

# Comrade celebrity: Stieg Larsson

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**Stieg Larsson's books and their movies continue to sweep Europe and the USA like a tornado. In 2008 *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was the best-selling book in EU and he was the second best-selling author in the world. Forty countries, including Vietnam and Thailand, have secured the rights to the books. Hollywood will produce its own versions of his trilogy.**

One of the most acclaimed novelists internationally at the moment is Swedish-born Stieg Larsson. Author of the famous Millennium trilogy – three books recently adapted into three separate films – he died from heart failure before the real success of his popular work had taken off. However the success has been darkened by dramatic and very personal fights and accusations, to the great dismay of those continuing his other chore, the struggle against racism, Nazism and women's oppression.

Stieg Larsson was born in 1954 in the northern Swedish town of Umeå. At the age of twenty he was already working as a freelance journalist. While still in school, he began researching racism and right-wing extremism. This would become a life-long assignment. As one of the founders, in 1995, of the Swedish anti-racist Expo Foundation and its magazine, *Expo*, Stieg Larsson will always be remembered as one of the most important experts on organized racism and Nazism, in Sweden and beyond.

His trilogy and the movies that chronicle their plots bear the mark of Stieg Larsson's political affiliation. There is no coincidence that his 'hero' – Lisbeth Salander – is a woman. And, as she is described in one of the movies, "She is a woman who hates men who hate women." Is that the reason behind his enormous popularity? It is calculated that at least a third of Sweden's population owns a book written by Larsson. Has the readership perhaps been longing for an exciting plot with a humane message? This is indeed a compelling thought.

But the aftermath of his sudden death in 2004, when he worked as chief editor of *Expo*, carried with it more than international fame. In an ugly fight over the money his popular work had generated, his partner and colleague of thirty years, Eva Gabrielsson, stands to lose not only the money but also the rights to his work to his next of kin: his father and brother.

As a vocal and highly initiated critic of Swedish right-wing organizations, Stieg Larsson was a target of violence and harassment. In order to make it more difficult to connect Eva Gabrielsson to him, the couple decided not to get married. As "only" a life-partner, Eva Gabrielsson has few legal rights to his legacy, despite having been involved in the creation and subsequent publishing of the Millennium series.

According to Eva Gabrielsson, Stieg Larsson saw his popular writing as a means to fund security for the couple, amongst other things. "It was about having fun with the books. To entertain the readers and earn money so we could scale down our jobs and start doing something meaningful together again. It was such a long time since we could do anything on paper together, where we were seen

together in public," she said in an interview three years after his death.

A dark horse in the struggle over Stieg Larsson's inheritance was the will that Eva Gabrielsson found a few years after his death. As a young man he was a member a northern branch of the Swedish Socialist Party (section of the Fourth International), then called the Communist Worker's Association (KAF). He was also a frequent writer in the party's weekly newspaper, *Internationalen*. In 1977 he wrote a will declaring that all his monetary assets would go to the party's northern branch in the event of his death. He wrote that he was "most resolute" on that point: "However much or little it is I want that money to go to KAF."

Eva Gabrielsson tells about her surprise when finding the will. "But that was Stieg in a nutshell. He was the same throughout his life. Never forgot his values," she commented in an interview in 2008.

As Swedish media hyped the news of the will and speculations of whether it was actually valid flew through the air, the Socialist Party branch of Umeå, Stieg Larsson's former home town, sat down to have a discussion. The result was a politically and principally motivated rejection of the millions that his work had generated. In a comment on the Swedish inheritance system, where unmarried people - included same-sex couples who were then excluded from the Swedish marriage law - were without rights to their partner's legacy, the Socialist Party stated: "People should be able to live together by choice without risking insecurity and lack of rights."

The statement continued: "The best way to cherish Stieg Larsson's memory is to continue the struggle against racism and right-wing extremism and for a society that respects equal values and rights for all people."

Yet the struggle over Stieg Larsson's inheritance is not over. Eva Gabrielsson has a great deal of public support in being considered the legitimate caretaker of her partner's work.

Early this year a debate started about whether Larsson was actually a good enough writer to have written the Millennium books himself. A former colleague claimed that Stieg Larsson was very talented, but not when it came to the actual writing. Another former colleague and friend, who recently published a book about Stieg Larsson, agreed. Instead, the theory is that Eva Gabrielsson wrote the books.

"Nonsense. That is not correct," she comments. "I proofread and discussed with Stieg. But I didn't get involved in the craftsmanship," she said in an interview in January this year.

But as the fights and accusations surround Stieg Larsson, the Swedish press reports that his books and their movies continue to sweep Europe and the USA like a tornado. In 2008 *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (*Män som hatar kvinnor*, original title) was the best-selling book in the European Union and Stieg Larsson was the second best-selling author in the world. Forty countries, including Vietnam and Thailand, have secured the rights to the books. Hollywood will produce its own versions of the trilogy. One of Larsson's relatively unknown books, about protection for journalists living under threat, published in 2000, is about to be updated and reprinted.

Stieg Larsson is possibly much more successful than he could ever have imagined. Ironically this is due to his popular books, not his intense work for democracy and equality. However, his colleagues, comrades and friends do remember and pay tribute to his more serious work - and his readers will get a glimpse of it even as they allow themselves to be highly entertained, that is for sure.

**Linn Hjort**

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## **P.S.**

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\* Born in Sweden, Linn Hjort has lived in South Africa for many years where she studied and worked. She has a Master in Political Studies from University of Cape Town and is currently completing a degree in Media and Communication at Stockholm University. After many years as a freelance journalist and researcher in South Africa, she returned to Sweden to work as chief editor of Stockholm-based weekly, *Internationalen* before resuming studying and freelancing for various left-wing newspapers. She has a keen interest in feminist issues, racism and class struggles. She writes a lot on issues concerning the African continent.