



Murder. Ink

The Dark
History of
the Girl
with the
Dragon
Tattoo...

Words: Owen Williams
Portraits: Adrian Green

The phenomenon. The controversy. The future: how the world — and Hollywood — caught the Millennium bug...

WHO WAS STIEG LARSSON?

Everyone, lately, thinks they know the answer. Larsson was a Swedish journalist who achieved (sadly posthumous) overnight success when his unusually feminist pulp thrillers, together entitled the Millennium trilogy, catapulted him to the top of bestseller lists the world over. He was the creator of Mikael Blomkvist, the frayed political hack of *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* and its sequels, *The Girl Who Played With Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest*; and of the extraordinary anti-heroine Lisbeth Salander, the girl with the ink herself. There are already three successful Swedish movie versions — the third out in the UK this month — starring Michael Nyqvist and Noomi Rapace, who looks all set to build an international career out of her star turn as Lisbeth. David Fincher is at work on a Hollywood version featuring Daniel Craig and Rooney Mara.

Why this explosion of interest? What is it about Millennium that has so captured worldwide imaginations?

THE LEGEND

A lot of folklore has built up around Larsson, so, to quote someone in a previous David Fincher film, this is rumour control. Firstly, while it's true that his greatest success, as a crusading anti-Nazi journalist, is oddly almost a footnote to his career, it's not quite the case that, as popular mythology has it, the completed Millennium manuscripts were left with his publisher shortly before his death, as if he dumped them on the doorstep on spec and never saw the results.

The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo was commissioned as part of a three-book deal by the Norstedts publishing house on the recommendation of a journalist friend of Larsson's who'd read the manuscript. And while he never lived to witness the books (and films) become the international phenomenon we're now familiar with, Larsson did stay around long enough to see the ink on his publishing deal dry. Swedish sales of the first novel passed the million-copies mark well before indie publishers Quercus picked up the rights for the English translation. Not bad for a second career.

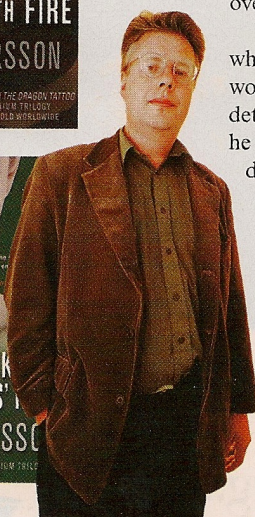
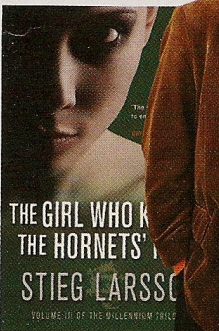
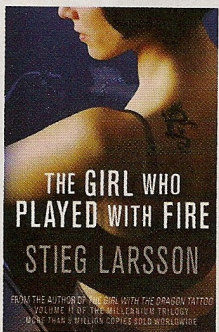
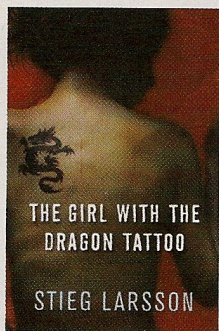
Some commentators have found the books somewhat rough around the edges, with *The Guardian's* Mark Lawson, for example, blogging that "the author died before the first book even went through the editorial process... leaving readers with a tantalising glimpse of the polish further drafts might have provided". Not at all true, according to Larsson's Swedish publisher, Eva Gedin. "We did a thorough editing together," she tells *Empire*, "and there were no dramatic changes."

"It's wrong to say the books were insufficiently edited before his death," says Barry Forshaw, who has written the first biography of Larsson, *The Man Who Left Too Soon*. "If they appear baggy and over-written, that was his choice."

Perhaps it's indicative of Larsson's own attitude to the work, which, while on the one hand a serious undertaking for him (stretching his working day to something like 14 hours), was also recreational. "Writing detective stories is about writing light literature, for entertainment," he said in what turned out to be his final interview. "It's easy to write detective stories. It's much harder to write a 5,000-word article where everything is 100 per cent correct."

Some commentators have tried to spin conspiracy theories around the author's sudden death in 2004, at the age of 50. Unsurprising, since Larsson's vocal anti-Nazi stance did put his life continually at risk. A contributor for 30 years to the anti-fascist periodical *Searchlight*, he was also the founding editor of his own far-right-baiting periodical, *Expo* (not unlike Blomkvist's fictional *Millennium*), which still exists and continues to be successful.

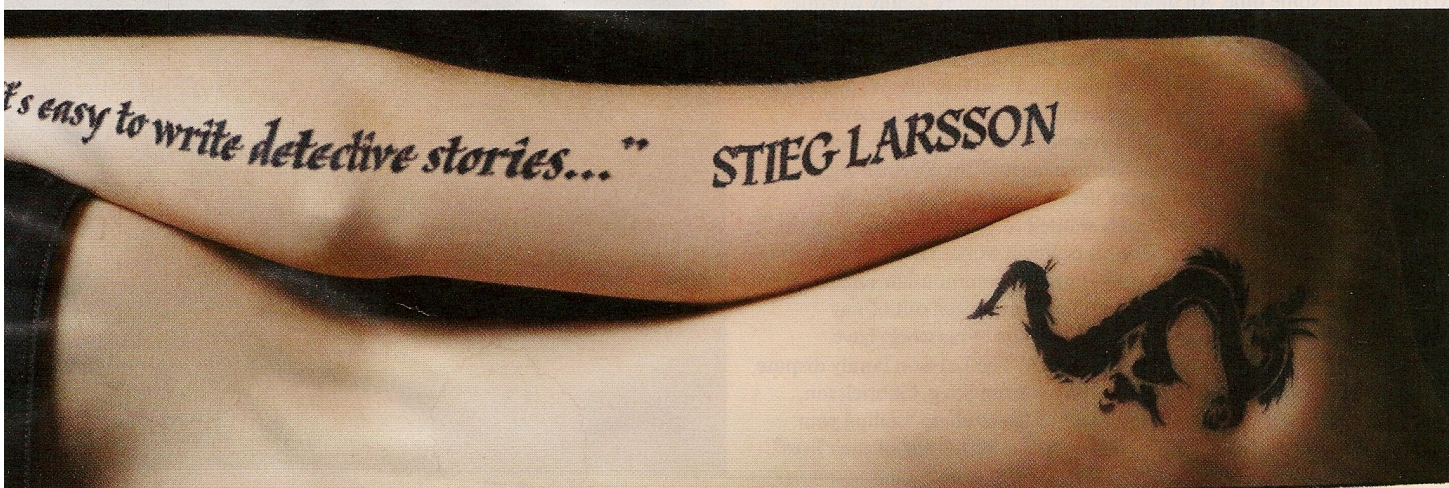
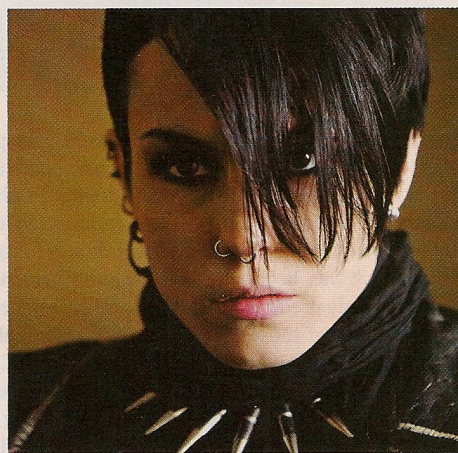
One plot to murder Larsson involved a Swedish SS veteran. The writer avoided another when he spotted a gang of bat-wielding skinheads waiting outside his office, and sensibly ducked out the back.



PREVIOUS PAGE AND SUBSEQUENT PORTRAITS: BODDY ART; EMMAJANE CANMACK; MODEL: NATALIE TAYLOR © GIRLS MANAGEMENT



Left: Daniel Craig as Mikael Blomkvist in David Fincher's hotly anticipated remake. Below: The excellent Noomi Rapace plays the original film's Lisbeth Salander.



AFP (3), GETTY (1)

Family ties: Stieg's father Erland (left) and brother Joakim are battling his partner, Eva Gabriëllsson, over his estate.



His name, address and phone number were once published along with other "enemies of the white race" in a neo-Nazi rag, and his details were found in the apartment of a white supremacist who'd been arrested for a political assassination. In the end, though, what eventually killed the author was nothing more dramatic than workaholicism and 60 a day. His heart attack was, believes his British publisher Christopher MacLehose, exasperatingly predictable. "Like many driven men, he tended not to listen to the counsel of those around him," says MacLehose. "He was warned again and again that he should look after himself." Gedin agrees: "He was clearly asking his body to do more than it could cope with."

But his early death contributed to his ongoing legend in a different way. The saga of who should inherit Larsson's now substantial estate is likely to drag on for some time. An unwitnessed and therefore legally worthless will from the 1970s bequeathed his worldly goods to the Swedish Socialist Party (at that time the Communist Workers' League). Later, apparent plans to divide his legacy between his partner, Eva Gabriëllsson, and *Expo* magazine were never made binding. Larsson and Gabriëllsson never married, despite a relationship of 32 years (they met at an anti-Vietnam rally when they were 18). This was due to a facet of the Swedish legal system that requires married couples' details to be made public: an announcement that the author clearly wanted to avoid given the long list of people who wished him harm for his political work. They wore wedding rings — Gabriëllsson still wears hers — but with common-law relationships not recognised by the state, Gabriëllsson has been frozen out of any inheritance, and Larsson's fortune, and the rights to his work, have automatically passed to his father and brother. The Larsson family dispute Gabriëllsson's claims that they were estranged from Stieg. Gabriëllsson, meanwhile, has likened their management of his estate to "selling your children and placing them in any old warehouse for the rest of their lives".



The *Social Network*'s Rooney Mara will play Fincher's take on Lisbeth Salander. Like?



DOUBLE DRAGON

Sweden vs. Hollywood: we size up the stars and helmers of the two *Tattoo* movies

THE POLITICS

The preoccupations that delineated Larsson's life unsurprisingly find their way into his novels, which some have even seen as partly autobiographical (or at least heightened situations drawn from his real life). His vision of Sweden is at serious odds with the easygoing stereotype: a blond people, fond of Volvos, Ikea, ABBA and drinking Absolut vodka naked in the snow. The Sweden of the Millennium trilogy is rife with corruption and violence. Larsson's exaggerated supervillains are fascist, Swedish corporate mega-capitalists, skinhead Aryan thugs, Bible-inspired serial killers, Hells Angels, crooked cops, Baltic sex-traffickers and basement torturers. The Girl Who Played With Fire has a baddie straight out of Bond: a Jaws-like hulk with Renard from *The World Is Not Enough's* inability to feel pain.

Sweden has a tradition of successful crime fiction published, translated and exported (Henning Mankell, the creator of Wallander, is another success, among many), which perhaps suggests dark undercurrents that have always been there. There are reminders in *The Girl Who Played With Fire* that Sweden's Prime Minister, Olof Palme, was murdered in 1986, and foreign minister Anna Lindh was stabbed to death in Stockholm in 2003.

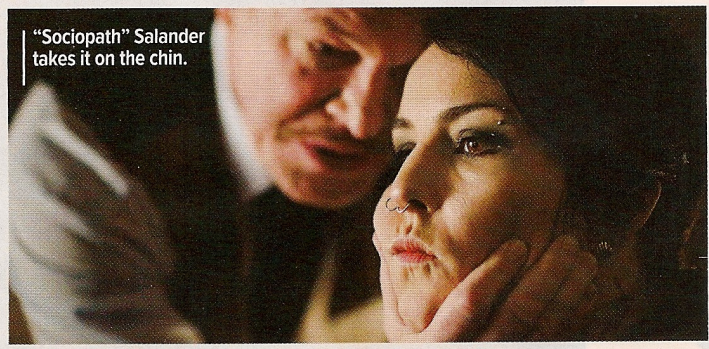
Larsson even alludes to Sweden's pro-German political activism and state-sanctioned Nazi collaboration during the Second World War. "You weren't allowed to talk about that when I was a kid," says actor Michael Nyqvist, who plays Blomkvist in the films. "It was like all our neighbours were a part of it and we were not. The Social Democratic Party had a secret police force in the '60s and '70s (*the Office Of Information*) and you weren't supposed to talk about that either. I think that's part of Larsson's success in Sweden: he took all the hidden things and put them out there. Sweden is very liberal: you're allowed to do a lot. But in the cause of everything being so equal, we don't talk about what's not equal. That's the awkwardness."

THE GIRL

Apparent from the outset, however, is Larsson's other preoccupation: that of violence towards women. Within the first third of the first book, casual online stalker Lisbeth Salander has undergone a brutal rape at the hands of her state-appointed guardian (a hangover from her institutionalised past) and exacted an Audition-like revenge with a Taser, tattoo gun and butt-plug. If, strictly speaking, Blomkvist is the protagonist, the supporting Salander, later promoted to full sidekick status, is the breakout star.

"In the final analysis," says Forshaw, "apart from its social critiques, the real engine behind the books' success is their remarkable heroine. Blomkvist is there for readers to identify with, but it's Salander who grabs our attention. She's something completely new in crime fiction. She's a damaged sociopath who has difficulties in relating to others on normal levels; she is a victim of repeated sexual abuse, with an alienating punk image. But despite her forbidding appearance she is immensely vulnerable, struggling with personal demons. She's irresistible." Mikael Wallén, producer of the Swedish films, agrees. "She's a special heroine who seems to strike a chord with readers and viewers. She's the base of the success."

A 24-year-old with a fetish for body art, Goth-chic and Apple Macs, Salander has a history of mental trauma in and out of institutions, can hack her way around cyberspace with the elan of a William Gibson

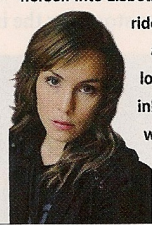


"Sociopath" Salander takes it on the chin.

DRAGON TATTOO '09

SALANDER

NOOMI RAPACE'S background was mostly in Swedish theatre, and she told *Empire* she was concerned that she would lose out on the role for being "too girly, cute or feminine". She impressed director Niels Arden Oplev with her willingness to transform herself into Lisbeth: learning to ride motorcycles and kickbox, losing weight to inhabit Lisbeth's wiry frame, and getting real piercings.



DRAGON TATTOO '11

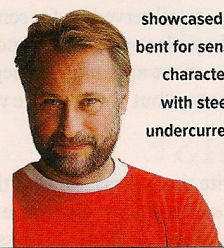
ROONEY MARA'S Lisbeth will continue a string of promiscuous-girl roles, following Tanner Hall, *Youth In Revolt* and *Dare*. She can currently be seen in the minor role of Mark Zuckerberg's ex in *The Social Network* (although clearly made enough impact to impress David Fincher), but she's most recognisable from kicking Freddy Krueger's ass in the *Nightmare On Elm Street* remake.



MICHAEL NYQVIST was already well known to Swedish audiences from a recurring role in another detective series, based on the Beck novels by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. He enjoyed exported success in Lukas Moodysson's *Together* and Kay Pollak's *As It Is In Heaven*, both of which

BLOMKVIST

showcased his bent for sensitive characters with steely undercurrents.

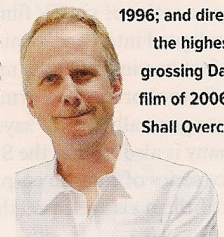


DANIEL CRAIG will be reining in his action-man Bond instincts for Blomkvist, who leaves the violent bits to Salander. We're saying that something like his shabby-chic turn in *Enduring Love* will serve the character well.



NIELS ARDEN OPLEV boasts an impressive track record in Scandinavia, having shepherded the International Emmy award-winning series *Unit 1* and *The Eagle* through development and into production; started the Danish New Wave with *Portland* in 1996; and directed the highest-grossing Danish film of 2006, *We Shall Overcome*.

THE DIRECTOR



DAVID FINCHER needs little introduction to English-speaking audiences. Having previously brought us modern crime classics *Seven* and *Zodiac*, he seems perfectly attuned to *Dragon Tattoo's* wavelength.





deck-jockey, and is not un-handly in a fight. Weirdly, Larsson's inspiration for Salander was the iconic Swedish children's heroine Pippi Longstocking, from the books by Astrid Lindgren.

"I wondered what she would be like today," he explained. "Would she be called a sociopath? She doesn't view society the way others do. I made her into a total outsider. She has no social competence." In a strange way, Salander's is the 'male' role in the trilogy: all steely determination, proactive action and violence. Blomkvist completes the reversal with the softer role of the investigator who needs rescuing and whom everyone wants to sleep with (although some critics have dismissed Blomkvist's cheerful promiscuity as vicarious wish-fulfilment on Larsson's part).

Larsson prefaces each section of the first novel with statistics: 18 per cent of Swedish women have been threatened by a man; 46 per cent have been subjected to violence by a man; 92 per cent of sexual-assault victims have not gone to the police... Salander's violence is always in self-defence or retributive, and there's certainly a large element of Larsson taking revenge against misogyny through his fiction. The story goes that he witnessed a gang-rape at a young age and never forgave himself for not speaking out. The novel's original title (and that of its Swedish movie adaptation) is *Män Som Hatar Kvinnor: Men Who Hate Women*. Larsson, says Gabriellsson, would never have stood for the international



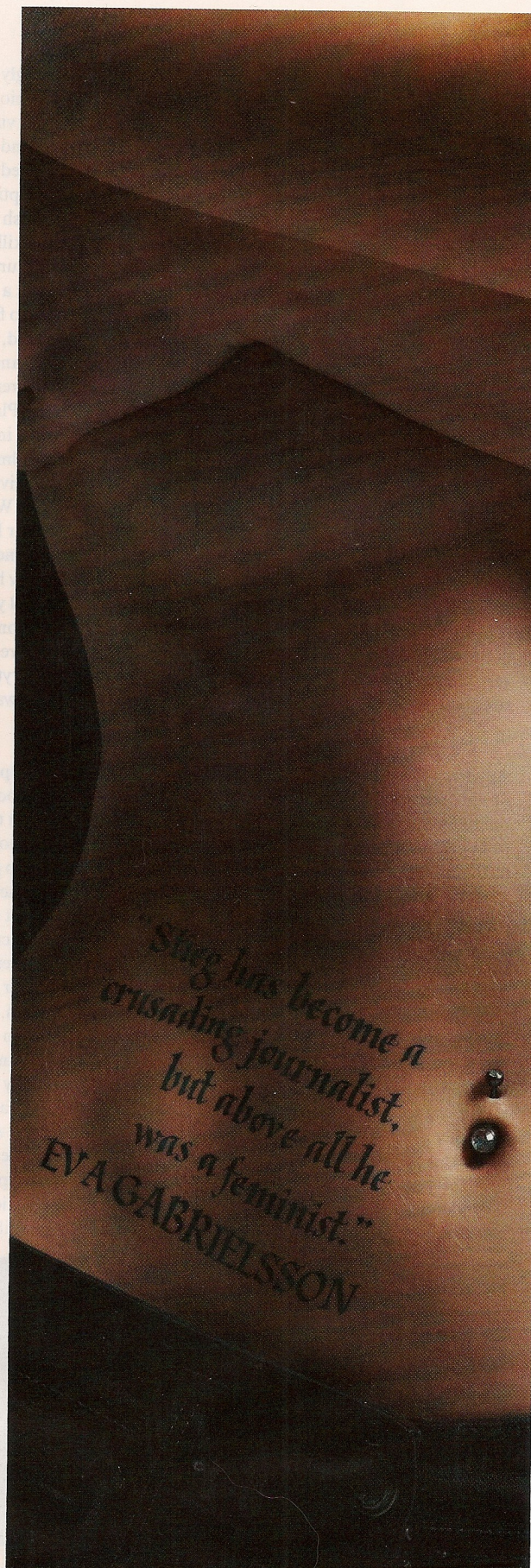
Sea of silence: Michael Nyqvist, who plays Mikael Blomkvist, maintains that Sweden has unspoken secrets.

monicker change. The Dragon Tattoo detail served up for sensitive, English-speaking audiences has nothing to do with anything (Salander's hacker alias is Wasp, making her wasp tattoo more apposite). "Stieg has become a 'crusading journalist'," says Gabriellsson, "but above all, he was a feminist."

THE FRANCHISE

If the Swedish films haven't been quite the juggernaut that the books have (like the Dan Brown adaptations, they'll arguably always be in the shadow of their source), they've nevertheless done excellent business: worldwide box-office receipts for *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* are currently north of \$100 million; *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, at the time of writing, has reached \$60 million. Their rapid release schedule (all three within a year) has given the impression that they were rushed into production, but the often-overlooked reality is down to the Swedish production system, and the ties between Swedish television and cinema, which are much closer than in the UK and USA. If the films seem disjointed and occasionally incoherent to newcomers to the series, it's because the theatrical versions have been edited down from the more expansive broadcast features.

"The trilogy was always planned as a series of six TV films," Wallén explains to *Empire*. The books were adapted into two 90-minute features each, with only Niels Arden Oplev's first two instalments (making up the complete *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*) originally earmarked for theatrical distribution. "This is how we generally work," says Wallén, whose Yellow Bird production company is also behind the Swedish and British *Wallander* series. "We produce series of films in co-production with broadcasters, with one or more of them also released theatrically."





The model for Wallander was the same: of a total 26 Wallander films, three have been released theatrically and the others have been released straight to DVD and then broadcast on TV. "In the case of the Millennium films," continues Wallén, "the success of the books made it also worthwhile to theatrically release the adaptations of books two and three (both directed by Daniel Alfredson), since the demand from audiences was so great." The broadcasters' demand to air the TV series as soon as possible "forced" Yellow Bird to release the films close together but, Wallén concludes, "it worked out very well, and even the DVD series seemed to profit from cross-promotion with the films in theatres."

David Fincher's English-language version, then, will be the first time the books have been adapted specifically for the cinema. Fincher, producer Scott Rudin and screenwriter Steve Zaillian have all been keen to stress *Dragon Tattoo 2.0* as wrestling a fresh adaptation from the source material rather than simply being a remake, and the distinction ought to be apparent from the budget. The Swedish version cost \$13 million. Only a couple of budgets in Fincher's entire career have been below \$50 million. The prestige project has come together at Sony who, following the legal wrangling that dogs the property, finally reached a deal with Yellow Bird in late 2009.

Daniel Craig's casting as Blomkvist seemed straightforward (helped by Craig's availability due to the Bond hiatus), and the all-but-confirmed

A cut above: Noomi Rapace in her final appearance as Lisbeth Salander, in this month's *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest*.



presences of Stellan Skarsgård (as corporation head Martin Vanger) and Robin Wright (playing Blomkvist's Millennium second-in-command and "occasional lover" Erika Berger) also appeared reasonably effortlessly. Rooney Mara's casting as Salander, however, was something of a surprise. The most-eagerly-awaited announcement since the new Peter Parker (a role which went to her *Social Network* co-star Andrew Garfield), Mara beat out practically every actress under 30 in Hollywood for the part.

It's still, Fincher says, "too early" to talk about the movie in any detail, but he has revealed that his *Dragon Tattoo* will not be Americanised, sticking to the Northern Sweden setting of the source. "You have to. What, are you gonna put it in Seattle?" he quipped. "Seattle noir!" Shooting began recently for a Christmas 2011 release, and while three-film contracts have been prepared for all the principals, there are no plans to shoot the trilogy back-to-back; a cautious Fincher notes, "You have to make a film that people want to see a sequel to before you can make a sequel." Zaillian is, however, already at work on *The Girl Who Played With Fire*.

It pays to be prepared. Lisbeth Salander has a long road yet to roar down on her not-quite-legal Kawasaki 125. Larsson would have enjoyed the ride.

owen@empiremagazine.com

The *Girl Who Kicked The Hornets' Nest* is out on November 25 and is reviewed on page 66. David Fincher's *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* is out on December 26, 2011.

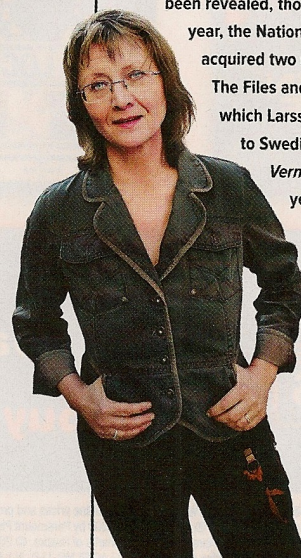
THE FOURTH INSTALMENT?

How The Girl may yet return

The embittered wranglings between Stieg Larsson's family and his long-term partner Eva Gabrielsson have revealed a tantalising further twist to the Millennium story. Far from just a trilogy, the series as planned would have stretched to ten volumes. Sketches for the remainder of the series are, says Gabrielsson, in her possession on Larsson's computer, including three-quarters of a completed manuscript for the fourth novel.

Gabrielsson claims to have collaborated closely with Larsson on the writing of the series and is considering claiming legal co-authorship. She says she is in a position to finish part four and continue the series, but will not release the material in her possession while the Larsson family control his estate. Larsson's father and brother have offered a token inheritance, first in the form of Larsson's half of the flat he shared with Gabrielsson, and later via a public offer of a one-off £1.75 million payment to settle the dispute. Gabrielsson's response was that she would not negotiate via the media, and the warring parties now communicate only through their lawyers. Larsson's father Erland lamented to the *Mail On Sunday* in 2009 that "she doesn't want the money, and we don't think she's qualified to manage the rights. She won't talk to us because we don't do exactly what she wants. We have become the enemy, but we are trapped." Gabrielsson told *The Guardian* that she's "tired of being portrayed as impossible".

Whether further Millennia ever come to light depends on the outcome of the dispute. Other, slightly less exciting earlier works have been revealed, though. In June of this year, the National Library Of Sweden acquired two sci-fi stories — titled *The Files* and *The Crystal Balls* — which Larsson had submitted to Swedish magazine *Jules Verne* when he was 17 years old, but which had been rejected. *The Girl With The Anal Probe, anyone?*



For Eva and ever: Larsson's partner claims there were meant to be many more novels.