

The Dogs of Riga

Hundarna i Riga

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

***The Dogs of Riga* is the second crime novel by Henning Mankell in the series featuring Inspector Kurt Wallander, and it is closely connected to the political changes taking place in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. The novel begins when a boat carrying two dead men dressed in suits runs aground on the Swedish coast. Inspector Kurt Wallander leads the investigation, but discovers little beyond the fact that the two deceased men were Latvians. As a result, the Swedish investigative team is joined by Latvian police major Karlis Liepa, a quiet man who smokes heavily and who is himself unable to solve the case. Armed with only a small amount of gathered information and impressions of how the Swedish police operate, Major Liepa returns to Riga, only to be murdered that very evening. The Latvian police then invite Inspector Wallander to help shed light on the case of the murdered major, and this marks the beginning of Wallander's encounter with the Latvian authoritarian regime, which is attempting to impose order on the country after the uprising at the beginning of 1990 known as the Barricades, when the citizens of Riga resisted the pro-Russian state authorities and unsuccessfully attempted to win their freedom. Working under such circumstances involves constant police surveillance, creating a lack of trust and gradually driving the normally calm inspector to distraction.**

After some time, he meets the major's widow, Baiba Liepa, a collaborator of the resistance movement, with whom he himself falls in love. She introduces him to the leadership of the resistance movement, which is convinced that one of the two police colonels, Putnis or Murniers, is responsible for the death of the major, whose ideals of an honest police force and a free Latvia had been close to his heart. As a result, Wallander repeatedly finds himself in mortal danger, meeting unknown individuals in dark alleyways, staying without witnesses in a house surrounded by forest belonging to one of the lieutenants, and experiencing a whole series of similarly unsettling situations. In the end, after having been officially required to return from Latvia to Sweden, he secretly returns during his vacation in order to uncover the murderer of Major Liepa and finally solve the deaths of the two men whose bodies had washed ashore near Ystad.

At one point during Major Liepa's stay in Sweden, Wallander notices his sensitivity to the political issues surrounding the investigation. The Swedish inspector is surprised by this and cannot understand why the Latvian major seeks evidence of a political background in every investigation. He wonders whether police officers in Sweden should not do the same. Beyond serving as a comparison between two different police, state, and social systems, this is an important moment because it speaks to the very nature of the crime novel itself. Somewhat later, while reflecting on what he has discovered and uncovered, Wallander asks himself whether any of it was accidental and whether chance can exist in a totalitarian state. This question reveals the importance of coincidence, false leads, dead ends, and contingency in crime fiction, and it can be reformulated as

the question of whether crime novels can exist in totalitarian regimes.

If all motives and every branch of the plot operate under the total control of the novel's central narrative line, is the necessary postponement of revealing the perpetrator, which must occur only at the end of the novel, even possible? If this postponement lies at the heart of the reader's interest in crime fiction, then such novels cannot exist in a world where chance does not exist. Mankell resolves this problem in two ways. The first is located within the plot itself and involves the doubling of actors who occupy a single actantial position. This concerns the two lieutenants who may be responsible for Major Liepa's death. Reading the novel will reveal whether it was one, the other, or perhaps both of them, but preserving a space for uncertainty constitutes a form of literary resistance against the totalization of the crime novel and the subordination of every one of its parts to a single idea, the idea of finding the perpetrator.

The second solution transcends the boundaries of the text itself, and it is the reason why Henning Mankell and *The Dogs of Riga* can be inscribed within the tradition of the Swedish social crime novel. In this tradition, the emphasis is not on the story and the discovery of the perpetrator, as in the classical representatives of the genre; rather, the broader social context that made the crime possible also enters the novel's field of interest. By placing at the centre both the differences and the similarities between the Swedish welfare state and authoritarian Latvia, which was still part of the Soviet Union, *The Dogs of Riga* examines the social circumstances and conditions that made the crime requiring resolution possible. The novel also compares police systems and seriously considers the advantages and disadvantages of democratic and autocratic modes of police operation, especially at the moment when the leader of the resistance movement confesses to the crime with which he is charged, even though he could not have committed it, a fact known to everyone involved. The ability of a genre of literature that is often looked down upon to incorporate so many different and complex layers of society and political systems transforms what appears to be an ordinary crime novel into a political one. It manifests its political nature through its capacity to speak about the community beyond the limits of its own genre while nevertheless remaining faithful to its literary origins.

LANGUAGE: Swedish/Svenska

CENSORSHIP STATUS: