

Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective, edited by Donna King and Carrie Lee Smith. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012, \$24.95 paperback.

Pseudo-Scholarship and Women Who Hate Men

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Between 2008 and 2010, the late Swedish novelist Stieg Larsson composed three books about a young woman who, drawing on computer skills and martial arts, pursues a vigilante campaign of mutilation and murder against her enemies. The *Millennium* trilogy, beginning with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, became an international bestseller as well as the basis for several movies. It might fairly be characterized as a feminist revenge fantasy, as the anti-heroine is mostly concerned with

punishing men who are sexual predators.

Feminists have tended to be divided about the novels—some objecting to their graphic depictions of violence, others finding the portrayal of the powerful, independent, unconquerable heroine an inspiration. This kind of division is fairly typical of feminist criticism of popular culture. In confronting the romance novel, for example, some feminists disdain the recurring dominant male/submissive female theme, while others applaud the ability of the heroines to find happiness on their own terms.

While mainstream criticism of Larsson's trilogy has tended to focus on its qualities as a detective thriller, taking the violence more or less in stride, Vanderbilt University Press has published a collection of essays by feminists in an attempt to confront more directly the particular conundrum it presents to feminist thought—whether the violent revenge story depicted in these novels is indeed empowering to women.

Edited by Donna King, associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and Carrie Lee Smith, associate professor of sociology at Millersville University, the collection

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is vernacularly titled *Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective*. While the title might suggest that King and Smith approve of the violence dominating the trilogy, it is far from dispositive.

After acknowledging that the book was “conceived and birthed in feminist collaboration,” the editors have an opportunity to state their own position. First, King and Smith have this to say about Larsson’s view of vigilantism in their introduction:

Larsson appears to support the view that we have to take matters of injustice into our own hands because we cannot rely on established institutions to look out for the oppressed and the abused. (p. xvi)

By referring to her “kick-ass character” as “compelling,” King and Smith offer a mild endorsement of main character Lisbeth Salander’s use of violence. But they fall short of offering a full endorsement of vigilantism. Instead, they refuse to critique it, even when it is undeniably gender-based violence that falls squarely outside the realm of self-defense. Instead, King and Smith reserve moral judgment for another legal matter, which developed in the wake

of the publication of the *Millennium* trilogy.

Larsson died intestate shortly after finishing the trilogy’s third volume. Therefore, his father and brother inherited Larsson’s entire estate, including royalties from these immensely profitable books. King and Smith opine that the estate should have gone to his live-in girlfriend, although they never married. They suggest that the estate settlement was an example of patriarchal oppression. The tension between the authors’ subjective perceptions of morality and the objective rule of law sets the tone for the entire collection.

In *Men Who Hate Women*’s first essay, Abby Ferber, professor of sociology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, is openly subjective in her approach. “In this essay,” she begins, “I want to focus on the deep feeling of ambiguity I have about the Millennium trilogy.” Ferber delivers on her promise to emote rather than inform. On the first page of the essay alone, Ferber refers to herself in the first person nineteen times. She also articulates the view that her role as an educator is to “comfort the distressed, and distress the comfortable.” In other words, her job is not to impart knowledge—it is to monitor and control emotionality.

Ferber complains that the *Millennium* trilogy may have the effect of distressing people who are already distressed, rather than distressing people who are not distressed. In that regard, she may be correct. The books contain graphic depictions of rape that are undoubtedly disturbing. She further complains that she was comfortable when beginning to read the trilogy but later started feeling uncomfortable. Ferber seems to be saying that it is good to make comfortable people feel uncomfortable, although she prefers to remain comfortable herself.

The crux of Ferber's ambivalence toward the graphic violence in the trilogy is this: It may make comfortable people feel distressed, which is good, while also making distressed people feel more distressed, which is not good.

In what is perhaps the most disturbing chapter in the collection, "Kick-Ass Feminism," Kristine De Welde, associate professor of sociology at Florida Gulf Coast University, explores the question of "whether violence can be feminist, and if so, by whom and under what conditions." De Welde goes beyond the ambivalence of the other essays and suggests that women should "reevaluate what women stand to gain by embracing physical

power as a warranted response to misogyny and sexism." In other words, she asks women to consider using violence in response to distasteful attitudes and beliefs.

De Welde's essay, "Violence, Resistance, and Feminist Avengers in Larsson's Trilogy," is informative in that it provides an overview of the violence employed by Lisbeth Salander. She speaks of the "rape, torture, and terrorism" Salander inflicts on another character—Bjurman, a lawyer who had previously harassed then raped her. She also speaks of Salander's attempted murder of her father in response to his brutality towards her mother. Finally, De Welde describes Salander's second attempt to murder her father by wedging an axe into his head and then into his leg. De Welde summarizes these crimes by saying that "these are all acts of self-defense." As a matter of law, this is inaccurate. It is also grossly irresponsible.

Readers of the Larsson trilogy probably recall the Bjurman "rape, torture, and terrorism" scene in some detail. It begins when Salander attempts to use vigilantism in response to his harassment. Bjurman had pressured Salander into performing oral sex in exchange for a welfare payment. She decides to break into his apartment to plant security cameras. She then returns to his house to

perform oral sex for money on camera so she can later blackmail Bjurman. Her plan backfires and Bjurman rapes her. This escalation of violence should lead to the conclusion that vigilantism is a bad idea—not that it is empowering, as De Welde suggests.

But Salander is not through. She goes back to Bjurman's house, attacks him with a Taser, binds him, sodomizes him with inanimate objects, disfigures him with compromising tattoos, and then blackmails him with the video of his previous rape of her.

De Welde characterizes *all of this* as self-defense. But that is incorrect. In order for an act to be self-defense it must be done to prevent an imminent attack. It cannot be done to avenge an act that has already taken place. De Welde is entitled to the opinion that Salander's acts *ought* to be considered self-defense, but that is not what she states. She is simply mischaracterizing the law. This calls into question her competence as a scholar and also the competence of the editors who either failed to detect the error or simply ignored it.

In this collection, the problem of indifference toward vigilantism often stems from a lack of understanding of what constitutes violence. Patricia Yancey Martin rose to the level of professor emerita and former chair of the sociology department at Florida

State University without understanding the difference between a crime and a tort. In “State Complicity in Men’s Violence against Women,” Martin claims that calling a woman a “whore” is “a form of emotional and psychological violence.” She further claims that calling a woman a “f-ing fatty” qualifies as “interpersonal violence.” In reality, the former is defamation of character. The latter is simply bad taste. Since neither is an act of violence, the discussion of self-defense is inapplicable. It is irrelevant to the issue of women’s legal rights.

Judith Lorber, another professor emerita—of sociology and women’s studies at the Graduate Center and Brooklyn College of the City University of New York—joins the chorus of contributors calling for vigilante violence as a means of advancing feminism. She states that reader satisfaction with “womanly justice” actually “mitigates the violence used” by Lisbeth Salander. Lorber speaks of a “moral right” to fight back using vigilante violence when rights will not be upheld by the justice system.

Discussions of extralegal violence and its “moral justifications” dominate *Men Who Hate Women*. But there are other reasons why contributors were drawn to Larsson’s trilogy. Mimi Schippers, associate professor of sociology and director of the Gender

and Sexuality Studies Program at Tulane University, confesses that “what really drew [her] into the series was the sex.” Schippers devotes the bulk of her essay to the sexual classifications of various characters in the trilogy. Regrettably, Schippers infuses her essay with repeated usage of the f-word. She also makes boastful references to her own sexual conquests. Her essay reads more like soft pornography than social science. It is a testament to the decline of academic standards in sociology particularly and in women’s studies generally.

The collection takes a strange turn with the essay by Jessie Daniels, associate professor of urban public health at Hunter College of the City University of New York. “Feminist Bloggers Kick Larsson’s Ass” classifies bloggers as legitimate sources of scholarly analysis. For example:

- Blogger CultureMom writes that Lisbeth Salander is a “true heroine.”
- Blogger Skye says of Salander: “She’s obviously brilliant, magnetic, and she looks really cool.”
- A feminist writing at *Blog and Squalor* views Salander as one of the “most important figures to step on screen ever.”
- Victoria, writing at the blog *Female Impersonator*, calls Salander an “action hero.”
- Well-known blogger PunditMom—not to be confused with Culture Mom—speaks of the consciousness-raising potential of the graphic violence in the Larsson trilogy. (p. 182)

When these bloggers are quoted by professors, it does not transform their work into scholarship. Instead it exposes the professors who quote them as pseudo-scholars lacking in sound intellectual judgment.

Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses is poorly executed, even by contemporary social science standards. Nonetheless, it gives us a glimpse into a large sector of feminist scholarship—the sort that takes up trivial subjects, gives them ponderous consideration, mixes in considerable vulgarity, and sows a path of moral myopia and intellectual confusion.