

“Far Darker than the IKEA Paradise of Sensible Volvos”: American Perceptions of Sweden Filtered Through Crime Fiction

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***Abstract:** This study looks at references made to Sweden in U.S. newspaper and magazine articles discussing Swedish crime fiction. Books by authors such as Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell have enjoyed a great deal of popularity in the United States in recent years, and institutions such as the Swedish Institute in Stockholm have expressed the hope that this popularity will result in greater interest in and knowledge about Sweden. The findings of the study, however, suggest that such is not necessarily the case. U.S. media references to the home country of Larsson and Mankell tend to follow stereotypes and focus on the country's cold climate, or to see Sweden solely as the origin of products and pop-culture phenomena already familiar to Americans, such as IKEA, Volvo and ABBA. The study considers this view of Sweden part of a larger trend in U.S. mass media away from politics and social issues and toward consumer-oriented news.*

***Keywords:** national stereotypes, U.S. mass media, Sweden, crime fiction, brands*

For a number of years, studies have noted a lack of knowledge of geography and foreign affairs in the United States. In 2006, for instance, a survey conducted by *National Geographic* and The Roper Center of Public Opinion concluded that young Americans demonstrated “a limited understanding of the world” due to a lack of basic geography knowledge (2006 National Geographic-Roper Survey of Geographic Literacy). Attempts to explain this lack of knowledge have tended to look at what Americans can find

about the world beyond their country's borders in their news media, and criticism of what can be found there has often been severe. A 2011 study that looked at the foreign coverage in American mass media over a period of 56 years concluded, for instance, that "the U.S. news media's window on the world has shrunk even as the United States has become more connected politically and economically to the rest of the world" (Jones et al.432).

Some critics have seen the decline in the coverage of foreign news as directly related to a general re-definition of news in general by U.S. mass media. In a 2004 book review, Todd Gitlin described it as a dual phenomenon of "the infotainment boom and the foreign-news bust," referring to the tendency in all media, including newspapers and magazines, to put increasing emphasis on topics such as celebrities, fitness, personal finances and leisure at the expense of international affairs (Gitlin). The inclination to favor such "soft news" had been evident since the end of the Vietnam War, claimed a 2001 column in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, but the fall of the Soviet Union combined with "an enormous appetite for soft news" among Americans in the 1990s to make it particularly strong during that decade ("Global Blinders"). Even the *Wall Street Journal*, long a bastion of traditional news coverage, announced in 2004 that it would add sections on personal finance, health and travel (Fine).

This article is concerned with the implications of this shift in media content for the knowledge that U.S. newspapers and news magazines provide about the world outside the United States. The premise is that news stories need not be the only conduits of information about other countries that the mass media supply. As the print media discussed here pay increasing attention to entertainment and leisure, some of the films, books and trends that journalists report on are from abroad and thus have the potential to convey information about and impressions of the countries where they originated.

In fact, some institutions whose task it is to promote their respective home countries abroad appear to count on such being the case. As an example, the foreign success of the *Millennium* trilogy of Stieg Larsson, one of the authors discussed in this study, prompted the Swedish Institute in Stockholm to claim in a 2012 report that the books had "increased the interest in Sweden as a nation," an interest that could aid the Institute in its mission to "create mutual relationships with other countries" (*Sweden beyond the Millennium 3*).

With the Institute's hopeful vision in mind, this study looks at references made to Sweden, a country seldom appearing in foreign-news reports in U.S. newspapers and magazines, as they surface in reviews and other dis-

cussions of Swedish crime fiction, a genre that has enjoyed considerable success in the United States in recent years. Because soft-news articles are examined here as an alternative to traditional news stories as sources for information about other countries, the pieces discussed here are, for the overwhelming part, not reviews by literary critics that offer literary analysis. Instead, although different in focus from more traditional types of news media content such as politics, they are nonetheless news stories that are intended to alert readers to novel sources of entertainment; as such, they primarily provide plot summaries and information about authors. They are written, then, not by literary critics but by reporters who have been assigned entertainment and leisure as their journalistic domain, and they serve a journalistic rather than literary purpose.

As will be discussed in the conclusion, the study shows that although writers of such articles frequently convey perceptions of Sweden, those perceptions tend to be superficial and stereotypical and not necessarily useful for an understanding of Swedish culture and society—or for creating the mutual relationships between Sweden and the United States envisioned by the Swedish Institute. They also have a tendency to portray Sweden mainly as a producer of consumer goods familiar to Americans.

To locate articles appropriately representing general-interest newspapers and news magazines, searches were conducted in the main media databases in the United States: *ProQuest Newsstand*, *NewsBank*, *Newspaper Source* and *LexisNexis Academic*. This study focuses on news media because of their reach, with the assumption that they, in contrast to strictly literary journals, furnish more Americans with information and opinion about books. To tie the material under study to the popularity of Swedish crime novels (and produce a manageable amount of material), the search terms “Stieg Larsson” and “*Millennium*” were used, as Larsson’s three novel have been extraordinarily popular in the United States in the last few years, widely distributed and occupying top positions on bestseller lists. To broaden the scope beyond one author, a search was also made for “Henning Mankell.” Although Mankell’s success in the United States has been nowhere near as spectacular as that of Larsson, his books have, on several occasions, been listed among the top-10 bestsellers by the trade publication *Publisher’s Weekly*, for instance in 2010 and 2011 (Schuessler; “Here are the New York Times Best-sellers”). Other authors often surface when American media discuss Swedish crime fiction as a genre; comments about Sweden as it emerges from reviews of their books are discussed here, too.

Before looking at what kind of image of the country emerges from crime-fiction discussions, however, it is necessary to provide a broader context for American views of Sweden.

Looking Across the Atlantic: American Attitudes toward Sweden

When Sweden's Department of Foreign Affairs (UD) conducted an extensive survey in 2005 that sought to discover the image of Sweden abroad, one of its findings was that expatriate Swedes in the United States thought that "Sweden is not covered at all in the media" in America (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet* 176). Studies that focus specifically on U.S. news coverage of Sweden are rare and somewhat dated, but they tend to support that impression. Back in 1993, for instance, Lianne Fridriksson examined general U.S. news coverage of Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia and concluded that "were it not for the reporting of various isolated crises, overall coverage of Scandinavia in the American media would be so scant as to be practically non-existent" (qtd. in Ito 71). Previous studies of television news and elite newspapers also found that Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries were "mostly ignored" (Rampal 49).

Research conducted by myself of coverage of Sweden in *Time* and *Newsweek* from 1958 to 2008 suggests, moreover, that the general tendency of a waning interest in foreign affairs in U.S. media that Jones, Van Aelst, and Vliegenthart note also holds true for Sweden. While articles about the largest Scandinavian country were never numerous in America's two premier news magazines, they were a fairly regular phenomenon in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s but virtually disappeared in the 1990s and 2000s, when, in many years, magazine indexes show no entries whatsoever for articles about Sweden in *Time* and *Newsweek*. Fridriksson's claim that Sweden only enters the U.S. news flow when an "isolated crisis" occurs there is largely borne out by the examination of the content of *Time* and *Newsweek*: In the early 1980s, for instance, the only stories emanating from Sweden in the two magazines dealt with incursions by Soviet submarines, and there the country was merely the setting for Cold-War politics.

As the coverage of Sweden in *Time* and *Newsweek* has diminished, it has also changed character. Into the 1970s, stories dealt with Sweden's politics and social and economic challenges, topics that would fit the traditional U.S. definition of so-called "hard news." After 1990, on the other hand, Sweden, on the few occasions that it was mentioned, was portrayed main-

ly as a source of products and popular culture. As an example, the only *Newsweek* article of more than a page that was dealing with Sweden-related matters in the 1988-2008 period discussed the pop group the Hives, and it mentioned only in passing that its members hailed from the Swedish town of Fagersta (Ali).

It can be surmised, then, that news stories are not a major source of information about Sweden for Americans, a speculation supported by the UD report mentioned above. An ambitious project that entailed interviews with Swedish foreign-service officials, Swedes living abroad, and “opinion leaders” in 23 countries, its section on the United States reached the somewhat stark conclusion that “there is no image of Sweden among Americans in general.” A U.S. State Department official cited in the report echoed that assessment, noting that “Sweden does not necessarily have a negative image, more a lack of an image” (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet* 165). Possibly as a result of limited U.S. media interest in Sweden, the broader American public had little knowledge of the country.

The 2005 UD report suggested, moreover, that American interest in Sweden may even have faded over time, just as U.S. news magazine coverage of the country has decreased. An American interviewed for the report implied that the lack of an image of Sweden in the United States had been a gradual development: “A problem is that Sweden is withering away—after World War II it was a special country with steel, athletes and a social agenda, but now others have done that, too. Sweden is not as unique as it was ...” (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet* 177).

Clearly, then, exactly what perception emerged from the sudden influx of crime stories from a country that most Americans know little about and seldom see news items from merits an examination.

“Nordic Noir” Hits America

The enormous success of Swedish and other Scandinavian crime fiction in the United States has routinely been noted in America. “[A] wave of outstanding Scandinavian crime novels” had arrived in America, noted *Booklist* as early as 2007, providing its readers with paragraph-length introductions to Swedish writers such as Mankell, Håkan Nesser, and Kjell Eriksson along with Arnaldur Indridason of Iceland, Peter Høeg of Denmark, and Karin Fossum and Anne Holt of Norway (Ott). Three years later, *Publishers Weekly*, noting the rapidly growing sales for Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl*

with *the Dragon Tattoo*, labeled the influx of crime novels from Sweden and the other Nordic countries a “Scandinavian invasion.” Adding Camilla Läckberg and Leif G.W. Persson to *Booklist’s* roster of Swedish authors whose works had been published in the United States (and Jo Nesbø to the Norwegians), the trade journal noted that its observation in 2002 that “Scandinavian dreariness just doesn’t seem to have broad appeal to American readers” was no longer true (Foster).

The use of the invasion metaphor was borne out by the runaway U.S. success of Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy. In a 2009 article for *Vanity Fair*, writer and social critic Christopher Hitchens suggested that the true measure of that success was how widely distributed Larsson’s works were in venues not commonly thought of as selling venues for books, resulting in a “towering, glistening rampart of books at Costco and the nation’s airports” (Hitchens). As *Publishers Weekly* looked back at the year 2010 a few months after alerting its readers to the Scandinavian crime-fiction invasion, the periodical noted that the *Millennium* novels had “outpaced all other bestsellers” (Maryles). A year later, two of Larsson’s three books, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, topped the *Publishers Weekly* paperback bestsellers list, having been there for 81 and 79 weeks, respectively, far longer than any other book at that time (“Paperback Bestsellers/Mass Market”). Interested in capitalizing on the fame of the creator of *Millennium* in its mission to promote Sweden abroad, the Swedish Institute noted in a report about the novels’ international popularity that more copies of the books had been sold in the United States than anywhere else: 16 million as of March 2012 (*Sweden beyond the Millennium* 7).

A Different World

As American newspapers and magazines began to note and write about the somewhat surprising success of stories from a region largely unfamiliar to the American readers buying the books, they frequently sought to explain what accounted for that success. A common reason put forward was that lack of familiarity had its own appeal. Seeking to explain the somewhat unexpected Swedish prominence in this particular fiction genre, American writers often bring up the setting. Interviewed in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2010 about the appeal of crime fiction from Scandinavia as a whole, the publisher of a magazine specializing in mystery stories thought that “[a] majority of

us know very little about these countries, and that breeds curiosity”(Keller). “Like J.R.R. Tolkien with Middle-earth and J.K. Rowling with Hogwarths,” wrote a *USA Today* reviewer in 2010, “Larsson immerses his readers in a world very different from their own”(Donahue, “Cool Swedish ‘Girl’”), and Henning Mankell’s novels, according to the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, “offer a window on other cultures”(“Clever Crime Fiction with a French Twist”). Part of the attraction of these stories, apparently, was that they transported their readers to an unfamiliar somewhere else.

Setting, moreover, is very much stressed in the articles as an essential component of the novels that sets them apart from their American counterparts. In general, however, the settings described as typical often follow American stereotypes, such as Sweden (and the other Scandinavian countries) being in a state of perpetual winter. “If there is a formula to the genre, it often includes a cold stark setting,” reflected a *New York Times* reviewer in a 2010 article (Bosman). The same year, the *Wall Street Journal* marveled at “the appeal of all this blood on the snow, police boots crunching over frozen grass and detectives whose every utterance comes in a puff of visible breath against a background of interminable night” (Miller). A New York City bookseller told the *Washington Post* that Swedish crime novels regardless of author were “all so similar... placed in cold, wintry settings, with people drinking a lot to keep warm” (Tucker). In a humorous vein, a writer for *Newsday* even declared that the appeal of the wintry Swedish settings was wearing thin: “Take your rain, your cold, your gloom... and go torture yourselves to death” (Siegel). Thus, while the backdrop for the stories supposedly has an appeal for American readers, it barely conveys something new to them about Sweden.

A Vehicle for Criticism

If the use of physical setting is one trait that is regarded as characterizing Swedish crime fiction and distinguishing it from books in the same genre originating elsewhere, so is employing the genre as a vehicle for a broader perspective on society. “Scandinavian mysteries... tend to use criminal investigations as a way to explore pressing social issues such as immigration, economic inequities, the treatment of the elderly and impoverished, and sexual mores,” noted the *Los Angeles Times* in 2010 (Keller). “Most Swedish crime writing,” thought the *Wall Street Journal*, “turns on political and social issues” (Alter).

The avowed goal of Swedish authors to provide social commentary affords American writers discussing their works the opportunity to introduce a theme of contrast. In Scandinavia, “a genteel façade with dark undertones” makes for an excellent setting for crime, according to *Publishers Weekly* (Ermelino). A 2003 *New York Times* article began with the observation that “[b]eneath its apparently ordered surface, Henning Mankell’s Sweden is a place of dark crimes and vicious psychopaths, of fractured families and a fraying society” (Lyll). While the crime novel being used as a device to criticize society in broader terms certainly is not unique to Swedish writers, U.S. discussions tend to stress it with the underlying assumption that the Swedish society whose dark sides the novels expose is particularly idyllic, harking back to long-held perceptions of Sweden as the ultimate welfare state. As the 2012 Swedish Institute report found, those perceptions are apparently still prevalent among some Americans, citing evidence that the 2011 survey Nation Brands Index reported that U.S. respondents considered Sweden “a land of equality with a competent government free of corruption and in many ways a model” (*Den svenska modellen* 2012, 109).

As the articles discussed in this study are journalistic products, assertions about the contrast between idyllic appearance and hidden problems are frequently supported by interviews with Swedish sources. Eva Gabrielson, Larsson’s partner, explained in a newspaper interview that the author “wanted to show that gender imbalances exist even in Sweden, one of the world’s most egalitarian societies” (Rising, “Larsson’s Partner”). “Everybody wrote at the time that Sweden was so idyllic, but it was of course not true,” Swedish crime novel pioneer Maj Sjöwall told *New York* magazine in 2011: “Everything started to get more inhuman and capitalistic” (Kachka). John-Henri Holmberg, a friend of Larson’s, claimed that the author of the *Millennium* series had shaken his countrymen’s view that “their government is benign, and working for their benefit,” depicting it instead as “an instrument of violence, wielded against individuals who threaten the privileges and power of those who have managed to gain control of it” (Acocella).

Not all Swedish interviewees support the impression left by the novels, however. Although routinely saying that his stories are meant to depict a society that has changed for the worse, Henning Mankell, for instance, felt it necessary to stress in a 2006 interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that Sweden on the whole is “a very decent society to live in” (Romano). Similarly, author and criminologist Leif G.W. Persson pointed out to a writer for *McClatchy-Tribune Business News* that crime is exaggerated in the novels

and that the “level of violent crime in Sweden, as compared to other countries, is very low—we are a peaceful and democratic society”(Dsouza). Even American writers note, on occasion, that “the cold countries of Northern Europe enjoy crime rates so low that they’re the envy of the rest of the world” (Leddy). The journalistic reporting underlying many of the articles in this study thus tends to offer American readers somewhat contradictory impressions: either the novels by Larsson and others depict real aspects of Swedish society in the early 2000s, or they are works of fiction that do not accurately portray Sweden.

A Nation of Brands?

Many of the articles discussed here do not, however, allude to perceptions of Sweden as a benevolent welfare state and to how crime novels may shatter that image. Instead, they reduce the country that Larsson’s heroes Mikael Blomqvist and Lisbeth Salander inhabit to an originator of consumer and popular-culture brands that many Americans may be familiar with. Hinting at the problem with this approach, Christopher Hitchens thought that Sweden in the American mind had been “made almost banal for us by Volvo, Absolut, Saab, and IKEA” (Hitchens). It is, moreover an approach used by U.S. journalists well before the ascendancy of Swedish crime fiction in the United States. In 2000, for instance, an article in *Newsweek* that began by noting that Sweden in recent years had been transformed from “welfare state to tech-and-design state” then went on to discuss that transition solely from the standpoint of Swedish products and restaurants that readers could encounter in the United States (“Swede Spots”).

In its simplest form, the device of connecting Swedish crime fiction to Swedish products simply tells readers that the same country spawned both: Stieg Larsson, wrote the *Sunday News* in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, “makes menace boil up inscrutably through the wellspring of Volvo and Ikea” (Rutter). In a similar vein, *USA Today* characterized the culture depicted in the *Millennium* series as one of “coffee-saturated, IKEA-furnished moodiness” (Donahue, “Looking for the Next Larsson”). Henning Mankell’s “prototype of the brooding detective,” Kurt Wallander, had, claimed the *New York Times*, turned out to be “the most popular Scandinavian import in the English-speaking world since Ikea” (M. Hale). To the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, on the other hand, the “biggest Swedish export” before the advent of crime fiction was not IKEA furniture but the pop group ABBA (Hewitt).

Other American articles about Swedish crime fiction use the well-known brands to bring up the contrast discussed above. The Swedish film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, warned the *Austin American Statesman* in 2010, was “not your IKEA’s Sweden,” without explaining what exactly the furniture company’s version of its home country was (Gross). The *New York Times* went slightly further in an article that same year by connecting, somewhat cryptically, the company’s product style to welfare-state policies, claiming that Larsson’s three books would introduce Americans to “a Sweden that is vastly different... from the design-loving Socialist paradise we imagine whenever we visit Ikea” (McGrath, “The After Life”). A similarly odd connection between Swedish social issues and export goods was made, possibly as a joke, by *USA Today*, which let readers know that *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* “includes certain historical tidbits that Volvo somehow omits in its manuals—like the admiration many Swedes felt for Hitler back in the 1930s and ‘40s” (Donahue, “Cool Swedish ‘Girl’”). Returning to the contrast between Swedish automotive exports and the country’s social issues (and bleak scenery), *USA Today* a few months later thought that the BBC-produced TV episodes of Mankell’s Wallander series showed Sweden not as a land of “beautiful blond people driving Volvos” but as “a darker Sweden of windswept fields, brewing racial tensions, and close-lipped people protecting dark secrets” (Bianco). Using pop music rather than automobiles as a reference point, *Condé Nast’s Traveler* magazine told its readers that Sweden was “best known for ABBA, the audio equivalent of high-fructose corn syrup” until Larsson’s novels came along to paint the country in a very different light (Knechtel).

Deirdre Donahue, a *USA Today* writer with a particular fondness for the *Millennium* trilogy, delighted in connecting Larson’s stories with Swedish brands in ways that hinted, at times in a rather odd manner, at contrasts between the image produced by brands and crime fiction. The country portrayed by the late author, she suggested in 2008, “is a lot more complicated than ABBA’s upbeat pop tunes might suggest” and, in what seems to be an even more convoluted reference to the welfare state, “far darker than the IKEA paradise of sensible Volvos” (Donahue, “Heroine of ‘Dragon Tattoo,’”). Two years later, Donahue warned readers not to “start warbling some perky Swedish ABBA tune” while going through the *Millennium* series, as it would fit very badly with the mood of the books (Donahue, “Cool Swedish ‘Girl’”).

The underlying assumption of Donahue and other American journalists when throwing in brand references seems to be that the products embody

aspects of Swedish society: safe cars, practical furniture and cheerful pop music are the results of a benevolent society.

Conflicting Impressions: Going There

The issue whether the novels are a true depiction of Sweden also surfaces in articles that are only indirectly related to the books. These articles concern themselves with the rise of a new kind of tourism in Sweden: fans of the books wanting to see the settings for themselves. Tours of Stockholm showing sites described in Larsson's series have attracted tourists from around the world, including a San Francisco couple who in the summer of 2010 came to the Swedish capital to "identify the addresses and see what the buildings look like" (Rising, "The Lure"; Summers).

These travel accounts tend to reinforce the idea that crime-fiction authors create a version of Sweden that plays up darkness and is not necessarily accurate. Thus, even though she was visiting the Södermalm area of Stockholm in chilly February, a writer for the *Washington Post* found it "hard to picture sadistic crimes and murders taking place in this pretty corner of Sweden" (Dell'Amore). A *New York Times* reporter visiting the same neighborhood four months later thought that "[t]here's nothing particularly remarkable about the mustard-colored building at Bellmansgatan 1, in Stockholm's Sodermalm neighborhood," the fictional home of Larsson's hero Mikael Blomqvist, and "anyone hoping to stumble on a crime scene will be disappointed" by Södermalm, "Stockholm's hippest district" (I. Williams). A visitor writing for *McClatchy-Tribune Business News* thought it "impossible to fathom" that Sweden could be "a dark country where dark deeds happen" after taking in the view of the Old Town and City Hall "from high over Lake Malaren" (Dsouza). To *USA Today*, it was "hard to square the story's [*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*] Nordic noir gloom with Stockholm's continuous-daylight summer euphoria," and the woman who conducted the guided tour for the American reporter informed her that "people who come for the books are surprised by the beauty and culture here" (Gould Stoddart).

Eschewing the Swedish capital in favor of the west-coast village of Fjällbacka, where author Camilla Läckberg sets her crime novels, a writer for the *Washington Post* considered it a most unlikely place for grisly murders but nonetheless asked his tour guide, a retired police officer, whether "anything terrible really happen[s] in Fjällbacka." The guide told him no but

then remembered that one man had disappeared and was believed to have drowned after falling into the sea from a cliff. He, it turned out, was a filmmaker scouting locations for a filmed version of one of Läckberg's novels (Vickers).

While the writers of these articles (and the American tourists they interviewed) traveled to Sweden and were able to form first-hand impressions of the country, their accounts, being travel pieces, tend to apply the perspective of tourists and be concerned with scenery rather than deal with the cultural and social issues that the crime stories bring up. As a result, the contrast between surface and underlying darker aspects is only hinted at in superficial terms and very little is added to discussions of the country that the works of Larsson and his fellow authors are set in.

Conclusion

As this study has noted, Sweden is a country that seldom surfaces in U.S. news media coverage. Although not expressly referring to that circumstance, the 2012 Swedish Institute *Millennium* report suggested that there were other ways to increase knowledge about and awareness of Sweden in the United States (and other countries) and that the popularity of Stieg Larsson's books could provide one way of doing so. As noted in this study, American newspapers and magazines have certainly paid a great deal of attention to Larsson and to Swedish crime fiction in general.

However, some qualifying observations need to be made about that attention and its value as a source of information about Sweden. To begin with, many of the articles that deal with Larsson and his trilogy do not connect them to Sweden in ways other than pointing out the author's nationality. Thus, the Swedish Institute's somewhat vague assertion that discussions of crime fiction from Sweden would automatically create "[s]ubstantial marketing value" for the country seems tenuous, unless fans of Larsson's and Mankell's works are somehow imagined as being compelled to find out more about Sweden from other sources once they are done with the books (*Sweden beyond the Millennium* 34). Second, U.S. article writers who did mention Sweden when discussing Larsson, Mankell and others did not necessarily heighten their readers' understanding of Swedish culture and society. As noted in this study, references to the country where Swedish crime fiction originates often contained stereotypes, portraying Sweden as a land of perpetual winter or conjuring up a generic welfare state with dark

undertones. In that sense, the articles discussed here reflect a pattern noted in the 2005 UD report by Swedish foreign-service officials who thought that among the first thing Americans thought of when hearing the word “Sweden” was “snow and cold” and “a welfare state on the skids” (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet*166).

Given the scant attention given to Sweden by U.S. news media, it is somewhat puzzling where these stereotypes come from. Perceptions of Sweden’s climate may, of course, stem from basic geographical knowledge of the country’s northerly location, whose latitude is that of Alaska. As to the welfare state, comments in the UD report suggested that that aspect of Swedish society may be a remnant of when American media paid more attention to Swedish policy and politics: the “dreamy image” still remained among some “well-read” Americans, according to a Swedish expatriate interviewed for the report, but it was fading (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet*, 176).

Also surfacing in the report was the tendency to associate Sweden with certain popular-culture icons and consumer products. What Americans thought of when hearing Sweden mentioned was (beside snow and cold) “Ikea, Annika Sörenstam, Volvo, Saab, Absolut Vodka, Björn Borg, Abba, the Hives,” according to Swedish diplomats stationed in the United States, and American interviewees assured the report’s authors that their countrymen “know Swedish products such as Saab, Volvo, Ikea and H&M” (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet* 169). That, the report concluded, could pose a problem, as many Americans who were very familiar with the products did not necessarily connect them to Sweden (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet* 174). Many of the articles discussed in this study made that connection, of course, but the result seemed to be an image of a country whose chief attributes are utilitarian furniture, safe cars and cheerful pop tunes. Whether that contributes to the Swedish Institute’s goal of creating relationships between Sweden and other countries is debatable, unless relationships are defined in purely commercial terms. It is, however, a perspective on international relations that seems to be in the ascendancy, with surveys such as the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index and the Country Brand Index focusing not on respondents’ knowledge of countries as much as how well they like a particular nation. “Country brands” are, moreover, closely connected with consumer brands, claimed the survey company Future Brands in 2014, so the tendency of the journalists in this study to bring Swedish products into their discussion of crime fiction is not a unique phenomenon (“FutureBrand Launches the Country Brand Index 2014-15”).

In a broader sense, the fondness for bringing product brands and pop culture into the discussion of Swedish crime fiction seems just another aspect of the increasing stress on soft news in U.S. media that was mentioned in the introduction. In an American domestic context, political scientists have become increasingly concerned about what implications this shift away from traditional news have for American democracy, which is built on the idea of a well-informed citizenry (Zaller). As the leaders that citizens elect also concern themselves with foreign policy, the ascendancy of soft news has also been studied in relation to international affairs (Baum). The results of this study suggest that the case of Sweden shows that soft news does not contribute to any great extent to increased knowledge of other countries.

A final observation is that American writers discussing Swedish crime fiction often bring in the other Scandinavian countries as well—as is suggested by the use of the term Nordic Noir. When such a wider perspective is taken, however, stereotypes are still common, particularly about weather and climate, and no real distinction is made between the four countries (five when Finland is occasionally included). A tentative review of U.S. newspaper and magazine articles dealing with an author from another Scandinavian nation (Norway's Jo Nesbø) suggests, however, that references to the country the stories are set in are rare. With one or two exceptions, the articles merely sum up the plots, and references to Norwegian brands are non-existent (McGrath, "Norway Has Noir"). Further research that looks at the treatment of other Norwegian authors as well as those of Denmark and Iceland would be valuable.

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