal" really, leading their lives like us all, but then something happens." Anti-heroes—she likes that. The characters develop across the books in the series. She explains how the stories are slow: "they are about a person's inside more than anything."

When another woman, from Germany, considers her appreciation of *Skandinavienkrimi*, she too reflects on how they provide understanding of people from the inside. There is also such little difference between criminals and "normal" people, she ponders. This reflection shows how Nordic Noir has extended Todorov's classic premise for Noir and thriller novels. It is not just the detective who is vulnerable and endangered. Ordinary people are also exposed to events that could lead them to criminal behaviour and put them at risk of their lives.

Connecting Outer and Inner Landscapes

Northern nature has a special role in the reader narratives. It helps to explain the links between the outer and inner worlds that are played out in relation to the North and to the crime novels. A German man around 30 years of age speaks Swedish fluently and travels to Sweden around three times a year, since his parents bought a house in Småland back in 1980. His parents had visited a friend, who had defected to Sweden in order to escape German conscription, and they immediately fell in love with Swedish nature: the woods and the lakes. Nowadays they have books by Swedish crime authors, namely Henning Mankell, Håkan Nesser, and Stieg Larsson. In other words, their encounter with Nordic nature was rather romantic and transformative, and in time opened them up to experiences of Sweden through literature.

Conversely, the Nordic Noir novels in turn also inspire readers to reflect on the role of nature and existence. A Swiss woman describes how she is fascinated by Nesser's story of how a man wins the lottery, but does not tell his wife. Instead, he buys himself a house out in the woods: "He wants to go and have another life." She sounds surprised, but emphasizes that she really likes that book.

This woman has also visited the Nordic countries a couple of times:

> I was in Finland with my ex-boyfriend. He now lives there. He was a bit … introvert. *Verbindung* /a bond/ with the landscape. I think of that landscape. I think of the woods and the seas, and the dark. When I read this book I think of this landscape. No people. Maybe people go mad….

Connecting the existential landscape with the physical may bring a deeper relation between the books, nature, and life at large. In 2017 this woman went travelling in Scandinavia, via Hamburg to Copenhagen, Gothenburg, and Stockholm, all by herself: "I needed some time for me." The North has become associated with withdrawal and establishing a new relationship to oneself.

This existential theme is recurring in the narrative of a German woman, approaching 50 years old. She loves Nordic *Krimis*, just like she loves reading. She enjoys Ost-Friesland *Krimis* too, because they reflect that

way of living. The only thing she says she avoids is American books and films; she is just not interested. This statement points less to the state of affairs than to a form of cultural positioning.

She has also travelled North, visiting friends who live in Stockholm and Uppsala. But when it comes to Scandinavian *Krimis*, she says she would not recognize their local flavour of course. Sadly, this woman was just recently diagnosed with cancer, and the prognosis for her survival looks dark. On this bad news she decided to go on a trip for herself over the weekend. She went straightaway to buy a pair of expensive binoculars for birdwatching, and a ticket to Sürt, an island in the northwestern part of Germany. This way she figures she can then come back strengthened and face her doctor. She is bringing a tent so she can stay on a camping site, close to nature. Perhaps her reading of regional crime novels and especially Scandinavian *Krimis* has nurtured a sense that nature is a place to withdraw and find oneself at a time of existential crisis.

Illustrative Examples of Brand Paratext

In order to discuss how paratext is used to construct books as Nordic, I have chosen a number of illustrative examples of authors and their books. Most examples are Swedish in reflection of the dominance of *Schwedenkrimi* on the German market, and one example is from Iceland.

One instance of paratext is words and texts printed on the cover. The example of Ninni Schulman's (2018) book, translated as *Stets Sollst Du Schweigen*, is explicitly categorized as *Schwedenkrimi* on the front cover. This book is the fourth in a series called "Värmland Krimi," or the "Hagfors series". The first two books in the series by Heine were categorized as "crime novel" only.

Another instance of paratext is the back-cover text. Here, the publisher has a chance to attract consumers with a description of the story. In Schulman's title, the back-cover text first gives a quote from the novel, then introduces directly the setting of the rural small-town context: "Hagfors, Värmland." This location conveys a dark and solitary sense of the provincial setting. There is no ridicule about the narrative's provinciality; rather, it is expected that the story will reach the bare existentiality

of the human predicament. This meaning is also emphasized by the book cover image. Here, nature is ever-present, covering the entire image from the dark woods in the background and the cold, quiet lake in the foreground. Red is the only colour, highlighting an empty rowboat and the title in capital letters against the black and white background. The design is aligned with the third book in the series (*Still Ruht der Wald*), where the cover shows a colorized red cottage in the midst of a black-and-white forest and the label of *Schwedenkrimi* is introduced. Here the publishers have changed their paratext tactics, possibly because her name could be interpreted as German and does not disclose her Swedish citizenship.

In contrast to Schulman, Håkan Nesser's books are tagged as "novels" on the cover, and most of them revolve around a brutal death regardless of whether they belong in his crime novel series or not. They have a more literary aesthetic than most other Nordic crime novels: the images are less dramatic and the colours are brighter. As noted by Böker (2018a), the German covers of Nesser's crime series about Van Veeteren have traditional *Schwedenkrimi* attributes: solitary red cottages, lakes, and rowboats—even though the stories belong in a fictitious setting. One Nesser book, *Elf Tage in Berlin*, reverberates with the German understanding of Swedish innocence: "The Swede Arne Murberg is young and naive, but he has a strange gift: believing in humankind" (my translation). Here the Swedish naivety is striking and is used as a selling point to the book's German audience.

The Swedish author Jonas Moström's "Nathalie Svensson" series is translated by Nora Pröfrock and is a relative newcomer to the market. The aesthetics are reminiscent of Nesser's novels: bright backgrounds with serene, yet dark, country scenery—an attempt at branding Moström as Nesser's literary heir. Parts one and three feature snowy landscapes with red cottages, and the second part, *Dominotod* (Domino death, 2017), a red house on the edge of a lake. Arne Dahl endorses this book in a quote with large capital letters in matching red, explaining how the intensity of Moström's literary style does not slacken. Several books by other authors (Arne Dahl, Ingrid Hedström, Alexander Söderberg, and many more) have variations of the same motif: a solitary house close to the water, on the point of danger, and a single rowboat. The intertwining of typography, image, aesthetics, and ambiance builds the identity of the book and

connects it with literary forerunners in the previous waves of crime literature.

The regional and countryside perspectives have become especially dominant when it comes to the design of book covers. Böker (2018a) describes how Icelandic author Arnaldur Indriðason's crime series is set in the capital of Reykjavik and still is presented with countryside images on the covers. Ragnar Jónasson's (2013) *Todes Nacht* (translated into German by Tina Fleck) is categorized on the cover as an "Iceland thriller" (*Island thriller*). The back-cover text says the book is the second part of the "Dark Iceland" series. The author's name and other text are printed in yellow, instead of the red which is used on the covers of Swedish crime novels. The cover image foregrounds a set of white and scruffy stone buildings, ripe with neglect. The buildings are set against a dark and foreboding mountain covered with trees and silhouettes of further mountains in the far distance. The image continues on the back cover and gives a dramatic sky as background to the book's description. Small print next to the EAN code discloses that the design bureau is German and the photograph was taken by Jim Smithson and bought via Getty Images, an international agency. The landscape, however, does not look at all like Iceland, but rather resembles the contours of Swedish (or possibly Norwegian) woodlands. Presumably, even though there are minor adjustments, the *Schwedenkrimi* aesthetics and nature have become the primary lens through which Nordic crime novels are viewed. This could be quite problematic in terms of the internal power structure amongst the countries in the Nordic region.

Concluding Discussion

The reasons for the remarkable success of Scandinavian crime in Germany are quite straightforward, according to Böker (2018a). Readers want to get an easy view of (especially) Swedish nature and society, and engage in societal critique. The interviewed readers add to this picture by emphasizing the perspectives of people's inside struggles, and accepting that criminals are not so different from "normal" people. There is a deeper existential mode of relating to the narratives, one where the ambience allows for

greater reflection, perhaps greater awe or empathy toward people and their choices. Not least with regard to the German experience during World War II, the Nordic crime novels may bring a more complex and nuanced understanding of human nature, operating under pressure. Indirectly, they resonate with specific cultural memories.

From the consumers' perspective, the three interviewed readers had all been traveling in the Nordic countries, gleaning insights into how human nature is reflected in the natural environment, and especially in a dark and empty landscape. Even a German woman who was not directly captivated by the Nordic landscape in her journey expresses a sense of relation to nature, seeking solace from sickness and an existential crisis in a remote northern corner of her country. Nature in the North is thus regarded as both the cause of madness and pain—and their remedy. These reader narratives may be regarded as isolated anecdotes, but reflect a long tradition stemming from Swedish seventeenth-century propaganda, by which northern nature is rendered with transcendental qualities: "the duality of eternal light and eternal darkness being employed to underline its divine characteristics" (Joenniemi and Lehti 2003). This duality remains underscored in the cover images of Nordic crime novels. Nevertheless, with knowledge of Noir genre conventions, we can expect of Nordic Noir that nothing is sacred; anything is possible, and everything is at risk—even inner life.

The textual and visual paratext of books constitutes a communicative threshold on the market. It helps to construct identity markers in terms of literary genre, which functions as a way to communicate expectations among publishers, authors, booksellers, and readers. Taking into account that consumption of cultural goods is speculative (Gray2010a), paratext could be even more important when selling books across cultural borders. It is well known that other intermediaries (or co-authors) such as literary agents are partly responsible for the successful selling of Nordic crime. They rely on an array of secondary visual and textual paratext to present the authorship from different angles and build the author's brand. Berglund (2016) observed how the author increasingly replaces the primary "text." The agents' author-centred paratext, however, is not adapted specifically to the German market. It could still be expected that Nordic and especially Swedish paratext resonates well with German publishers

and is reverberated in their further mediations. Here, the success of *Schwedenkrimi* has probably foregrounded presentations of other Nordic novels. When nature is portrayed in "Iceland *krimi*" it is presented with a cover image of deep woods reminiscent of Swedish nature. Brand paratext can thus reflect and reproduce certain power structures, which can be quite problematic.

It is also important to acknowledge that while Germany has had a keen eye on all things Nordic for a long time, that fact alone cannot explain the development and success of Nordic Noir or *Schwedenkrimi*. The German market was already inclined toward Noir and has been innovative in Noir aesthetics throughout history (Gohlis 2016). Second, the German literary market was already primed by regionalization. Nordic Noir presented itself at a time when European politics opened up to a new geopolitical organization beyond the Cold War division of West and East. The Nordic countries presented themselves as a progressive alternative, ready to take the lead into the future (Joenniemi and Lehti 2003). When these promises fell through, there was a growing audience who were curious about the contrast between the ideal and the more, dark, depressive, and difficult sides of Nordic societies, especially in terms of everyday, local life.

According to Böker's study, critics in Germany do not usually single out which works are Scandinavian or not; instead, this is communicated by publishers. Investigating the paratext shows the way that publishers quite often use Nordic critics' reviews from both regional and national media. The various endorsements on the back covers of books show how quotes from local Swedish media, commenting on the quality of a book title in relation to other (national) authors, have become transported to a German-language context. Considering that the Noir narratives also foreground countryside scenes and settings, the local perspective is, somewhat paradoxically, integrated and pervasive in the communication of national and super-national identity.

To conclude, the case of crime novels and Nordic Noir highlights how paratext can bring out symbolic qualities of a text in a way that resonates and reverberates a brand, and especially across cultural borders. The concept of "brand paratext" serves to capture how identity markers in the

form of text and images not only pertain to the single product or author, but manage to create an interplay of local and symbolic qualities that helps to establish and extend a brand as a composite whole. If it were not for successful brand paratext, Nordic Noir could not have got away with more literary approaches to the genre and still call it crime. Indeed, it is with the careful use of brand paratext that reflects the quality of authors' works that Nordic Noir is now considered an "upmarket genre" compared with other crime. The waves of Nordic Noir are still crashing onto the shores of Germany, though their impact may not be as striking today as it once was. Yet, as agent Altrov Berg observes, there is still space left for more.

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