

## **Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole**

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#### **The vantage points of international allegory**

Whether measured by sales figures, reach, celebrity standing, cultural influence or departure-lounge sightings, it is beyond contestation that Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole Thriller series (1997–2014) has joined detective fiction's big league. And while both author and character are firmly rooted in Norwegian society and culture (the former played football for Molde FK and is a member of the band Di Derre; the latter is drawn back to Oslo and its underworlds despite his globe-trotting tendencies), their respective successes have been enjoyed on an international scale. Since the first English-language translation of a Hole Thriller was released (*Marekors/The Devil's Star* in 2005 [2003]), the series has gone on to sell over 23 million copies worldwide. Surfing the wave of 'Nordic Noir', or 'Scandicrime' with a profile to rival Stieg Larsson's Millennium series (2004–07) or television's *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (DR1, 2007–12) and *Broen/Bron/The Bridge* (SVT1/DR1, 2011–), Hole's adventures are increasingly branded and marketed as emblematic of this now established genre—witness the sepia-tinted, Stieg Larsson-inspired city maps that lead readers into Oslo's cityscape in Vintage's 2013 release of *Politi/Police*, together with the back-page testimony from the *Sunday Mirror*'s Deirdre O'Brien: 'Scandinavian crime thrillers don't come much darker or more tense than the bestselling Harry Hole series'.

In this chapter, the aim is to consider what this connection between a local or regional identity on the one hand, and an international profile on the other, means for the ways we respond to Harry Hole, Nesbø's troubled detective and the hero of the series. To do so, the focus will be less on the tenseness of the action, the thrill of the chase, important elements though these may be in building the fictional worlds that

Hole inhabits, but rather, the narrative dynamics of those cultural tensions that he negotiates, as the narratives move between the local Norwegian context and international references. For, if Nordic Noir is to be understood as a multi-valenced niche with global appeal that includes tourism marketing as much as literary value, then the novels can be seen as anticipating, perhaps producing, this dichotomy as they themselves extend, from Oslo's ports, airports, politics, histories and trade routes, throughout a globalized and networked international crime scene.

### **National identities**

Hole's persona, and the readings that can be made of his investigations (it will be argued), can best be understood by situating them as *international* allegory. That is to say that while the figure of the police detective, often reduced to a caricature of a socially isolated and violent alcoholic, speaks both to the characteristics of the genre and at the same time to a precarious masculinity that is rooted in Scandinavian society, the readings that are brought to bear on the novels operate in more complex ways. As Kerstin Bergman (2014), drawing on the work of Frederic Jameson, points out in her reading of Arne Dahl's *Chinese Whispers*, 'the lion's share' of the messages and meanings gleaned during the reading of detective novels translates into a web of commentary about national identities, values and concerns. Bergman goes on to point out that 'in line with the societal trend of globalization', we have witnessed an 'increasing number of Swedish crime novels set in Europe, which discuss European identities' (Bergman 2014: 20). The same dynamic, it could be argued, applies to the Hole Thrillers, albeit on an even broader scale.

Fictional detectives are the fulcrum between our engagement with a plot and desire for fiction and the societies that they police. Often characterized by persistence,

grit, a sense of righteousness and a bitter, caustic, even damaged outlook; theirs is the typical pathology of the driven avenger out to right the wrongs of aggrieved communities at no matter what cost to themselves, and in so doing, re-weave the fractured social fabric. The term 'hard boiled', initially associated with darker, 'noir' narratives and used to describe a particular breed of North American male detective, working through his personal demons, isolated from society and alienated from his own emotions, forms the prototype, and Hole owes much to this model. Here, the sense of isolation already stands as a comment on social atomization, and the alienation of the detective as a logical, if exaggerated and impractical response to this. Noir has, in recent times, been deployed more widely, drawing in contemporary crime formulae and central characters including female detectives such as Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, described as a heroine who 'oscillates between manifestations of extreme independence and autonomy and yearning for connections and relationships' (Porsdam 1998: 132).

### **Bloody Social Democrats**

In the case of Hole, his desire to belong, whether through his repeatedly foiled attempts to build a family with Rakel and Oleg, or the ways in which his reliance on colleagues features in the resolution of narratives, is, like that of Warshawski, just as strong as his self-destructive and isolationist drive. Indeed, towards the end of *Police*, he even concedes that his concern with the escalating cost of an operation positions him as embodying the national good citizenship associated with Scandinavian values:

Harry almost had to laugh at himself [...] In the end he was a product of his upbringing as well, a brainwashed, herd-following, bloody Social Democrat who suffered physical pain at

the thought of leaving a light on all night or discarding plastic in the countryside. (Nesbø 2013: 617)

In the same way as Helle Porsdam's reading of Paretsky is one where 'the personal is discussed against the background of the law and the conventions of the detective novel, and thereby made political or public' (1998: 132), Nesbø's novels can be considered as exercises in positioning and interrogating ethical and political concerns via a set of human dilemmas, as played out by the detective himself. However, rather than the questions at stake being limited to Norwegian society, the tendency within the Hole Thriller series is to set up a broader set of debates about how local and national values intersect with international perspectives.

### **Snowmen and leopards**

Perspective, or more accurately, vantage point, is important for Hole. At crucial moments in the investigations he often retreats to the hills above Oslo, sometimes in the company of his childhood companion, to reflect, from on high, on the city and the case. Establishing 'shots' from hillsides, at the start and end of chapters, framing the action within the natural and human elements of weather, light and cityscape, are also commonplace in the novels, and a fascination with heights, falling or climbing (the mountains of *Snømannen/The Snowman* [2007] and *Panserhjerte/The Leopard* [2009]; the walkway above the aquarium in *Flaggermusmannen/The Bat* [1997]; the diving board of Frogner Park; or the many tall buildings in which action is set) provide a thematic framework for many of the narratives, perhaps reflecting their author's involvement in rock climbing. It is from an elevated vantage point, both physically and metaphorically, that Hole is often shown to be achieving the overview

required for him to comprehend the totality of a mystery, and gain the advantages he needs to work out how to solve the crimes and dilemmas he confronts.

Hole's ultimate perspective however, on both Oslo and the crimes that take place both within and beyond its city boundary, is international. Scenes set in planes and airports are commonplace, and, as his character develops, his recourse to Hong Kong, whether actual (as in *The Leopard* when he is fetched back from there to Oslo) or in his mind, provides him with the perspective of an alternative milieu, characterized by anonymity, descent into the darker worlds of his demons, and cultural otherness. When he is first introduced to readers, Hole has been dispatched to Sydney where he is to assist the local police force in investigating the disappearance of a Norwegian. The action in this first novel, *The Bat*, takes place exclusively in Australia and the early Hole mysteries (all but the first two chapters of *Kakerlakkene/The Cockroaches* [1998], published the following year, are set in Thailand) set the tone for the series by bringing Norway (through Hole's persona, but equally the heavily bureaucratic national institutions back home with which he is at odds) into contact with places positioned as its exotic others. In part, the juxtapositioning of Scandinavia with Asia and Australia reflects the region's growing tourist mobility and subsequent global interconnectedness. In fact, Hole comments in *The Leopard* that 'the number of Norwegians who realised their dream of a white Christmas on Thailand's white beaches had doubled in just three years' (Nesbø 2011 [2009]: 11), and Nesbø's success has to be understood within the context of providing reading matter, and dark if never too demanding fantasies, to entertain a generation of western holidaymakers on those very beaches. Later in the series, Hole's subsequent investigations will also take him to Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Brazil and Egypt, and the issues he confronts will embroil him in post-

Soviet social ills (*Gjenferd/Phantom* [2011]) and the Europe-wide legacies of World War II (*Rødstrupe/The Redbreast* [2000]). In the same way as the detective seeks the detachment and panoramic vista of a vantage point, he brings a necessarily international perspective to bear on the crimes he investigates. Indeed, the narrative impacts of many of the novels can best be understood through a lens that focuses on the vivid portrayal of Norwegian society through Hole's, and, indeed, the majority of the readers of the series', global outlook.

### **Innocents abroad**

Turning to Hole's initial appearance in *The Bat*, the criminal underworld that Hole uncovers as he investigates the murder of Inger Holger, leads him to encounter certainly the rapes, murders, drug trafficking and corruption that constitute the social disequilibrium of the novel, but at the same time a set of stereotypical Aussie staples that a Norwegian readership would expect to find: boxing, Aboriginal culture, transvestism and the gay scene, and the icons of Sydney's tourist circuit. In broad terms, Hole's foreignness equips him well to play the innocent abroad and navigate across these strata as he pieces together the evidence. More than this though, it is from an outsider's perspective that the narrative construction pitting two forms of Aboriginal experience (the cop and victim Andrew Kensington's struggle to overcome adversity and the derailed abreaction of the boxer Toowomba, revealed as the villain) is brought to its resolution. The focus on indigeneity and gay Sydney as defining Australia, themselves characteristic of a European exoticism of Australia and heightened pre-Olympic interest, are observed from the vantage point of Hole's limited grasp of Australian culture, enabling him to ask questions where his Sydney sidekicks make assumptions.

Hole's trajectory through New South Wales often replicates that of tourists themselves, visiting the various sites that constitute a backpacker's itinerary, and replicating many of the discoveries they make about the differences in climate, fauna and language use. It is his arrival, though, both as he queues for immigration control at the airport and into the series, which reveals most about how Hole will establish his credentials as a globalized detective. In the opening few pages of *The Bat*, Hole is assessed by the border guard, while at the same time he appraises the guard's own modus operandi (is it normal for her not to call him 'sir?'). This is a liminal moment, one where the non-resident is admitted into the nation, where the detective is introduced to his readership, and it is noteworthy that the situation is already reversed, with Hole (the Norwegian) framed as the outsider requiring admission (to another country, Australia). For a home readership, the effect is to position 'self' as always already 'other', or *otherable*, understandable and recuperable within other cultural contexts. Moreover, his opening gambit is, blatantly and by his own admission, a lie. Something was wrong.

At first the female passport officer had beamed:

'How are ya, mate?'

'I'm fine,' Harry Hole had lied. It was more than thirty hours since he had taken off from Oslo via London, and after the change of planes in Bahrain he had sat in the same bloody seat by the emergency exit. For security reasons it could only be tipped back a little, and his lumbar region had almost crumbled by the time they reached Singapore. (Nesbø 2012 [1997]:

1)

To arrive, Hole's journey has taken him literally halfway round the globe, and Nesbø notes the main cultural nodes he has traversed to get there. The journey has impacted

on his body, to the point that Hole feels his spine may have been eroded. This relatively anodyne example of physical destruction, which could be dismissed as the routine discomfort of globalized displacement, will become a leitmotif as the novels accumulate, with subsequent encounters leaving his body scarred and damaged. Situated within the international space of border control at the outset of the series, the trope of crossing the frontier takes on a more metaphorical or allegorical import. It is the 'something that is wrong'. Global displacement is the foundational lie that Hole tells, to authority, to women, to society. He is not fine. The world, the whole world, is not as it should be, and his body bears the (first of many) assaults and scars on its integrity while his foundational lie sets the parameters for the many instances in the novels where he refuses to answer to, or confine himself within, the cultural norms of any given authority.

### **Between crimes and between countries**

*The Leopard*, originally published in Norway in 2009 as the eighth Hole Thriller, was released in its English translation in 2011, actually a year prior to *The Bat* which had been written over a decade previously. The random mismatch of the series in its English publication with both the chronological order of events and the Norwegian publishing sequence, ought not to be overlooked. It suggests, for instance, that for Nesbø's international readership, Hole is always encountered *in medias res*, between crimes and between countries. The most internationalized of the novels in terms of its settings (Hong Kong, Australia, Congo and Norway), *The Leopard* is perhaps also the most cinematic and typical of the goriness with which the series has come to be associated: Hole's improbably snowbound mountainside encounters with his arch-nemesis Mikael Bellman, could easily lend themselves to Hollywood treatment, while



the murderous ‘Leopold’s apple’ device by which victims’ fates are sealed is at the extreme end of the physical violence in the texts. As the story unfolds, African weapons’ suppliers become implicated in a plot that links them, and the politics of the region, to more local and personal narratives originating in a Norwegian ski lodge. Hole’s interventions, at the same time, point to his broader global citizenship with key clues being uncovered through his linking of Bristol Cream sherry with a suburb of Bristol which Nesbø situates in Sydney, and the Hotel Bristol in Oslo.

In addition to the ways in which the plotline and its resolution are globally situated, and perhaps again with a future eye to cinema, *The Leopard* also ups the ante in terms of the field of references which both Harry and the other characters in the novel engage. Whether as the international brands and products placed throughout the narrative (the cars in particular are often identified by make and originate from around the world) or Harry’s own cultural reference points, the impact is to construct an environment within which international connections are normalized. Mimicking both the high espionage ambience of Bond movies, but also the ways in which our own international travel, or, indeed, consumerized day-to-day high street journeys, are negotiated via corridors of global brands, destinations and suggestions, Hole’s persona and the import of the crime are co-constructed within a recognizably broader social arena than the city of Oslo and its political concerns. A passage involving a couple of minor characters in the novel, albeit a crucial one in that it is the first firm indication that Bellman is not all he seems, shows just how far Nesbø goes in addressing his international readership:

The man beneath the shelf was Bent Nordbø. He had John Gielgud’s superior appearance, John Major’s panoramic glasses and Larry King’s braces. Roger had heard that Nordbø read only the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *China Daily*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *El*

*Pais* and *Le Monde*, although he did read them every day. He might take it into his head to flick through *Pravda* and the Slovenian *Dnevnik*, but he insisted that ‘East European languages are so heavy on the eye’. (Nesbø 2011 [2009]: 473)

As if to underline the series’ growing local/global dichotomy which will marble the later novels, Hole is positioned at the novel’s conclusion, with a foot in each camp. The formal ending of the novel sees him, as is often the case, high on a hillside taking refuge in the company of his childhood friend, Øystein, as he takes stock of the physical and emotional damage he has sustained. Within the remit of his links to the community, Hole, the (impossible) detective who fixes society, is left counting the cost to himself and wishing for ‘an armoured heart’ (a direct translation of the novel’s Norwegian title, *Panserhjerter*). However, as hinted in the previous chapter when he is served glass noodles flown directly from his favourite Hong Kong cafe in an Oslo restaurant, the epilogue sees him back where he began, maintaining the distance and anonymity of the Happy Valley racecourse where ‘those without hope, those without, the lucky and the unlucky [...] went to have their dreams fulfilled [or] purely to dream’ (Nesbø 2011 [2009]: 739).

### **Oslo blues**

But of course, as the saying goes, ‘he’ll be back’, and towards the start of *Phantom*, the next in the series (and now both original and English translation publications are in track), Hole is found checking in to Oslo’s Hotel Leon, in his suit bought from a Punjabi tailor on Hong Kong’s international thoroughfare Nathan Road. Once more, or even more so than in the opening to *The Bat*, his identity is not easily ascertainable: indeed now he struggles to contextualize himself within the expected rubrics of the guest registration form. The global and the local collide once more though, as the

intricate plotting of the novel has already commenced prior to his arrival in its pages, and the juxtaposition of the rat's-eye view from Oslo's sewers with the shadowy dealings of the international airline pilot Tord Schultz, who will drift through the interstices of its storylines, has begun. Hole's first perspective is one that brings these dimensions together, as he hangs up his suit and looks down from his second-floor window: '[He] looked straight down onto an open skip and recognised the sweet smell of rubbish rising forth. He spat and heard it hit the paper in the bin' (Nesbø 2012 [2011]: 23–24).

And, if the action in *Phantom* unravels within the city confines of Oslo, its origins and ramifications are as globalized as in novels which see Hole travel abroad. In particular, the drug barons peddling 'violin', with tentacles spreading across Norwegian society, bring with them the legacies and back stories of the collapsing Soviet empire, and these, together with the hands-on control exercised by the top echelons of Oslo's political establishment in how their enterprise is managed and protected, result in another intensely globalized set of dilemmas for the detective to unpick. Whether in dealing with the street-level violence that delimits the lives of the lowest-level runners or describing the opulence and corruption of the oligarchs, the 'sweet smell of rubbish' throughout this novel is positioned as both local and global, to the extent that the bounds and boundaries of each are blurred. Indeed, the central plot device, whereby the dealers are locatable by the Arsenal football shirts they wear, comments ironically on the interconnectedness of Premier League ownership, club fan bases and consumer demand. Again, it is through his ability to piece together this global jigsaw that Hole makes progress as he sifts through the clues. Importantly too though, the network also draws in his surrogate son, Oleg, both within the evolving plot and culturally, as it threatens to unravel the tenuous familial resolutions that Hole

is attempting to bring together. The personal and the public are one, once more, and both are global.

In his comparison of how detective narratives in France and Australia make sense of the worlds in which they are set, Alistair Rolls (2009) points out that both deploy a sense of ‘otherness’ as a way of situating and contextualizing the dynamics of national ordering and re-ordering that the stories and their resolutions undertake. He proposes a model whereby ‘nations construct *their own identities* in relation to the world not *in isolation from it*’ (Rolls, 2009: 43. Original emphasis.). For a Norwegian readership, but equally for the global market that Nesbø has gone on to address, Hole’s persona operates within this dynamic, as a radical other, at the same time deeply embedded within the local cultural context. However the meanings and messages that those readers glean from the series, rather than static stereotypes, are always evolving. As Rolls goes on to explain,

This is a (national and textual) difference based on movement (transnational and intertextual), in which otherness is always already built into the notion of self, and interconnectedness is presupposed [...] The logistics of the crime itself, after all, becomes one with the narrative development of the detective story. (Rolls 2009: 43)

### **Larded with violence**

The ‘fluid models of exchange’ which Rolls sees as typifying the transactional allegories of the detective genre can be applied to the ways that readers navigate Hole’s international perspective, and, in particular, provide a way of contextualizing to those elements of the series which could otherwise be dismissed as uninformed, crass or unsavoury. In particular, this approach provides an alternative way of approaching the series to Nesbø’s much criticized use of graphic violence, misogyny

and caricatural plots. See, for example, fellow crime writer Val McDermid's account of the Nesbø novel, not in the Harry Hole series, *Sønnen/The Son* (2014), where she dismisses its literary merit, not only for the fact that it remains 'larded with violence' but for its lack of 'understanding of what motivates people', resulting in a narrative that comes across as 'overblown and preachy with the kind of faux-nobility with which Hollywood loves to invest its villains' (McDermid 2014).

McDermid's comments, however justified in the general terms of literary critique, seem in other ways to miss one of the key points of the hard boiled or the noir, in that rather than aiming for psychological accuracy or verisimilitude, the characters (not least the figure of the detective) wear the stock characteristics of the genre on their sleeves. As self-conscious constructs, Hole and the villains he encounters deliberately exaggerate certain traits, but also trends, threats and evolving social fact, and it is the plot, or rather the plotting and our engagement with it, as Rolls indicates, that enacts a narrative transaction with the text (and its intertexts) that gives collective shape to how we situate ourselves and our values within that shifting context. Peter Brooks's definition of narratology, as 'how we understand the initiation and completion of an action; [...] standard narrative sequences (stock stories, one might say); and [...] the movement of a narrative through a state of disequilibrium to a final outcome that re-establishes order' (Brooks 2006: 1), perhaps finds the epitome of its expression in the detective drama, in that there is a double imperative towards resolution, both of the plot itself and of the case to be solved. Within this ambit, extreme violence, together with misogyny and other forms of discrimination and hatred, while featured within detective stories, do so, in exaggerated forms, as part of the plot's bid to represent the social disorder that must be eliminated, as well as to

model the approaches, perspectives and contradictions that readers bring to bear on their communities.

In Nesbø's Harry Hole Thrillers, social change, and the communities it threatens, is international in nature; the scale and severity of the disorder that risks the Social Democratic dream at the same time all-pervasive and unpredictable. Always already at its core, Oslo is a city, as are all our cities, poised on the edges of the corruption and capitalism that corrode our social heart, and the terrors that rip apart our dreams. It takes a hero with an armoured heart and a global vantage point who, as if it were his superpower, transcends the ordinariness of our human engagements, to do all that one damaged soul, howsoever exaggerated, no matter how far beyond belief, can do; to put up the vestigial resistances in which we want to believe, if only for the duration of our holiday reading.

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Jo Nesbø: The Official Website, <http://jonesbo.com/>

Jo Nesbø [Wikipedia], [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jo\\_Nesb%C3%B8](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jo_Nesb%C3%B8)