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# The Stieg Effect

An analysis of the life, work, and social change created by author Stieg Larsson

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the life of Swedish author Stieg Larsson and how his career as a journalist and activist lead him to create the global phenomenon, *The Millennium Trilogy*. Through writing about international political themes, Larsson successfully tells a tale of a female heroine, Lisbeth Salander, who overcomes her tragic destiny. Originally written in Swedish, Larsson creates a cultural assimilation through writing about universal themes, such as computer hacking and crimes against humanity. The three novels, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire, and The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* are together called the *Millennium Trilogy*, and after only 6 years of publication, sold more than 65 million copies in more than 44 different languages. The novels are additionally the first major block buster books about social networking. Unfortunately, Larsson never saw the success of his novels, having died before their publication. This thesis will search for the truth behind the fiction by using current events that reflect the issues he proposes. It will also explore the idea of writing as a medium for social change by enlightening readers through journalism and literature. Through discussing the international success of the novels, this thesis aims to show the power of universal themes in transcending cultural barriers to create awareness of global issues. The books have not only become a symbol of pop culture, but also a symbol for social justice. *The Millennium Trilogy* is a series of crime novels that are a delivery system for social activism in the 21st century that

incorporates contemporary technology as well as traditional "who dun it" story lines.

*The Millennium Trilogy* written by author Stieg Larson has received tremendous success within the United States and internationally. Originally written and published in Sweden, the book series consists of three fiction novels, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire, and The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*. Stieg Larsson lived most of his life as a journalist and completed *The Millennium Trilogy* as a side project. He died of a heart attack in 2004, shortly after receiving the news that his novels were to be published. He left behind his father, brother, and long-term partner, Eva Gabrielsson. The books were released in Sweden the following year in 2005, and due to the extreme popularity went on to be bought, translated and released by international publishers such as Random House in the United States. Stieg incorporated his life experiences and passions into his writing and hoped to create a piece of work that would change the manner of crime fiction writing and the way authors approach social issues.

The global popularity and acclaim earned by *The Millennium Trilogy* is attributed to the universal themes it possesses. The topics proposed in the book series goes beyond cultural differences to create a global understanding. Subjects such as the capabilities of technology and the struggles of oppressed women, creates interest and awareness for all readers. It forms a call to action in which the audience feels empowered to follow in the footsteps of Lisbeth Salander and Mikael Blomkvist. *The Millennium Trilogy* exemplifies the power of literature in creating social change through bringing attention to current issues. It proves that the communication medium of writing in the 21st century has the capability of influencing a very large readership.

Stieg Larsson was born on August 15, 1954, in the small town of Sklleftehhamn, Sweden, with a current population of about 3,000. Being born to two teenage parents who were unable to raise him, he was sent to live with his grandparents. His parents then moved to Stockholm to search for work. His grandparents lived on a farm within a surrounding community of about sixty inhabitants (Thompson 55). For many Swedes, the northern part of the country is extremely rural and beyond having any knowledge of, but for Stieg, he incorporated his experiences living there into his novels by referencing to actual towns and locations. According to Stieg's partner, Eva Gabrielsson, growing up on the Swedish countryside "took plenty of ingenuity to survive, but such an environment breeds hardy individuals, self-reliant, resourceful, generous folks who can be counted on in a pinch. Like Stieg" (Gabrielsson 8,9). Despite the hardships of growing up without many things, such as heating in the small wooden house in which he lived with his grandparents, his life was still filled with happiness and love. They instilled lessons in him such as nothing is impossible and that "chasing after money is contemptible" (Gabrielsson 9). At the age of eight, Stieg's grandfather, Severin, had a heart attack and died. He was left only with his grandmother. After losing his grandfather, the carefree life that he knew came to an end. In 1962, Stieg, along with his grandmother, moved in with his parents who had now left Stockholm and lived in a small city named Umea (Thompson 55). They had an additional child named Joakim in 1957 and were officially married in 1958. Stieg felt as though he barely knew his parents anymore (Gabrielsson 10).

As told by Stieg, his grandfather was an anti-Nazi communist having been imprisoned during World War II. Additionally, Stieg's parents participated in marches

and demonstrations supporting social democracy and at the age of fourteen, Stieg was already committed to politics. He was very independent at an early age and often spent much time on his own reading and writing. Politics became a big part of his life, having his grandfather being a committed communist and his parents being social democrats. Stieg became accustomed to arguing and having political discussions. A classmate of Stieg's at Haga School in Umea described, "If there was anyone being bullied or victimized he would step in and try to resolve the problem. Not by fighting, there were others who did that-but by talking" (Pettersson 17). He enjoyed activities such as drawing and essay writing, and debating with teachers about his grades, which almost always resulted in them being raised. He had interests in science and technology, leading him to borrow the school keys to use the telescope there and participating in a radio club in which students would seek out distant radio stations for fun. At the age of twelve, Stieg's parents bought him a typewriter in which he would write boys' detective stories, similar to the ones he read from the United States. He would write until extremely late hours of the night in the basement of his building, as to not wake his brother, Joakim, with whom he shared a room (Pettersson).

At the age of sixteen, Stieg was extremely independent and even asked his parents for his own apartment. In 1970, he began renting his own room across the hall from his parents and only visited home for the occasional meal. He decided to specialize in social sciences in high school and at this point was considered a seasoned activist, having served in the NLF (National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam) for two years. It was through NLF that he met Eva Gabrielsson in 1972. They shared many interests and immediately became a couple. Eva described meeting Stieg, "He fascinated me. There

was nothing theoretical about the way he spoke from the heart, from his gut, and yet he was entertaining, too" (Gabrielsson 24). Stieg's mother, Vivianne, became a mother figure to Eva considering she had lost her mother very young. Eva stated how "Stieg and Vivianne were very much alike, and anything they did was done with wholehearted commitment" (Gabrielsson 18). Additionally Eva's grandmother became quite fond of Stieg often stating that he was "a good man" (18). Eva described how she often pushed Stieg to write, "when he saw his first published article, he was so thrilled that I think he decided to become a journalist on the spot" (24). At the age of 18 he took the journalism school entrance exam, failed, and refused to take it again. He started earning his living off of odd jobs while Eva was in school. Gabrielsson emphasized in her memoir, "Sometimes we tried to pull back a little, to get some perspective, but the attraction we felt was too strong…we were made for each other" (Gabrielsson 28,29).

In 1979, Stieg joined the TT New Agency in Stockholm, an equivalent of the Associated Press, and ended up working there for 20 years. He began by answering phones and doing secretarial tasks, and then transitioned into illustrating articles. He was able to display his talent when filling in for a colleague, and eventually earned himself a permanent position. Lacking a journalism degree, he was never given reporting assignments, but established himself creating "news graphics" and was highly regarded at TT. During this time he was still active in the Socialist Party and wrote many articles for a weekly publication titled, *Internationalen* (Pettersson 43). According to his partner Eva, "Most of his colleagues saw Stieg as a pleasant person, intelligent, but difficult to get a handle on, especially since he tended to keep his private life to himself" (Gabrielsson 42). Stieg became an unofficial consultant for the news department

regarding current events. He had much insight into political corruption and the crimes being committed in the mid-80s by the extreme right. The TT News Agency was praised for their knowledge of such subjects, with the root of their insight being stuck in the graphics department. Even with the support of his fellow colleagues and journalists at TT, he was never promoted because they said, "Stieg cannot write" (43). In the mid-90s, a tough time for media companies, TT had many lay-offs and eliminated Stieg's whole department. Regardless of the fact that his political insight proved he should be moved to the news department, the company still refused, falling back on their old argument. In 1999, realizing he would never advance; he left the company and 20 years of work behind (Gabrielsson).

After Stieg's departure from TT, he devoted himself entirely to the organization he cofounded in 1995, the Swedish Expo Foundation and their magazine publication named *Expo*. Having strong views on subjects such as racism and feminism, *Expo* attracted a lot of attention and often had to change meeting locations to escape harassment. Extremist groups also started issuing threats to people who supported *Expo*, and even vandalized their printing house being tagged with swastikas and writing, "Don't print *Expo*". The printing house gave in and refused to print any further, however two major newspaper publications in Sweden offered to print *Expo* as a supplement to their own paper. The magazine kept going until 1997, when costs increased and income decreased. At this time it managed to stay alive through contributing commentary to other publications and producing occasional supplements. It did not resurface independently until 2003 with the help of grants to foster the culture of democracy among youth and examine instances of racial discrimination and crimes within society. *Expo* survived as

best it could, with the similar strength and perseverance that the fictional *Millennium* did. Gabrielsson wrote, "The 1990s were a grueling period during which he worked like a man possessed… Stieg wrote constantly, hoping to sound the alarm about nationalist political parties like the Sweden Democrats" (48,51). In addition to *Expo*, Stieg also wrote articles for the antifascist British publication, *Searchlight*. Having grown up under the influence of his grandfather's anti-Nazi political views, Stieg had a constant admiration for *Searchlight*. When having met the editor at a business meeting in London, they formed an instant bond and Stieg began writing for them. With Stieg's name associated with *Expo*, *Searchlight*, and additional left-winged extremist publications that he contributed to, this lead to multiple threats and many enemies. This was a big factor in the decision for Eva Gabrielsson and Stieg to not get married; Stieg believed it would be safer to not be associated with each other or share the same name.

Aside from Stieg's many political and journalism endeavors, he also had an extreme interest and passion for crime novels, both reading and writing. While working for *Expo* and *Searchlight,* he was also writing his own stories revolving around a female protagonist named Lisbeth Salander with a working title, *Men Who Hate Women* (still the remaining title for the Swedish publication). In the autumn of 2003, he decided to submit his two completed novels (books one and two) to Sweden's third largest publishing house, Piratforlaget. It was returned unopened with a rejection letter. Considering Stieg's prior commitments, he remained busy with other work, not thinking about his book series. It was a colleague at *Expo* that sent out a manuscript of the first novel to Nordstedts, Sweden's oldest publishing house. In the spring of 2004, Nordstedts agreed to move forward and publish all three novels of *The Millennium Trilogy*. Publishers at

Nordstedts read and passed the novels along to a retired publisher named Lasse Bergstrom, who noted that Stieg "managed to hold together the most wide-ranging of plots…the first book was an almost classic detective mystery, the second more of a police procedural. The third book would turn out to be a version of yet another genre, the spy thriller" (Pettersson 222). He predicted that the books would be very successful if published. Stieg had intended to write a series of ten novels, and Nordstedts agreed on three and gave him a book advance that was almost unheard of for a new author. Stieg's main publisher, Eva Gedin, apposed the title *Men Who Hate Women*, but Stieg refused to change it and they ultimately agreed. Gedin commented, "One thing that was really striking was that he had the entire plot in his head, despite its complexity. He never lost sight of any character and never confused a name" (Pettersson 224). Once word got around of the predicted success of the books, a number of international publishers expressed interest in the manuscripts and there was an immediate offer from a German publishing house (Gabrielsson).

Shortly to follow the wonderful news that Stieg would finally be rewarded for all of his hard work, he died suddenly November 8th of 2004. When entering the office building of *Expo* to find that the elevator was broken, he climbed seven flights of stairs only to suffer a heart attack once he reached the office and was taken to the hospital immediately. With his wife and co-workers in complete shock, this also meant that the publication process would become much more difficult, with many unanswered questions and decisions having to be made without him. Publisher Gedin stated, "We all agreed the books should be published. But it was a massive challenge. How would we launch these novels without the author with us?" (Pettersson 227). There was an element of doubt for

all of the publishers involved, but they came to a conclusion that they must continue on and print. The first novel, *Men Who Hate Women* (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo) was first published in Sweden in the summer of 2005, and with much success, sold double the expectancy. The second book was published in 2006, and the third in 2007, with first year sales increasing with the release of each book. A nurse admitted that within Stieg's last moments, he gathered up enough strength to tell the nurse, "You must contact Eva Gabrielsson" (Gabrielsson 132). Eva, being the closest person to him, immediately stepped in to help *Expo* and contribute as much as possible to *The Millennium Trilogy*, but considering they were never married, legalities prevented her from gaining access to his intellectual property and estate. Stieg's father and brother, whom according to Eva barely contacted Stieg throughout his adult life, took everything and showed her little sympathy or generosity. Eva wrote, "I thought back over all those years of frustration that had wounded the man of my life, years during which some people had refused to recognize his abilities, his immense store of knowledge, and his worth" (150). Today, *The Millennium Trilogy* is one of the most successful book series ever written, having sold millions of copies internationally and made into major motions pictures.

Within *The Millennium Trilogy,* a text rich with details, characters and complex story lines, one cannot help but wonder if there are any truths behind the fiction. How did Stieg decide to write about these ideas and themes? What parts of Stieg's life are incorporated into the novels? There are clear indications as to why Stieg made certain choices, such as the setting being Stockholm and Mikael Blomkvist having a career as a journalist; these where the details of Stieg's life. However, there is deeper reasoning behind him making these choices. This was the life he knew, and felt he could write most

honestly under these circumstances. There were also many things that Stieg wanted to emphasize about journalism. Eva Gabrielsson wrote, "The novels speak of values, justice, of journalism in the noble sense of the world, of the integrity and efficiency some people bring to their jobs" (94-95). Additionally, "throughout the trilogy an overt feminist consciousness presides" (Burstein 26). The decision to use a character such as Lisbeth Salander as the protagonist resorts back to Stieg's life experiences and how he learned to advocate and understand the struggles of women. According to Eva, "When I'd met Stieg in 1972, he was already a staunch feminist" (72). Stieg incorporated many elements of himself into the characters, plots and themes of *The Millennium Trilogy*.

Stieg's career as a journalist resulted in many personal struggles. Similar to Blomkvist, Stieg worked to expose the wrongful and criminal acts of politicians, extremists and gangs. He dedicated most of his adult life writing for *Searchlight* and *Expo*. Both being leftist publications, "*Expo* was undisguisedly the model for *Millennium*, the journal that is Blomkvist's home base in the trilogy" (Acocella). Writing for such publications, this created many enemies that made it their life's mission to see that Stieg was silenced. Stieg became "a hated enemy of the far right" (Gabrielsson 53). Being subject to many threats, Stieg had to constantly be aware of his surroundings and safety. Occasionally, he would get bullets sent to him in the mail and would notice strangers waiting outside the entrances of where he was working, in which he would then exit through the back door. Stieg and Eva also had to leave their answering machine on "record", for evidence of all the death threats. Messages typically went something like this, "Piece of shit, you Jew-fucker…traitor, we'll tear you apart…and we know where you live…" (Gabrielsson 56). The events that Stieg witnessed throughout his career were

used to support the examples described in the book series, "In fact, everything described in *The Millennium Trilogy* has happened at one time or another to a Swedish citizen, journalist, politician, public prosecutor, unionist or policeman. Nothing was made up" (Gabrielsson 57).

Stieg's methods and work ethic behind journalism is often seen in the acts of Michael Blomkvist, "Stieg put his entire code of journalistic ethics into *The Millennium Trilogy"* (Gabrielsson 67). Like Stieg, Blomkvist believes that journalism should be pursued with honesty and used to create social change for victims who have undergone injustices in their lives. Blomkvist expressed these feelings after his sentencing in the Wennerstrom affair:

> His [Blomkvist's] contempt for his fellow financial journalists was based on something that in his opinion was as plain as morality. The equation was simple. A bank director who blow millions on foolhardy speculations should not keep his job. A managing director who plays shell company games should do time. A slum landlord who forces young people to pay through the nose and under the table for a one-room apartment with shard toilet should be hung out to dry. (Larsson/Tattoo 53)

Stieg's viewpoints are also reflected in Blomkvist's focus on the readers and material being published within *Millennium*. Blomkvist makes statements along the lines of, "It doesn't matter how many advertisers we have if no one wants to buy the magazine". Stieg believed that in journalism, you owe your readers the truth, not stories that simply increase revenue and create shock value. Stieg even mocks the media within *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, showing the influence of media in creating and spreading

a false story of Lisbeth's past. The media forms the phrase that she is a "Lesbian Satanist" and within hours it is printed in multiple headlines. An additional principle that Stieg believed in was the protection of sources in journalism. Throughout the novels, you never hear anyone reveal their source, and this is due to Stieg's strong feelings about the subject. He believed that all sources must be protected and makes that clear through Blomkvist's behavior regarding his work.

Stieg's financial struggles with *Expo* are seen throughout the way *Millennium* deals with similar situations. Stieg was a great editor and chief of *Expo*, but lacked the ability to control the magazine's finances. This was the exact position Blomkvist was in after Berger left *Millennium* in the third novel. *Expo* had to constantly come up with additional ways of funding. There was even a letter found after Stieg's death that was addressed to a financial sponsor asking for money. This letter was dated two days before Stieg's passing. A similar reality for *Expo*, *Millennium* struggled with a lack of advertisers and barely having enough funds to make it through one year of publication. *Millennium* magazine shared the same morale and mission as *Expo*, to continue writing and to never give up, "Without Stieg's battles and crusades, *The Millennium Trilogy* would never have seen the light of day" (Gabrielsson 64). By incorporating examples from his own experiences, he creates an accurate depiction of the everyday challenges within the field of journalism and working for a magazine like *Millennium*.

Gabrielsson writes, "*The Millennium Trilogy* is a catalogue of all forms of violence and discrimination endured by women" (71). Stieg's support of the female community began as a teenager. One weekend, he witnessed an incident that changed his life. He watched a group of boys attack and rape a girl at a campground. Afterwards, he

could never forgive himself for not intervening and even attempted to approach the girl to talk about it, but she refused, stating, "You're one of them!" Stieg felt overwhelming guilt. This contributed tremendously to Stieg's views on feminism, if not being the complete source of it. Following this event, "Larsson's campaign against the abuse of power eventually became focused on one victimized group: women" (Acocella). He additionally enjoyed working with women and found them "more creative and less ambitious, less conniving than men" (Gabrielsson 72,73). Within the workplace, he always treated men and women equally. Stieg was also drastically affected by the deaths of many women at the hands of men. He often followed murder cases within the news and admitted that all of the cases described in *The Millennium Trilogy* were inspired by real murders. He sympathized with women and understood their struggles. Through his work he hoped to "show women as he saw them: brave, free, strong enough to change their world and refuse to be victims" (Gabrielsson 75).

It is impossible for any artist to create anything without parts of themselves in it. For Stieg, he incorporated his love for his career and his passion for feminism into *The Millennium Trilogy*. The way that Mikael Blomkvist approaches his work as a journalist is how Stieg looked at journalism as well. He portrays journalism as something of a duty, rather than a job. As if journalism is something that needs to be prevalent in society, to provide people with honest insight. Stieg used his experiences at *Expo* to form *Millennium*. With the same mission in mind, they both fight to provide truth for their readers. Stieg's personal opinions on feminism are extremely prevalent throughout the novels. In creating Lisbeth Salander, she embodies all of the traits of a true feminist who always overcomes her battles. One commentator wrote, "*The Millennium Trilogy* is one

long female revenge story" (Burstein 26). The novels speak of Stieg's beliefs, values and journeys within the world of journalism and feminism.

The character of Lisbeth Salander is non-traditional in every sense of the word. This female heroine challenges all social norms through her appearance, actions, and just about every other attribute. Readers soon deemed Salander as "an irresistible new character in the [crime fiction] genre" (Forshaw 3). It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when readers fall in love with Salander. Considering her list of characteristics, one would think she would receive the opposite reaction. From the outside she appears to be less than five feet tall and weighing in at about 90 pounds. She has short black hair and a number of piercings and tattoos, not to mention one intimidating stare. She is perceived to be anti-social, violent, and bi-sexual. However, "Larsson portrays her with both tenderness and humor" (Thompson 11,12). She is admired for her determination, "she wants and expects to live her life according to her own ideas, beliefs, morality and resources, regardless of what anyone else may feel or think about it" (Thompson 73). Readers have come to love her simply because there is no one else like Lisbeth Salander. She challenges the typical crime fiction novels of the past and makes way for a new, modern protagonist.

Lisbeth defies all gender roles laid out by society. She refuses to present herself on any other terms than her own, "Not only does she not look traditionally feminine, but she goes even a step further and, through her extremely short hair, multiple piercings in her eyebrows and nose, unusual tattoos, and rebellious clothing, ensures that her appearance is as unconventional as possible for a woman" (Rosenberg 52). Additionally, Lisbeth's intelligence and actions make her unconventional. Typically a male dominated

field, she conducts background checks and participates in computer hacking for Milton Security. Also, her lack of emotions and nurturing behavior lead her to be considered more masculine than feminine. Lisbeth has the effect of shocking readers and making us question how we perceive gender, "Watching someone defy our expectations of gender roles forces us to call into question some of the fundamental beliefs we share as a culture; it's kind of like having the rug pulled out from beneath you" (Rosenberg 55).

Lisbeth is viewed as radical within Swedish tradition, "She rejects the consensus doctrine and trusts only her own judgment and morality" (Thompson 72). She sets an example for all women that they can control their own destiny. Lisbeth refuses to become a victim and commits extremely violent acts to seek revenge. In the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, in which her government assigned guardian rapes her, she, then butchers he's stomach with a tattoo stating, "I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST" (Larsson/Tattoo 209). One commentator wrote, "protagonist extraordinaire Lisbeth Salander performs an act that made me laugh out loud and shiver with vicarious revenge" (Burstein 25). She is the perfect balance of aggressive, yet logical. However, Lisbeth never acts unjustly, "She operates outside society but not outside morality. She is an outlaw, or a sprite—a punk fairy" (Acocella). She never uses force or violence to punish someone who has never committed a harsh act on someone else, "she does not hesitate to use violence to right wrongs" (Burstein 26). Readers admire her for her strength and intelligence, a true paradigm of Swedish feminism.

When the Blomkvist-Salander partnership is established, Lisbeth's life is changed forever. She is introduced to a man that she not only begins to like, but also respects. Unlike the many male characters throughout the novels that need prestige and power,

Blomkvist lacks these typical male traits, "Mikael Blomkvist is so anti-masculinist that, in a narrative where people are brandishing chainsaws, he can take no forceful action" (Acocella). He would never hurt a woman or cheat to get ahead. However, he is somewhat conventional in the sense that women love him, that he avoids long-term commitment, and has a daughter from his past that he keeps in minimal contact with. This makes Blomkvist and Salander such an unlikely pair. Lisbeth has traits that make her seem somewhat fictional, such as the ability to knock out grown men at less than five foot tall. While Blomkvist is rather average, being career obsessed, yet admirable. Blomkvist accepts Salander's unique abilities, rather than striving to overcome her. Through the time they spend together in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, solving the mystery of Harriet Vanger, they become comfortable around one another and develop an attraction.

> Her [Salander's] problem was that she could not interpret her own feelings for him. Not since before reaching puberty had she lowered her guard to let another person get so close as she had with him. To be quite honest, he has a trying ability to penetrate her defenses and to get her to talk about personal matters and private feelings… It frightened her and made her feel naked and vulnerable to his will. (Larsson/Tattoo 459-60)

Blomkvist becomes one of the very few people that can spark an emotion within Lisbeth Salander, and for this reason, readers have a chance to see the humane side of her (Petterson).

The cyber world of true computer intellectuals is a community that Lisbeth Salander is very much apart of. Engaging in extreme computer hacking and globalized

social networking are techniques that come easily to her. Without technology and the abilities of Lisbeth, *The Millennium Trilogy* would not be able to begin or finish. In the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the unsolved mystery of Harriet Vanger's disappearance would have never been solved, nor would have Mikael Blomkvist been hired to investigate. In the second novel, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, the murders revolving around ex-Russian spy Alexander Zalachenko would have never come to a close. In the third novel, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, the scandal, which ultimately controlled Lisbeth's freedom, would have never been exposed. As her government enforced psychiatrist and guardian, Holger Palmgren, described her, "Lisbeth Salander isn't like normal people…Lisbeth is a very special girl" (Larsson/Fire 444). With traits such as a photographic memory and the ability to teach herself complicated math equations, Lisbeth's intelligence provides her with many advantages. Even though Lisbeth has the ability to use social networking and hacking to control technology and do just about anything, she never abuses this power.

Lisbeth's intense knowledge of computers leads her to make contacts within the cyber world that are on her level or even more advanced. Lisbeth and her hacker friends all have cyber identities such as "Wasp" and "Plague" in an elite online community called "Hacker Republic". Admittance to this community is only allowed via referral, and it is required to know another member personally prior to being accepted. Considering the exclusivity and small size of this community, there is a very supportive and helpful culture. Her most valued contact, known as "Plague", assists her with many things such as creating fake identifications and background checks on government officials. Lisbeth describes Plague as, "a 350-pound recluse who communicated almost exclusively via the

Internet and made Salander look like a miracle of social skills" (Larsson/Fire 327). This statement is ironic considering Lisbeth's already minimal human interaction. However, her relationships with her associates online allow her to combine resources and access information more easily. In *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, Plague assisted Lisbeth in hacking into the police information systems faster than humanly possibly. This revealed to Lisbeth police officer Ekstrom, who was leaking information to the media involving a triple murder investigation:

> Doing a hostile takeover, even with Plague's brilliant programme and his specially designed hardware, was a laborious process that required slipping bits of information into a computer one kilobyte at a time until a simple piece of software has been created…Forty-eight hours was not merely exceptional and it was theoretically impossible. Salander was impressed…Salander soon discovered that the person who had leaked the information to the media was Ekstrom himself. (Larsson/Fire 328-9)

The importance of online social networking within *The Millennium Trilogy* is emphasized in all three books by the continual cyber relationships and exchange of information, all in the pursuit of justice.

In a recent case involving social networking and activism, The Arab Spring, an uprising consisting of riots and protests organized via social media, began in December of 2010 in Tunisia. This movement has continued on to the present day and proven successful in making political, economic and social changes. One of the most memorable and effective demonstrations done during this period was seen in Egypt in January of

2011, “by using the social networking sites, activists organized and publicized the unprecedented protests that gave rise to the so-called Arab Spring” (Huang). Social media allowed groups to form and protesting events to be easily planned and executed. According to the Arab Social Media Report by the Dubai School of Government, “Social media – its rise and its new activist uses – have ‘played a critical role in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions and influencing change,’” the report stated (Huang). Wael Ghonim, a Google executive who took leave to help organize the protests in Egypt, was soon jailed for his efforts and then later released. In an interview following, he was quoted saying that if “you want to free a society, give them Internet access” (CNN). This allows people to read articles online not only about their country, but the entire world, as well as providing multiple platforms for freedom of speech. When being praised for his efforts, he emphasized how he was only behind the keyboard and that the revolution belonged to the Internet youth. Technology and social networking specifically is a very powerful tool and has many advantages, especially for those seeking to organize and fight for change.

The growth and existence of extreme computer hacking in our world today is a topic worth examining. For Lisbeth Salander and the “Hacker Republic”, it was a way for them to access information and create justice, they “did not generally spread computer viruses. On the contrary- [they were] adversaries of those idiots who created viruses ” (Larsson/Nest 242). However, this great power can easily be abused to cause destruction. In *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, hacking is taken to a high capacity when Lisbeth Salander, with the assistance of Plague, creates the fake Norwegian identity of Irene Nesser to steal dirty money from the criminal, Hans Wennerstrom. Regardless of the

moral justification behind stealing back from Wennerstrom, it is still a remarkable act of stealing and could create great chaos in the hands of the wrong people. By Stieg writing about the extensity of computer hacking, it makes the audience receptive to people's capabilities and is an indicator of the modern world. The contemporary theme of technology within *The Millennium Trilogy* makes it an informative piece of work in creating technological awareness.

In a current hacking scandal, a Middle East cyber war has taken hold between the countries of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Essentially a war between Jewish and Arab hackers, this adds a virtual element to the already existing conflicts in the Middle East. Being one of the greatest instances of data theft in Israel, a hacker who identified them self as a Saudi national and goes by the name of "Oxomar" published private credit card information of 400,000 Israelis online. Oxomar is the self-proclaimed leader of a Saudi Arabia based hacking group named "Nightmare". Being released in early January 2012, Oxomar described his findings as "a gift to the world for a new year" (Knell). Shortly to follow, an even higher number of Israeli credit card information was posted online. Of this large number, Israeli officials stated that over 20,000 credit card accounts were affected, and many cards were cancelled and reissued. Israeli deputy foreign minister, Danny Ayalon labeled the attacks as an act of terrorism and gave notice that Israel would "retaliate forcefully". After this occurrence, Mr. Ayalon's website was attacked. Retaliation took place from an Israel based hacking group named the "Israel Defenders" in releasing private information of the Saudi Arabians (Blomfield). An online post was titled, "Free Saudi's credit cards!" and consisted of names, e-mail addresses and phone numbers (Knell). The following month, hackers were responsible for interrupting the

computer systems of the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange and the national airline, El Al. This attack shows the extent to which hackers are taking action. From a study conducted in Israel, Internet experts praise the country for being "one of the world's best protected countries against cyber-attacks" (MacIntyre). However, the most recent events make it clear that times are changing and hackers are becoming more educated.

The presence of technology with *The Millennium Trilogy*, paired together with the success of the book series shows that computers are an international language. Essentially, the capabilities and functions of technology are the same, and this allows the subject of computers to be understood interculturally. Being written with intricate details as to the technological actions of Lisbeth and then translated into multiple languages from Swedish, it creates a possibility for confusion for global readers. However, it did quite the opposite. Readers are able to understand and be intrigued by the technological aspects of the story. Foreshadowing the possibilities of the future, technology poses questions such as the inability to enforce strict Internet regulations and the possibility of the need for a reorganization of society. Not only did the novels create a global assimilation through the universal interest of computers, but also educated a worldwide community about the limitless extents of technology.

There are many elements of crime within *The Millennium Trilogy*, mainly being crimes against women. For Lisbeth Salander, her whole life was spent being a victim to the power and control of a section of the Swedish government working to cover up a scandal. The lack of government transparency within society allowed for the unnecessary confinement, rape and public humiliation of Lisbeth Salander. The same goes for an additional community of young women. Lisbeth's father, Alexander Zalachenko, was a

part of a large prostitution ring based out of Sweden. The language used to refer to all women in the novels is usually along the lines of "whore", or any other derogatory form of name-calling. Continuous instances of female oppression are exemplified throughout all three books and enforce the overall concern for gender equality and the policing of ruthless corruption.

The occurrence of crimes against women begins early on in the book series and continues throughout all three novels. After being introduced to Lisbeth Salander, we are informed of her past and the hardships she underwent as a young girl and young woman. Once being made aware of the history of her mother's abuse by her father, as well as Lisbeth's own cases of abuse, we come to understand the relevance of female oppression within Lisbeth's life and *The Millennium Trilogy*. In an act of defending her already badly beaten mother, Lisbeth attacks her father by lighting him on fire while he is leaving her home. She acts on an impulse of defiance, for her father had beaten her mother so badly, that she lost all consciousness. This was not Lisbeth's last exposure to physical abuse. She went on to be violated by one of her childhood psychologists named Peter Teleborian, and then raped by her later government assigned guardian, Nils Bjurman. The carelessness of the adults and mentors surrounding Lisbeth's childhood combined with the oppression she has undergone in her adult life exemplifies some of the injustices that women face.

The act of rape is a horrifying crime that is often committed against women. Leaving women psychically and emotionally scared for the rest of their lives, this is a thought not regarded when opposed with the selfish and greedy acts of men. In a recent event, an accused rapist and NYPD police officer by the name of Michael Pena or the

"rape cop" was convicted on March 27, 2012 of three counts of predatory sexual assault (King). In a drunken state, Pena attacked a 25-year old school teacher at gunpoint on an August morning on her way to work. Pena's lawyer emphasized, "He's been remorseful from the very first moment his head cleared and he realized what a terrible thing he did" (Jurors). Jurors came to the verdict that no rape was committed due to DNA evidence that showed no actual vaginal penetration that occurred. Convicted of multiple accounts of assault, no rape charge was ultimately placed. The victim reportedly "hid her tear-streaked face in a huddle of family and friends as she left the courtroom, clearly upset after hearing the partial verdict" (Jurors). Pena will serve 10 years in prison for sexual assault charges as opposed to 25 to life served for convicted rapists (Moriarty).

Within *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, we follow the work of journalist Dag Svenson and his wife Mia Johanson in their quest for female social justice. Dag, working to expose a sex trafficking ring, in a feature for *Millennium* magazine, and Mia publishing a doctorial thesis following the Russian immigrant victims of the same sex trafficking operation. The introduction of these two characters into the story assists in exemplifying the extent to which crimes are committed against women. Mia describes, "Girls-Victims; Boys-perpetrators…several hundred girls are transported to Sweden every year to work as prostitutes, which in this case means making their bodies available to systematic rape" (Larsson/Fire 80). Dag and Mia make the theme of female oppression even more pertinent to the story of Lisbeth Salander and the overall message behind the novels. Due to the efforts of Dag and Mia to expose those involved in the prostitution ring, they are ultimately murdered to prevent the release of their findings. This couple

assists in showing readers the high magnitude of sex trafficking, prostitution and organized crime within society.

The relevance of Dag and Mia's story, as well as the overall theme of female oppression is seen in a current example of a prostitution ring based out of New York City. A Scottish-born woman named Anna Gristina was recently exposed for running a Manhattan based brothel. She was arrested on accounts of running a multimillion-dollar prostitution ring out of the Upper East Side of Manhattan and arraigned on February 23, 2012. Being a part of a five-year long investigation, she appeared in court in March on an account of promoting prostitution and pleaded not guilty. According to assistant district attorney, Charles Linehan, there are over 50 hours of video and audio recordings that have been accumulated. Through surveillance evidence, Gristina was heard saying "she has connections in law enforcement who are poised to help her out" (Peltz). Whether the statement is accurate or not, this is a similar instance of the government's involvement in organized crime within *The Millennium Trilogy*. Interrogators have been assigned to question Gristina, throwing lists of "Big Apple power players at her", hoping to gain the names of some of her clients. Gristina exclaimed in an interview at Rikers Island, where she is being detained, "It's not about me; its bigger than me…they are clearly trying to break me…I'd bite my tongue off before I'd tell them anything" (MacIntosh). It has been rumored that Gristina involved some minors in her operations, but stated "absolutely not", when formally being questioned. Her bail is set at $2 million and she is yet to be convicted (MacIntosh).

Although a work of fiction, *The Millennium Trilogy* contains many truths that can be applied to our world today. For instance, sexist crimes committed against women are

being acted out globally. It sheds light on the extremities to which people will go and the extent to which people victimize women. This book series narrates an on-going battle of one female's involvement with many perpetrators and her struggle for justice. By graphically describing Lisbeth's rape by someone in a position of power provides the reader with a clear depiction of the cruelty of such a crime. Relevant to the current case of a woman's rape by an NYPD officer, *The Millennium Trilogy* is indeed an accurate representation of the sad truth. Additionally, the novels are applicable to the current case of the Manhattan prostitution ring, which serves as an example of how women become objectified and exploited. For Lisbeth Salander, she conquered her own past and continued to fight to protect other women. This is an empowering lesson and call for social change by Stieg Larsson.

*The Millennium Trilogy* book series has sold an estimate of 65 million copies worldwide as of December 2011, and has been translated in 44 different languages (Millennium). Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, published the series in the United States. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* was released in the 2008, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* in 2009, and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* in 2010. As of August 2010, an average of about 50,000 copies was sold in the US per day (James). An estimate of 17 million was sold in the US as of April 2011 (Bosman). The third novel, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, was the most sold book in the US in 2010 according to *Publishers Weekly* (Millennium). Additionally, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* was the first e-book to sell over a million digital copies, and with combined sales of *The Girl Who Played with Fire and The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, reached over 3 million (Bosman). At least one of the three novels still remains within high

ranking on the New York Times Best Seller list as of April 15, 2012; *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* is ranked number ten under "Combined Print and E-Book Fiction", number two under "Paperback Trade Fiction", number seven under "Paperback Mass-Market Fiction", and number six under "Combined Hardcover and Paperback Fiction" (Best Sellers). Considering the book series' publication in 2008, it has remained in the top ten of the New York Times Best Seller list for the past four years.

Stieg received much acclaim and awards for his work in *The Millennium Trilogy*, including *USA Today*'s Author of Year award in 2010. Aside from all of the recognition and positive reviews of all three novels, there was the occasional critic that challenged Stieg's work. One reviewer expressed that Stieg portrayed an "ugly view of human nature, especially when it comes to the way Swedish men treat Swedish women" (Berenson). For some, they believed his portrayal was too dramatic and not accurate of Swedish culture. Additional criticism also challenged Blomkvist's character with statements such as, "He seems like a stock character" and "His relationships with his daughter and with Erika Berger seem half formed and weak…is he stoic or merely Swedish?" (Berenson). One of the first reviews to be written following the American release of *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* in 2008, referring to Blomkvist's exposure of Wennerstrom, stated, "The story of his [Blomkvist's] revenge is boring and implausible, relying heavily on lazy e-mail exchanges between characters…'Girl' ends badly (Berenson)." However, the extreme popularity of the book series speaks for itself in terms of criticism and global interest.

Additional attention was gained for the book series through three Swedish film adaptations and an American remake. In 2009, the three Swedish films were released,

"These films were huge hits, and they certainly bumped up the sales of the books" (Acocella). Having to bring the stories down to about two hours each, the films lacked a lot of the details; the screenwriters "got rid of a lot of the clutter and scrubbed off the sugar coating that Larsson put on the relationship between Mikael and Lisbeth" (Acocella). Casted in the Swedish films to play the role of Lisbeth Salander was Scandinavian actress Noomi Repace, whom portrayed an accurate depiction of Salander both physically and psychologically. Initially the first film was intended for commercial release, while the remaining two would be debuted on television. However, after the success of the first film, their intention changed. Actress Rooney Mara was casted in the American depiction, with much to live up to following Repace's performance, which was highly regarded. The American film was released in North American on December 21, 2011 (Millennium).

One of the reasons for such tremendous international success of *The Millennium Trilogy* is the incorporation of universal themes. Themes such as the power of technology, crimes against women, and the significance of feminism help to create global interest and understanding. Being filled with instances of true to life examples, Stieg writes with elements of both fantasy and realism. Stieg hoped "to do something new, something else, something that didn't look like other Swedish crime writing" (Moriarty). Therefore, he incorporated visions and ideas that he thought would draw people in and create a bigger audience. One of his past colleagues described, "He saw the dark side of Sweden. He saw racism, he saw discrimination, he saw violence against women. He saw many things that he wanted to change" (Moriarty). The questions and issues Stieg raises are not just concerns of the Swedish society, but of the global society. They are questions

of humanity. Is there a need for more Internet regulation? What can be done to prevent crimes against women? Should women succumb to the victimization of men? These questions transcend cultural barriers to keep readers thinking and questioning.

Stieg Larsson's writing is not only a representation of current issues within society, but also a depiction of the modern world. Incorporating topics of technology and feminism, Stieg carries his novels to an enlightened place of digital activism. In the new world of digital technologies, online blogging has become a place where people can explore the world. The future of independent journalism has arrived, where an individual can write and create an outcome that will promote social change. *The Millennium Trilogy* creates awareness of how we can fight for social justice, and read a crime novel in the bargain.

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