Genres at work: A holistic approach to genres in book publishing

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Abstract
This article presents a holistic approach to the study of genres in book publishing that includes formal aspects of literary texts, marketing strategies and categorisations used by producers, and perspectives on how these labels are perceived by readers and critics, as well as a temporal and spatial understanding of how genres evolve. The empirical point of departure is the recent boom in Nordic Noir, exemplified by the following three Swedish authors successful in the 21st century: Lars Kepler, Jens Lapidus and Camilla Läckberg. The discourses surrounding Nordic Noir and how these authors and their writing relate and get related to it are used as an example of how book-trade genres operate in multiple and complex ways, and how genres produce effects that move back and forth among creators, producers and consumers. It proposes a twofold model, where genres are understood as constituted by all of the relations between these areas together. Through Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg, the article shows how Nordic Noir has emerged over the years; how it changes with its publishing context; and how the genre’s internal discrepancy between literary content and marketing and reception is a crucial component in understanding Nordic Noir.

Keywords
Book marketing, book trade, Camilla Läckberg, genres, Jens Lapidus, Lars Kepler, literary genres, Nordic Noir, publishing, sociology of literature, Swedish crime fiction

Introduction
Starting with Aristotle’s Poetics (1996[c. 335 BC]), genres in literary studies have been understood as primarily categories of literary content and form or structure of content, albeit theorised in different ways (cf. Derrida, 1980; Fishelov, 1993; Fowler, 1982; Frow, 2015;
Todorov, 1976, 1990). Hence, science fiction is a different genre from crime fiction, and poetry is a different genre from prose due to the fact that their respective literary content diverges in relation to some prerequisite formal aspects: science fiction contains spaceships and future technology whereas crime fiction contains murders and police investigations; poetry makes use of aesthetics and rhythm in language to create meaning whereas novels are prose works of a certain length containing fictional material, and so on. Literary genres are thus traditionally used to classify literary works.

In recent decades, sociologists of literature and book historians have instead started to theorise literary genres as book-trade categories, as marketing strategies and as a foundational means of communication among publishers, authors and readers in the literary marketplace (cf. Berglund, 2016; Phillips, 2007; Squires, 2007; Steiner, 2015). Such an understanding of genre obviously lies quite far from how the term is most often used in literary studies, and closer to a rhetorical view of genres as social action (cf. Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010; Devitt, 2004, 2009; Miller, 1984), or work carried out in the reader-response tradition, where the genre’s implications for the reader’s horizon of expectation is emphasised (Jauss, 1982; cf. Todorov, 1990).

What none of the above approaches does is unite these perspectives into a more holistic account of literary genres in the contemporary book market. Amy Devitt might come closest, when she argues that genre studies should address both ‘the context and the form, without denying either’ (Devitt, 2009: 33), but she is not studying literary genres nor contemporary publishing specifically.

This article proposes a broad approach to the studies of literary genres in contemporary publishing that includes formal aspects of literary texts, marketing strategies and other kinds of categorisation by the producers, and perspectives on how these labels are perceived by readers. The empirical point of departure is the recent boom in Nordic Noir. As is commonly known, Nordic Noir has been widely popularised in both Scandinavia and on a global scale in recent years (cf. Berglund, 2012, Berglund, forthcoming 2021; Broomé, 2014; Svedjedal, 2012b), which in turn has fostered several book-length literary studies of the genre (cf. Åström et al., 2013; Berglund, 2017a; Bergman, 2014; Forshaw, 2012; Nestingen and Arvas, 2011; Peacock, 2014; Stougaard-Nielsen, 2017; Tapper, 2011), and innumerable articles.

The genre has become big business in the 21st century, both in publishing and in academia. I will not retell the whole story here since numerous excellent accounts of this development already exist (see above). Instead, I want to contrast and problematise the storytelling surrounding this genre with a focus on three principal aspects of how this genre is generally perceived: its settings, its social criticism and the impact of Stieg Larsson. These aspects are discussed specifically in relation to three of the most commercially successful Swedish crime writers in the 21st century: Lars Kepler, Jens Lapidus and Camilla Läckberg.

Through these three examples, the evolvement of Nordic Noir and the discourses that surrounds it are used to showcase how book-trade genres operate in many and complex ways, and how genres produce effects that move back and forth between creators, producers and consumers. I will argue for a twofold model, where the ‘genre’ in question is constituted by all of these relations taken together.

To concretise even further, the article’s research questions are the following:
How can the alleged importance of settings in Nordic Noir be understood in relation to Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg?

How do Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg relate and get related to Stieg Larsson?

How can social criticism in Nordic Noir be problematised by the successes of Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg?

How does literary content, marketing and reception interrelate in these three case studies? What does it say about Nordic Noir more generally?

How can the questions earlier be discussed more principally within the framework of the proposed twofold genre model?

The concept of Nordic Noir highlights the geographical inequalities in global publishing, but in a somewhat reversed way: fictional characteristics from the periphery (‘the Nordic’) are, by producers in the centre of publishing, transformed into assets that are packaged to be interesting to audiences that generally care very little for Scandinavian literature. At the same time, the often-stated seriousness and qualities connected to the genre are dependent on Scandinavia’s position as a rich part of Western Europe; the provided political perspectives are always spatially grounded. An analysis of Nordic Noir can thus in several ways lay bare the power dynamics and inequalities at work in contemporary publishing in a transnational perspective.

The article will first describe the theoretical points of departure and propose a twofold model for holistic genre studies. Then, the model will be put to work in three empirical sections that focus on how Nordic Noir is constructed, and temporally and spatially renegotiated in the sum of the interrelations between formal aspects of the texts, market strategies and categorisations and their reception and the consumers’ horizons of expectations. The article ends with some concluding remarks on the model, the case studies and how to study genres in contemporary publishing.

Theoretical framework

The article is theoretically anchored in the field of the sociology of literature, which with a generic definition can be said ‘to systematically analyse the relationships between fiction and society’ (Svedjedal, 2012a: 78). This is an overarching ambition here as well. Even though sociologists of literature often emphasise the interplay between book-trade structures and works of fiction on a conceptual or theoretical level (similar to the quote earlier), most research on contemporary publishing does de facto not take the literary texts themselves into account. As Clayton Childress (2017) has noted, there is generally a wide gap between those who study the production of culture and those who study cultural content.

This holds true also when it comes to studies of literary genres. The ambition here is to unite contextual approaches to literary genre, with the classificatory approaches of genres as textual form found in literary studies and to enable this merging of arenas both on the conceptual and the empirical level. Hence, the analyses are based on both literary texts and book-trade contexts; the conceptualisation of genre borrows from both publishing studies and literary studies, especially crime fiction studies.
To start with the latter, fictional works are generally understood in literary scholarship to belong to one of three more overarching genres: prose (epic), poetry (lyric) or drama. These foundational genres go back at least to Aristotle (1996[c. 335 BC]) and are categories based on literary form, not content. Moving up one level and considering only prose fiction, there are nowadays several well-established genres that categorise novels (and novellas) per their content and/or themes: fable, fantasy, crime fiction, science fiction, historical fiction and so on.

Things are even more complicated, though, since genre fiction in a literary context also holds normative claims upon the value of the work in question. Genre fiction is typically associated with pulp or popular fiction of poor quality, and most often, it functions as a contrast to literary fiction, which then stands for aesthetically interesting, complex and challenging literature. The latter can be said to reach its peak in high modernism and post-modernism literature. As Walter Benjamin (2005[1927–1930]) famously and tellingly stated regarding Marcel Proust: ‘[I]t has rightly been said that all great works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one’ (p.236).

This is a paradox of how the term genre operates in literary studies. At the same time, as all works of literature are understood to belong to certain genres (cf. Derrida, 1980: 65), it is an unfavourable valuation to call something genre fiction. This goes back to romanticism’s ideals of unique works of art and of poets writing in divine inspiration, unaffected by their surroundings (and most definitely unaffected by rigid genre regulations). By tradition, and because of these differences in status, scholars of literature have engaged far more in studies of literary fiction than genre fiction.

The strong association between genres and popular fiction in the contemporary literary realm is also ascribable to the fact that popular fiction is easier to categorise than literary fiction. Most works of popular fiction, at least the commercially successful ones, are written in one of a few well-established and distinct genres, the most important of which are crime fiction, romance, fantasy and science fiction. And each of these genres is constituted by a set of more or less strongly defined formal features (Glover and McCracken, 2012). As Ken Gelder (2004) notes, genres matter to all fiction, but to a much greater extent to popular fiction: ‘Popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction’; it ‘simply cannot live without it, both culturally and industrially’ (pp.1–2). Gelder’s remark is important as it highlights the bonds between form and context concerning genre for contemporary popular fiction.

Crime fiction is one of these well-established and popular genres, and the currently most commercially important of them all (Berglund, Forthcoming). It is also well-defined insofar as there are distinct formal prerequisites for inclusion in the genre. Even though these prerequisites are not fixed once and for all, and the core of the genre has been disputed (cf. Bennich-Björkman, [1978]1979), most crime fiction scholars today use a broad and inclusive genre definition centred on ‘the crime’ as the constituting element. For instance, John Scaggs (2005) argues that ‘a focus in crime, but only sometimes its investigation, has always been central to the genre’ (p.1). Stephen Knight (2010) makes a similar claim: ‘There is, though, always a crime (or very occasionally just the appearance of one) and that is why I have used the generally descriptive term “crime fiction” for the whole genre’ (p.xiii). Thus, in the sense of literary criticism, crime fiction is fiction centred on a crime, typically a murder. As I will show, it is a definition that at the same time is very formulaic and very stretchable.
Genres in publishing studies, however, are primarily understood as means for communication between producers and consumers. In ‘Genres in the marketplace’, Claire Squires (2007: 70–104) highlights the importance of genres in the publishing industry. She claims the taxonomic enterprise of genre labelling to be absolutely crucial in the contemporary book trade. Genres are from a very early stage (at the manuscript level) carefully discussed and negotiated among publishers, literary agents and authors in decisions concerning marketing, author branding, book covers and so on. She therefore calls for broad genre studies that cover the whole spectrum of what she labels a ‘sociology of genres’, that includes ‘books as material object, branding, imprints, book-shop taxonomies and literary prizes’ (Squires, 2007: 74).

At least to some extent, this has also been done empirically (e.g. Berglund, 2016; Phillips, 2007), often focusing on how books’ paratexts, Genette ([1987]1997) present and market – and thereby, function as thresholds into – the literary text that, in turn, affect the consumers’ horizons of expectations and thus the reading and reception of them. Also, the booksellers’ perspective should be emphasised in this context. As Angus Phillips(2007: 21–22, 29–30) rightly notes, publishers do not primarily sell books to readers, but to booksellers.

With a genre perspective similar to the earlier, a book sold as crime fiction is crime fiction, essentially. The formal textual requirements for genre inclusion found in literary criticism have been swapped out for marketing requirements; text has been replaced by context as the single most important factor behind how genres work and come into being. This is somewhat of an exaggeration, of course, since both sides recognise the importance of the other. For instance, Tzvetan Todorov ([1978]1990: 18–20) writes also of genres as events and as affecting readers’ horizons of expectations; Squires (2007: 70) also accounts for the importance of the literary text in genre matters. Nevertheless, there are neither any theoretical approaches nor any systematic empirical studies that fully merge these perspectives.

I argue that marketing, textual form and reception are closely intertwined in the contemporary book trade when it comes to matters of genre. Equally important, and spanning all three sectors, are the more generic preconceptions of genres, which often function as a foil when new genre labels are constructed or old ones are re-negotiated. These sectors depend on and constantly affect each other, and therefore, much is to be gained by also analysing them together.

As one might note, the three categories in Figure 1 closely resemble the broader but more vague actor concepts of creators, producers and consumers. This is a deliberate parallelism, although I also want to emphasise the differences between how actors behave, on one hand, and the more concrete functions that are part of the ongoing process of constituting and re-constituting genre, on the other hand. If we think of authors as creators, for instance, they often also take part in both the marketing and consumption of literature.

To conceptualise genre as proposed in Figure 1, a temporal and spatial layer of genres also needs to be taken into account. Figure 2 visualises how genres change over time and how dissemination into new geographical areas add new layers to the genre in question, which in turn affects the concept itself and leads to further revisions and alterations. In the last step of the figure, the domestic and global concepts together constitute the genre.
Figures 1 and 2 thus together provide a holistic understanding of how genres works in publishing.

To get the best picture of a genre, ideally, all parts of the twofold model should at least be touched upon. This does raise substantive demands on the researcher regarding the ability to grasp large, diverse and partly contradictory materials.

**Nordic Noir and the alleged importance of settings**

Lars Kepler (a pseudonym for the married couple Alexander Ahndoril and Alexandra Coelho Ahndoril), Jens Lapidus and Camilla Läckberg are three of the most popular and commercially successful Swedish crime writers of the 21st century. In Sweden, they have all, since their respective debuts in the genre, had permanent positions on the best-seller charts (Berglund, 2012), and they constantly attain a lot of media coverage. All of them are also widely disseminated over the world. According to Suecana extranea, a database covering Swedish literature in translation, there are 108 editions published in 25 languages of Lapidus, 496 editions in 32 languages of Läckberg and 297 editions in 32 languages of Kepler. After Stieg Larsson, these three authors represent the utter top segment of Swedish crime fiction regarding impact and commercial importance.

Together, Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg can also be said to visualise the width of Nordic Noir. Lars Kepler write high-pace thrillers influenced by an American tradition, with lots of bloody details, horror elements, serial killers and evil antagonists. Both authors in this duo started out as literary writers, and their – almost instantly exposed - pseudonym debut in the crime genre – *The Hypnotist* – became the most sold title in Sweden in 2009.

Camilla Läckberg, however, has since her debut in 2003 established herself as the Swedish queen of ‘cozies’, a sub-genre of crime fiction that uses the clue-puzzle pattern
of mysterious crime in a non-violent and cheery way (cf. Knight, 2010: 14). Some of the more important components in Läckberg’s fictional universe are the double protagonist constellation of a police officer and an author amateur sleuth, the murder motives that often go way back in history, and the settings of her series in the rural Fjällbacka, an idyllic coastal village in western Sweden.

Jens Lapidus, finally, made a much talked-about debut with Easy Money in 2006, a hard-boiled crime novel in the style of James Ellroy but set in urban Stockholm. All of his novels take place in and around the city, and deal with organised crime, heavy criminality and dark depictions of Swedish society in general.

Settings are important for all of them, but in distinctly different ways. While Läckberg uses idyllic nature and small town gossip to create a pleasant foundation for her murder plots, Stockholm’s concrete in miserable suburbs paralleled with the extravaganza and glamour of night clubs are the driving force in Lapidus’ thrillers. For Kepler, which is setting-wise the most diverse of the three, the crime scenes are always described in detail, with the victims found in strange, ritualistic arrangements.

These contrasts surface also in the marketing of the authors in Sweden. Läckberg’s book covers depict water, nature and old buildings; Lapidus’ dark and blurry unidentifiable urban milieus; Kepler’s images of victims. Thus, in a Swedish context, marketing, author branding and literary content for these authors are to a great extent connected. Since they share so few characteristics, they are seldom compared to each other, other than as writers of contemporary bestsellers.

When Läckberg, Lapidus and Kepler are published abroad, as parts of the wave of Nordic Noir, their respective author brands are still different from one another, but yet much more similar than in Sweden. Previous research has noted that the perhaps most apparent marketing feature of Nordic Noir is the gloomy and snow-covered book covers that by default are used for the genre outside Scandinavia (Berglund, 2017b; Broomé, 2014; Nilsson, 2018;
Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). This is indeed also the case for Läckberg ([2005]2013; [2014]2016), who have several covers in translations that showcase ice and snow (e.g. The Ice Princess, The Ice Child (2016); The Stonecutter (2013)). The book covers for Kepler ([2009]2018, [2011]2019, [2012]2018) are more diverse, but typical Nordic Noir attributes appear in several cases, as in the snowflakes on the recent US paperback editions of The Hypnotist (2018), The Fire Witness (2018) and The Sandman (2019). An extreme yet typical example of this exotification is Jens Lapidus’ Never Fuck Up ([2008]2010), which deals with organised crime in urban Stockholm, but where the cover of the Italian edition (2010) is fronted by a frost-covered reindeer.

Thus, Nordic Noir is a global label on a genre that in its home regions is simply called crime fiction; its Nordicness is only relevant to frame when outside of Scandinavia, because it is then that the Nordic or Scandinavian label applies and becomes something exotic.² Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (2016) has summarised this relationship aptly:

Nordic crime fiction, in other words, is perhaps only really ‘Nordic’ when viewed or read from abroad – when published, marketed and sold in bookshops, book fairs or at broadcasting trade fairs, where the branding of national peculiarities is essential for attracting the attention of potential funders, publishers and book buyers in a crowded, globalised field. (p.4)

That genres transform when they travel and are marketed differently at home and abroad is logical, but it is nevertheless important to highlight, as it is a key aspect of how genres operate in contemporary publishing. A novel becomes something different when translated and targeted towards an audience in another national context. This does not mean that setting is irrelevant for Swedish crime fiction in Sweden, but merely that other kinds of settings are highlighted and exoticised there – primarily, coastal regions popular among Swedish tourists, as in the case of Läckberg, and urban criminal underworld milieus, as in the case of Lapidus. This diversity in settings gets lost in translation, which is interesting due to the stark emphasis put on them in discourses surrounding the genre. It seems like the genre label Nordic Noir is not primarily about settings, after all, but origin.

For Kepler, Lapidus and Läckberg, framing and content drifts apart when the ‘Nordicness’ gets emphasised at the expense of their individual author brands, which are much less strong abroad than at home in Sweden. These three disparate authors are filtered through global genre concepts that seek to unite them, which can be noticed also in the reception of their work. Consider the following three review excerpts:

One of the reasons for the success of Scandinavian crime fiction in this country is its unsentimental readiness to confront the less admirable aspects of human behaviour. Here, Läckberg’s stamping ground of Fjällbacka is the scene of a small tragedy: the body of a little girl is found in a fisherman’s net. (Forshaw, 2010, review of Läckberg’s The Stonecutter)

The Sandman is Nordic noir at its best: a modern, nightmarish fairytale with an heroic, intuitive policeman, a monstrous villain and a maiden in distress. (Creer, 2014, review of Kepler’s The Sandman)

If you’re having withdrawal symptoms after Henning Mankell wrote finis to the chronicles of Kurt Wallander, remember that it’s possible to take alternative journeys down the mean streets
of Swedish cities. If you’re hardy enough to tackle crime narratives drenched in vitriol, grit your teeth and tackle Jens Lapidus’s lacerating Stockholm Noir trilogy. (Forshaw, 2012, review of Lapidus *Easy Money*)

In these excerpts, almost any aspect of a crime story from Scandinavia is said to be typical for the genre Nordic Noir. The ‘unsentimental readiness to confront the less admirable aspects of human character’ suits Läckberg’s stories. A ‘modern, nightmarish fairytale with an heroic, intuitive policeman, a monstrous villain and a maiden in distress’ is an accurate description of Kepler’s novels. The perhaps most interesting judgement concerns Lapidus. It indeed states that he is a different author from Mankell and similar Swedish crime writers, but still manages to group him together with Nordic Noir. Country of origin trumps content.

That the same content is given different attributions when contexts change makes sense when regarded in a market perspective. At the same time, it alters one of the core arguments made about the uniqueness of Nordic Noir in a global perspective, namely the importance of how the genre depicts its locations. For Nordic Noir is not a unique branch of crime fiction when it comes to depicting places. In fact, a strong focus on locations and settings can be said to be foundational for the entire genre of crime fiction (cf. Erdmann, 2009; Waade, 2013). What differ are the locations that are being depicted.

What started out as a marketing strategy (a focus on the Nordic settings) has emerged into more or less a genre-truth (Nordic Noir is recognised by its settings and illustrative depictions of landscapes). Scholars who critically examine the genre of Nordic Noir and understand it as primarily branding or marketing also credit the importance of location and place in the genre. For instance, Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade (2017) explain the title of their book *Locating Nordic Noir* from such a standpoint:

Instead of asking ‘what is Nordic Noir?, which in itself is a very difficult question to answer, this book asks “where is Nordic Noir?”’. This enables us to pinpoint a conspicuously spatial modus operandi, a topography, in the accentuation of place in Nordic Noir [. . .]. (p.10)

Since the concept of Nordic Noir is analytically vague, the solution becomes to focus on the most obvious unifying factor, namely the location (which I have tried to show is something that rather concerns origin than location). And in so doing, the connection between Nordic Noir and its depicted locations becomes further emphasised.

The next Stieg Larsson?

But the impact of different levels of framing goes beyond marketing. Since global outreach is becoming steadily more important for Swedish publishers, literary agents and authors, it has also started to affect the very creation and production of Swedish crime fiction. As Karl Berglund (2017b) argues, ‘Swedish crime fiction seems to be increasingly written and produced with translation, adaptation, and global popularity in mind, at the same time as the impact of the genre is due to its regional characteristics’ (pp.85–86).

Among the example writers in this article, such a pattern is most apparent in the case of Camilla Läckberg. In 2019, she launched a new series with *The Golden Cage*, released
in English in July 2020, and starring the heroine Faye, who gets betrayed and cruelly dumped by her billionaire husband. Faye, who originally helped him to build up his fortune and then sacrificed her own career for him and their family, decides to take revenge. And indeed she does, at the same time as she builds up a fortune of her own – because Faye is super smart and ruthless when it comes to accomplishing what she wants. She also enjoys sex on her own terms, a theme which is depicted frequently throughout the novel (Läckberg, 2020).

The similarity to the well-known rape-revenge story of Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy is of course no coincidence. The main selling point for most Scandinavian crime writers abroad in the 2010s has been that they resemble Stieg Larsson (‘the next Stieg Larsson’, as it is often phrased). This holds true for Läckberg as well as Kepler and Lapidus, and surfaces, among other places, in publisher’s presentations and blurbs on their book covers:

[I]rresistible for fans of Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbo. (Läckberg, 2016)

At last: an epic European thriller to rival the Stieg Larsson books. (Lapidus, 2018)

Perfect for fans of Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbo. (Kepler, 2019)

No matter their significant individual differences, Läckberg, Lapidus and Kepler are all marketed in a similar fashion, as the potential follow-up read after Stieg Larsson (and Jo Nesbo). At least to some extent, it was the mania around Larsson and Salander that cemented Nordic Noir as a more long-lasting genre concept. To many readers, Nordic Noir still equals Lisbeth Salander.

Läckberg, whose original Fjällbacka series (2003–2018) lies far from Larsson, has with her new series transformed her writing into a product that, based solely on the literary content, actually makes sense to compare to the Millennium trilogy. Is Faye the new Salander? Obviously, the resemblance between these two strong, female, anti-hero avengers is used in the marketing of the novel, for instance in the blurbs attached to the book cover and used in online retail stores:

Comparisons to Gone Girl and Lisbeth Salander will undoubtedly be drawn, and the cunning revenge plot does justify those parallels, but there are satisfying themes of redemption, loyalty, and power here that push the story beyond vengeance. A darkly glamorous and utterly absorbing departure. (Booklist)

Läckberg outdoes herself with this delectable tale of revenge . . . Sexy . . . exquisite . . . scorching . . . The poignant insights into women’s capacity for self-sacrifice, multidimensional characterizations, and celebration of female ingenuity will resonate with many. Läckberg reinforces her position as the thriller queen of Scandinavia. (Publishers Weekly)

The Golden Cage is a twisting, brutal tale of betrayal and revenge. Lackberg paints a vivid portrait of a dark and complicated anti-heroine who is both the abused and abuser, victim and victimizer. A chilling, timely read sure to thrill her international legion of fans! (Lisa Unger, New York Times best-selling author of The Stranger Inside (Läckberg, 2020: back cover))
The publisher’s presentation text of the novel is written in the same vein:

An exhilarating new novel from a global superstar – a sexy, over-the-top psychological thriller that tells the story of the scorned wife of a billionaire and her delicious plot to get her revenge and bring him to his knees. (Läckberg, 2020: back cover)

Michael Tapper has showed that the ‘Swedish sin’ angle was frequent in the British and American reception of the Millennium trilogy (Tapper, 2014: 258–259). Läckberg and her publisher and agent have taken note of this. In the Fjällbacka series, sex was a rare event. In both The Golden cage and the sequel Vingar av silver (Wings of silver, not yet released in English) explicit sex scenes are recurring. Ironically, then, erotica gets incorporated into Swedish crime fiction to fit global discourses on ‘Swedish sin’ and of explicit sex as a character trait for Nordic Noir. Global ideas of the local start to change the local. Läckberg is giving the world the kind of Nordic Noir it longs for.

Content affects global marketing and reception, which in turn start to affect the new stories written for the market, increasingly so to please the much larger, international audience. The genre Nordic Noir has thus become a loop of ongoing negotiations that involves all parts of the proposed genre model: literary content, marketing and reception. And it is the constant flux of these parts that together constitutes the genre.

Of course, Läckberg has still a voice of her own, far from Larsson. Her new series contains crime fiction that borrows from feel-good, romance and erotica. But it is beyond doubt that parts of the plot and the main characters has been partly modelled by the Millennium trilogy and its worldwide success.

**Nordic Noir and social criticism**

A second, supporting idea about what characterises Nordic Noir is that the genre is permeated by seriousness, societal realism and political engagement. This goes for Nordic Noir in general, and for Swedish crime fiction, in particular. For example, the editors to Scandinavian Crime Fiction in the introduction state that the genre is ‘gloomy, pensive and pessimistic in tone’ (Nestingen and Arvas, 2011: 2), and literary critic Barry Forshaw (2012), in his more popularly written overview Death in a Cold Climate, emphasises the literary qualities of the genre:

Even the least ambitious Nordic fiction, however, is often prepared to take some audacious steps into the unknown, producing fiction which can function as both popular product and personal statement from the author. (p.3)

Today, this connection is well-established and agreed upon by practically everyone in the literary field; it is emphasised in the marketing of the genre (Berglund, 2016), by many authors in the genre (cf. Berglund, 2016: 123–131, 172–174; Forshaw, 2012: 90; Jørgensen, 1994: 2; Kirkegaard, 2013: 179), and by most scholars and literary critics (e.g. Agger, 2010; Brodén, 2008; Kärrholm, 2014; Nestingen, 2008; Stougaard-Nielsen, 2017; cf. Berglund, 2017a: 128–133).

A curious thing about this picture is that it emanates from two of the most prominent authors in the genre: Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. They wrote 10 famous Swedish crime
novels together in the 1960s and 1970s that are commonly regarded as the origin of Nordic Noir. Sjöwall and Wahlöö were outspoken Marxists – members of the Swedish Communist Party and influenced by Mao and the New Left – that wanted to make political use of the popular genre of crime fiction, which they themselves despised and found to be bourgeois and reactionary. They understood their 10-novel series ‘The story of a crime’ as an explicit political literary project, with the ambition to enlighten the common man. In 1971, they published a manifesto that stated this purpose clearly:

In the crime novel the motivation of the main players is always seen in relation to other people. The criminal is inconceivable as completely alone. He is always acting inside society. Crime is a kind of social manifestation in a negative sense. [. . .] Our intention with the series The Story of a Crime, projected to be in ten parts, is to analyse a bourgeois welfare state in which we try to see crime in relation to its political and ideological doctrines. (Sjöwall and Wahlöö, [1971]1972, my translation)

The manifesto and its principal ideas had an instant and massive impact and set the tone for discussions concerning Swedish crime fiction – in Sweden and beyond. As Michael Tapper (2011: 246–263) has shown, it is remarkable how uncritical the reception has been among critics and scholars.

The birth of the concept of Nordic Noir as a unique genre, different from its Anglo-Saxon counterparts, is thus, not only due to the novels Sjöwall and Wahlöö wrote (which were influenced by, among others, the American crime writer Ed McBain, see, for example, Tapper, 2011). To an even greater extent, it is because of how these books were framed and marketed – first, by the authors themselves and then soon followed by publishers, critics and academics. What Sjöwall and Wahlöö really invented was the storytelling of Swedish crime fiction as political to a greater extent than other crime fiction. Still today, this is said to characterise the genre as a whole.

However, the only quantitative, large-scale investigation of the entire top segment of the genre that has been carried out on contemporary Swedish crime fiction tells a different story. In Död och dagshämtningar, Karl Berglund (2017a) shows that politics is, in general, not very salient in the genre. The commercial impact has broadened the genre and incorporated a large variety of stories under the same wide genre umbrella.

The three authors in this case study confirm the diversity of the genre. Camilla Läckberg has no outspoken political ambitions, and her books are optimistic in tone rather than pessimistic. The private life of the amateur sleuth is an important part of all of her books, and the murder plots are generally complicated, historical, private and unlikely. In The Ice Princess (Läckberg, [2003]2008), a mother murders her son’s friend because of the risk that she would let anyone know that they were exposed to sexual assault as children. In The Stonecutter (Läckberg, [2005]2013), a grandma drowns her granddaughter because of the girl’s psychiatric diagnosis, which the grandma thought of as harmful. Furthermore, Läckberg often deploy poison as a murder method (e.g. in The Stonecutter and The Stranger (Läckberg [2006]2012)), which in this context can be understood as a direct homage to the British whodunit tradition in the style of Agatha Christie.

Neither author of the duo Lars Kepler have any political ambitions, and in interviews, the authors are open about their American influences and that they first and foremost
seek to entertain the reader ([unattributed], 2011). Kepler use a lot of violent details, and the murders are brutal and sadistic – and regularly performed by evil and/or mentally disturbed psychopaths and serial killers. In *The Hypnotist* (Kepler, [2009]2018), one of the two killers fantasises that she is the mother of others’ children, which leads to harassment, violence and death. In *The Fire Witness* (Kepler [2011]2019), the killer, who works at a home for abused girls, himself repeatedly sexually abuses and kills girls. In *Stalker* (Kepler [2015]2020), a female serial killer tries to protect the love of her life by killing all females in his surroundings, and this in a very spectacular fashion – she sends a short movie clip of the victims alive in their homes to the police, just before the murders. When the police arrives, the young women are killed through repeated razor cuttings, and the bodies are propped up in unnatural positions, dressed only in underwear.

Jens Lapidus’ crime novels lie closer to the branding of the Nordic Noir genre in their dark depictions of Swedish society and the author’s emphasis on the realism in his stories (e.g. TT Spektra, 2008; Wallgren, 2015). More irregular is the choice of killers as protagonists, and the hard-boiled language, which the author in interviews explicitly states as influenced by American crime writers, and James Ellroy in particular:

Q: Which book has been the most important to you?

A: LA Confidential by James Ellroy (Stenberg, 2014, my translation)

[H]is role model James Ellroy [. . .]. For ‘The VIP room’ he has also been inspired by buried crime writers such as Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald, but to an even higher extent to the very much alive Boston Author Dennis Lehane. All colleagues with interest in the city as a stage and psychological architecture of characters rather than bullet holes in corpses (Cederskog, 2014, my translation)

Perhaps, Nordic Noir today is best described as heterogeneous when it comes to its literary content, at the same time as its crime fiction core remains intact. All of the examples earlier cling to different but standardised formulaic elements in crime fiction, and none are particularly ‘Nordic’ or political; to a great extent, they resemble established conventions found in British and American contemporary crime fiction. Hence, the stories within the genre are diverse but with strong roots in British and American crime fiction, whereas the stories about the genre are distinct and focus on Nordic unicity and political content.

This discrepancy is important to note in itself, but matters are, I argue, even more complex. The storytelling about the socially engaged Swedish crime fiction is by now so entrenched that it affects all producers and consumers of these fictions. Today, publishers as well as authors, readers and critics often use this ‘political origin’ of Swedish crime fiction in legitimating the genre as something important, something beyond pure entertainment. Not least in academia, this perspective is prevalent. Scandinavian popular culture is understood to have ‘taken on a significant moral and political role as a vehicle of critique’ (Nestingen, 2008: 20); Nordic Noir is seen as ‘united in worrying about and nostalgically longing for the good home and the comforts of a just, egalitarian welfare society in a turbulent and increasingly globalized world’ (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2017: 11);
serial killers in the genre are interpreted ‘as an extreme expression of the lack of emotions in an individualized society’ (Brodén, 2008: 284, my translation); and so on.

There seems to be a shared eagerness in emphasising the connection between Nordic Noir and politics, since it raises the status of the genre; Nordic Noir has been established as a genre beyond, or rather above, genre fiction. The relatively low status of crime fiction in the literary realm is used as a contrast to boost the importance of Nordic Noir, both in Scandinavia and abroad. In relation to both layers in the proposed twofold model, the ‘general genre understanding’ of crime fiction is a crucial component of the establishment of Nordic Noir. The latter is seen as not just crime fiction, but as something else, something with literary and political qualities – and therefore, something easier to legitimise. I repeat the words of Barry Forshaw (2012): ‘fiction which can function as both popular product and personal statement from the author’ (p.3).

**Genres at work: constituting Nordic Noir**

To return to the model (see Figures 3 and 4), Swedish crime fiction has been constituted and negotiated back and forth among the three nodes over the past 50 years. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sjöwall and Wahlöö (creators) created an image of Swedish crime fiction as (left-wing) political, both in their crime novels (literary content) and in their framing of them (storytelling). This was done deliberately in direct opposition to established notions of crime fiction (general understanding literary genres), and therefore, quickly became popular and appropriated by publishers (producers), readers and critics (consumers), and other authors (creators), who – consciously and/or unconsciously – could use it to legitimise their own respective production, consumption, criticism and writing of Swedish crime fiction. This, in turn, fostered a new generation of Swedish crime writing that connected to the legacy of Sjöwall and Wahlöö (first Henning Mankell, then, for example, Liza Marklund, Arne Dahl, Leif G.W. Persson, Stieg Larsson, and Anders Roslund and Börge Hellström), and a new generation of crime fiction readers and critics. Since the late 1990s, the genre has more than doubled its market share in Sweden, and since the second half of the 2000s around half of all bestsellers in fiction – in all categories – have been domestic crime fiction (Berglund, 2012).

The popularisation of Henning Mankell and others in Germany in the 1990s led to the creation of the genre label ‘Schwedenkrimi’, and when particularly Stieg Larsson hit the bestseller charts abroad in the 2000s, the global interest in crime fiction from Scandinavia rapidly rose to heights never seen before. Around 2010, the genre was labelled Nordic Noir, thus in the same way as ‘Schwedenkrimi’ emphasising not only social criticism but also the exotic elements of the stories’ settings. Much due to this foreign exoticness, Nordic Noir has a higher status abroad than Swedish crime fiction has in Sweden. Camilla Läckberg, for instance, who has low status in the genre in Sweden, was awarded the Grand prix de littérature policière in 2008, the most prestigious crime fiction prize in France. (For issues on status and gender in Nordic Noir seen from the producers’ perspective, see further Berglund, 2016: 89–120, 174–177; Alacovska, 2017.)

The literary texts are, of course the same, although questions have been raised over whether translators improve the literary quality (cf. Pennlert, 2011). In the longer run, however, the global impact is likely to transform new stories written in the genre. Genres
attract - and therefore, affect – publishers as well as writers and readers. As Claire Squires (2007) rightly states, genres are ‘as much an agency in the publishing field as publishers, booksellers, and the other symbolic brokers, though it also affects and is affected by them’ (p.72). Today, Nordic Noir as a genre concept works both on the global and the domestic level, and these levels reciprocally affect each other. And as foreign-rights sales grow in importance, publishers and writers might increasingly incorporate elements stated as typical of the genre (i.e. Nordic landscapes, dark realism, social criticism, strong female leads, sex) to please the larger, international crowd. Among the
investigated writers in this article, such a pattern is most apparent regarding Camilla Läckberg and her content switch. Another example is David Lagercrantz’s expansion of the Stieg Larsson universe, a Nordic Noir product born solely out of commercial causes.

Still, most stories in the Nordic Noir genre are to a large extent fairly traditional crime fiction, firmly rooted in old conventions of 20th-century crime fiction. What is said to distinguish Nordic Noir as a genre is mostly apparent on the surface of the literary works – names, places, character gimmicks and so on – and in the marketing of the genre. When it comes to creating suspense, plots, narrative arcs and genre clichés (bad guys, good guys, innocent victims), Swedish crime fiction is very similar to established crime fiction, written either in the British (Läckberg) or the American (Kepler and Lapidus) tradition.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show the complexity and historicity of genres in contemporary book publishing by using three popular Swedish writers, and their relation to the conceptualised genre of Nordic Noir, as empirical case studies. I propose a twofold model that is applied to the cases, and that suggests a holistic approach to investigate how genres operates. To summarise, I argue the following:

1. All segments and actors in the book market participate in the constitution of literary genres, and they all mutually affect each other and the genre in question.
2. Genres are geographically bound and change with their context.
3. Genres are historical phenomena that are in a state of constant flux.
4. All sub-genres are related to their main genres, but all genres are also related to the concept of genre in general and the low status that comes with genres and genre fiction.
5. Discrepancies between a genre’s content, reception and marketing are not to be seen as inconsistencies, but rather as parts of the constitution of the genre itself.

In relation to Nordic Noir, in general, and Lars Kepler, Jens Lapidus and Camilla Läckberg, in particular, all of these five points surfaces: the interconnections between the principal nodes in the genre model (literary content, marketing, reception) are in constant flux; the authors are marketed in different ways abroad and at home; the conceptualisation of the genre Nordic Noir has a history, and it has always been related and compared to crime fiction, in general; and the discrepancy between content and framing is apparent for all three authors – Kepler and Läckberg get politicised, they all get exotified, they all get grouped together despite their large individual differences.

The contradiction between text and context seems to be a part of the explanation for the success of Nordic Noir. To a great extent, it is a genre that consists of crime fiction written in the British or the American tradition, but set in the Nordic countries. Such content is popular among many readers. But what the genre framing also provides to its readers is a higher literary status due to the moral, political and (in a global context) exotic storytelling that surrounds the genre. And this admixture of highbrow and lowbrow is applauded by all parties involved: authors, readers, publishers, agents, critics,
The key to understand Nordic Noir is the productive discrepancy between the stories within the genre and the stories surrounding it.

Finally, Nordic Noir lays bare and complicates the inequalities and power dynamics involved in transnational publishing in relation to genres. The exotified framing of the periphery – ‘the Nordic’ – is to a large extent produced by agents and publishing houses in the centre of global publishing. It is a kind of positive othering that depends on Scandinavia’s special place and reputation in the world, but that still produces problematic statements and images of the North. Furthermore, the classificatory device of genre is in the case of Nordic Noir explicitly used to single-out certain works of crime fiction on spatial grounds. In so doing, the concept of genre gets somewhat transformed: from classification based on content to classification based on origin. And since only Scandinavians can produce Nordic Noir, the genre’s political perspectives hailed by critics and academics globally are per definition Scandinavian perspectives. Positive connotations of Scandinavia are an important part of the genre formula itself.

Hence, Nordic Noir is a genre that has the inequalities of global publishing built-in. It is only accessible to producers from certain West European countries. It is produced both from the periphery and from the centre. And it is produced both for the periphery and for the centre. Genre-wise, Nordic Noir is simultaneously top dog and underdog.

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**Notes**

1. *Suecana extranea* is produced by Kungl. Biblioteket, the national library of Sweden. Although the database has the ambition to cover all publications of Swedish literature abroad, there are, in fact, lots of publications that never reach the database. Statistics from *Suecana extranea* are thus to be regarded as low estimates (cf. Hedberg, 2012).

2. This exotification of the Nordic countries is a rather special case of exotification of the not-so-unfamiliar or the-almost-well-known that has been labelled as *Nordientalism* (Hauge, 2003) or *borealism* (Schram, 2011; cf. Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016).

3. There are, however, cases where Non-Scandinavians have written literature framed as Nordic Noir. One of the better-known examples is ‘Der Sturm’, a crime novel set in Sweden and written by the Swedish-sounding pseudonym Per Johansson, that was later exposed as two German writers.

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