The Terrorists Short Guide

The Terrorists by Sjöwall and Wahlöö

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Characters

Perhaps the strongest element in a strong series of books is Sjowal and Wahloo's characterization. Personages in these novels fall into two broad categories: characters and non-characters. Characters, even those who make cameo appearances, are finely drawn and usually win the audience's sympathy in one way or another, and the best appear repeatedly.

The non-character category is reserved for generic losers without whom no society is complete, and high level officials who exemplify the Peter Principle, whom readers never get to know personally. Kristiansson and Kvastmo (Kvant, in earlier books) exemplify the losers in The Terrorists.

These two men in a patrol car represent the poorly trained and even more poorly motivated policemen who replaced the earlier "flatfoot" on the beat. Unlike their predecessors, they have no personal contact with the people they supposedly protect and no sense that their purpose is to serve the public. They do, however, provide black comic relief. They exemplify what happens when law enforcement becomes a job and officers are screened only for their skills and not for finer qualities. They are either lazy or blind followers of rules; they treasure their firearms which they are likely to use without provocation; and their ineptitude complicates the tasks of their more conscientious colleagues. Other non-characters in The Terrorists are a right-wing U.S. senator with no sense that he should comply with the mores of the country he is visiting — the target of the terrorists — and Sweden's unnamed prime minister whose chief concerns are ceremonial and for whom government is a matter of appearing at the right place at the right time.

The characters, however, are much more interesting. Martin Beck, of course, is never without the sympathy of the audience. Like the other characters, he grows with each appearance. In Beck's case the growth is both in rank and in ability to manage his private life. In Rosanna (1965), he is a First Detective Inspector attached to the Homicide Division of the Swedish national police organization — an entity similar to the FBI with much further ranging responsibility. In The Terrorists, he has become Chief of the National Homicide Squad. His rise has been steady and consistent. He knows he is one of the best Swedish police, but he puzzles throughout the ten books about precisely why. Readers know it is because of his commitment to the job, his ability to see the individuality of everyone he comes in contact with, and his dedication to doing his part to make the world, if not better, then certainly less uncomfortable. His career success in the early books is contrasted with his personal unhappi ness. His marriage is a disaster for him and, one presumes, for his unloved wife, and yet he has not the strength to make a change. By the final books, he has divorced his wife, sampled a few promising relationships which he has found not quite right and settled down with the consistent companionship of an ideal, independent woman — neither of them ready to relinquish autonomy for a formal commitment. In The Terrorists then, his personal life is satisfying while his career has become exceedingly unsatisfying because the bureaucracy demands near hypocrisy and hinders skillful police work.

Another reason for Beck's job dissatisfaction in the last books is that his best friend and another continuing character, Lennart Kollberg, has left the force to avoid compliance with a system he considers inane. Kollberg's blissful late-life marriage provides balance for Beck's early personal unhappiness, and his refusal to carry firearms even when ordered to do so provides the authors opportunity to include continued dialogue on the advisability of an armed police force.

Interestingly, in The Terrorists, Kollberg, who had been a crack shot on the police range has been employed part time by a museum because his analytical powers are ideal to classify a bequest of antique firearms. Apparently, both the character and the authors find museums the proper place for storing weapons.

Kollberg and Beck are joined on the Homicide Squad by other equally well drawn, if less visible, detectives. There is the computer minded Melander whose limited analytical powers are offset by the fact that he forgets nothing. And there is Einer Ronn, conscientious and slow witted, junior detective with a nose continually inflamed by allergies who grows from inept in the early books to capable and trustworthy in The Terrorists. The Squad is supplemented by a succession of eager, young and inexperienced detectives: Stenholm in the early books before he is killed in The Laughing Policeman (1970) and Skacke who becomes Beck's partner after Kollberg's resignation. Both of them begin as hopeless kids, and, through their own ambition and association with the dedicated and successful Homicide Squad, become first class policemen. These supporting characters are dwarfed in The Terrorists by the fifth member of the Homicide Squad, Gunwald Larsson. Larsson, who in previous books was a supporting character, is always fearless, intelligent and good to have around when daring feats are required. In the earlier books, however, he is an overdressed, sports cardriving, antisocial oaf with a private income whose presence when there is no crisis is an irritation at best. He grows throughout the saga, and by the conclusion of The Terrorists, when he is fifty and his inheritance has been spent, readers know that he has become a fine policeman — it is primarily his contributions that enable Beck's team to save the country from a terrorist attack and ignominy — and will become a congenial colleague for Martin Beck.

The place of women in the Sjowal and Wahloo microcosm is a fascinating subject for examination. Women move into strong positions in the canon as Western consciousness is raised in regard to sex discrimination and the contribution women make to society. In the first books, from the mid-1960s, women occupy the space they did in real life. Beck's wife is an unsympathetic nag; Kollberg's wife-to-be is sexy, a good cook, and a cheerful companion. Other women are murdered or they get questioned — they are appendages. In The Laughing Policeman, Ase Torrell is introduced as the broken hearted "roommate" of the murdered policeman and the first woman worthy of complete characterization. She joins the force and becomes a continuing character, and in Cop Killer (1968), her skill in questioning more sensitive witnesses has made her a valuable member of the squad. In The Terrorists, Torrell is ready to take her place among the elite of Beck's crime solving circle and Kollberg's wife has grown to where she is a fully realized character and the main breadwinner of their family.

Throughout the canon, the Stockholm police are supplemented with continuing law enforcers from the provinces who demonstrate advantages of decentralization no longer possible for the Stockholm agency. Mansson, for example, head of the Malmo police, can be relied on to carry out any of Beck's requests in a manner consistent with good police work and without the constant haranguing of a political National Police Commissioner. And Allright, provincial chief of the Anderslov police, cheerful, astute, and skilled, but mostly happy that he lives away from the high crime regions around Stockholm, recalls halcyon days when murder was exceptional in Sweden.

A consideration of characterization in Sjowal and Wahloo would not be complete without mention of the myriad witnesses and criminals, each of whom comes to life under Beck's astute questioning and the authors' limitless supply of detail. Most of these peripheral characters are victims of the system in one way or another. While readers are forced to agree that Rebecka Lind, for instance, is guilty beyond a doubt, that the murderer-rapist in Rosanna must pay for his crime, and that the almost juvenile delinquent in Cop Killer has made disastrous mistakes, they also see every one of them as prisoners of the system. Even the wealthy, middle-class murderer in The Laughing Policeman, whom everyone rejoices to see arrested, is in his own way merely a victim trying to protect himself. While criminals are victims, victims are often criminals. In most cases, those who are murdered, robbed or otherwise wronged are not themselves innocent although they may never have broken a law.

Social Concerns

consider any one of the Sjowal Toand Wahloo novels out of its canonical context is unthinkable. While The Terrorists has been chosen here for its timeliness and its critical status as one of the two best of the series featuring policeman Martin Beck, it can only be considered as the last thirty chapters of a major novel that began 270 chapters earlier. Maj Sjowal and Per Wahloo entered their collaboration — the literary one and the social one are utterly intertwined — because of their mutual ambition to analyze Swedish society through the crime novel and their mutual revulsion at what they saw happening to their nation. The first of the novels, Rosanna (1965), was written shortly after Sweden had nationalized its police force and shortly after Swedish policemen were first required to carry weapons. From that beginning through to The Terrorists, these two social issues were dominant in the saga. The authors repeatedly demonstrate the folly of relinquishing an effective decentralized law enforcement system for a centralized bureaucracy. While the continuing characters manage to function effectively because they are well trained and concerned policemen, younger members of the force are often preempted by the system.

Almost as important in the series as the ineffectuality of bureaucracy headed by ambitious politicians is the question of the correct place for firearms among the policeman's tools. In The Terrorists, for example, most crime prevention is accomplished through skill, intelligence, and occasionally an uncanny ability of one of the characters to lock into the mind of his adversary.

Only in a spectacular arrest of two of the terrorists must the heroes resort to firearms — and then only to dismantle a bomb — not to hurt people. The subject of arrest had strapped to his body a bomb intended to blow up his assailant, himself, and any incidental bystanders. A detective, whose record in target practice had been adequate at best, manages miraculously to disarm the bomb with his gun just before it detonates. In this novel, the bureaucracy is thwarted when three very nearly insubordinate policemen eschew the Swedish "S.W.A.T. Team" mentality of their superiors and apprehend the terrorists on their own. From the text, it is clear that, had the central police system had its way, many would have died or been injured in unsuccessful attempts to bring criminals to justice.

Another social concern which runs through the series is the relative helplessness of the individual — policeman, victim, and criminal — in the face of a government more concerned with publicity than people. Here the individual is represented, not only by the continuing characters who do their jobs in spite of a hostile system, but by an eighteen-year-old mother whose only concern is to raise her child in a healthy environment outside the system. When her independence fails, this young woman turns to the welfare state for help only to find herself thwarted at every turn and finally becomes a criminal out of desperation — an example of bureaucracy's failure to serve the individual.

And, of course, the rising tide of terrorism in the western world becomes a major concern in this book.

Here the reader is treated to an analysis of how terrorists manage to wreak their havoc often undetected and certainly undaunted. More than any other novel in the series, The Terrorists shifts point of view away from the continuing characters, and the readers come to know intimately several men who have chosen terrorism as a career.

Techniques

To construct their plots and make their points, Sjowal and Wahloo use a chronological narrative with frequent alternations between one place and another. In the early chapters of The Terrorists, the narration jumps from Stockholm's police headquarters where preparations are being made for an unpopular state visit, to an unnamed South American country where Gunwald Larsson is observing antiterrorist precautions, to the farcical trial of Rebecka Lind for bank robbery.

In each setting, and in each of the other novels, the themes are developed through the thoughts of Martin Beck and through conversations between him and his colleagues. The plot, on the other hand, depends on the thorough plodding of dedicated detectives following every clue. Every effort is made to show successful police work as the product of long hours with few immediate rewards. Perhaps the most typical situations the authors use to develop these ideas — and the ones which most distinguish the Beck series from other police procedurals — are the "think tank" sessions in which the Homicide Squad brainstorms about seemingly solutionless crimes until the germ of an idea evolves from their combined minds.

Finally, however, the solution in some way depends on coincidence or "hunch." In Cop Killer, while the police know whom they want and why, they are saved more weeks of slow sifting work because a car turns up by chance at the right place at the right time. And the last of the terrorists is caught in part because Gunwald Larsson "feels" that he will try to escape Sweden in the Christmas rush.

Themes

The major theme in all the Sjowal and Wahloo novels is the individual's struggle for survival in a society that would thwart individuality. In The Terrorists, as in all its precedents, a hardy group of capable policemen attempt to solve and prevent crimes in the only effective way: intelligent anal4152 ysis of the problem and tireless following up on even the most apparently insignificant clue. They are constantly badgered to make premature arrests, abandon apparently hopeless cases, and show off law enforcement hardware — all in the name of appeasing the public — never to create a safer society. And Rebecka Lind struggles, in a "free" society," to live a life meaningful to her only to discover that to receive society largesse, one must conform to meaningless expectations.

A second and almost as important theme is the growing violence in a culture which has functioned very well for centuries without it. In Sjowal and Wahloo's Sweden, violence among those outside the law increases in direct proportion to the violence espoused by law enforcement agencies.

The novels are sprinkled with contrasts (and later comparisons) between Sweden and the relatively violent United States. Everyone is aware of how things are done in America, and everyone except the power structure has no desire to see the situation emulated in Sweden. In Martin Beck's Stockholm, terrorism is thwarted by brains not by arms — and then only by using the same brainpower to outwit the bureaucracy. And the violent crime that is committed is done, not by a highly organized international terrorist organization with diabolically clever equipment, but by a desperate, childlike woman with an antique pistol.

Rebecka Lind, who in an uncanny prophecy assassinated the Swedish prime minister, is typical of the "criminals" who people the Martin Beck novels. A social outcast with nowhere to turn, she might have been saved and she might have contributed to the quality of life had the Swedish welfare state been a genuinely caring society.

In The Terrorists as in the other series novels, criminals are often victims and victims are equally often criminal — the reader learns in no uncertain terms that both the target of the terrorists and Rebecka's powerful victim are not worthy human beings whatever recognition society has accorded them and that society itself is badly in need of restructuring. Even so, in the book's final sentence, when Martin Beck's best friend mentions "Marx" as if to imply that Karl Marx might have an answer to Sweden's ills, readers have already been shown that the problems cannot be so simply solved as to exchange one ideology for another.

Adaptations

Two film adaptations of Sjowal and Wahloo works have been made. Film rights to The Man on the Balcony were sold to Universal Studios in 1969 but apparently were never used. In 1974, however, Twentieth Century Fox released its motion picture version of The Laughing Policeman, starring Walter Matthau. While the film itself was well received by those unfamiliar with the books, much of the spirit was lost when the setting was changed to San Francisco, the Swedish Homicide Squad became American bachelor policemen and "action" was added to please an American audience. A faithful and excellent Swedish version of The Abominable Man called The Man on the Roof was released in 1979. Alert Americans can occasionally catch that movie, sometimes with subtitles, other times dubbed, on public television or in the art houses that feature old classics.

Literary Precedents

Writers from Daniel Defoe and Samuel Pepys through Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle to Bernard Malamud and Dashiell Hammett have used urban crime to examine social ills. To this tradition must also be added Sjowal and Wahloo, but today's police procedural novel owes less to literary tradition than to cross fertilization between roughly contemporary writers.

Sjowal and Wahloo have been aptly compared to Georges Simenon, Ross Macdonald, and Raymond Chandler, at least in Chandler's The Long Goodbye (1954). Each of these authors of detective fiction has, like the writers of the Martin Beck series, made the personal life of the continuing detective character integral to his professional accomplishments, and in each case the character has matured as he has grown older in succeeding books. Each of these authors has been recognized as transcending the detective fiction medium and writing "novels" in the truest sense, and each has achieved at least some mainstream critical recognition. Sjowal and Wahloo have added to these qualities a large group of perpetual characters and a story that continues from one novel to another.

Related Titles

One of the aims in the Martin Beck series is to present a different element of police homicide work in each of the novels. For example, in Rosanna the Swedish Homicide Squad must deal with mindless and almost motiveless murder by a deranged killer. In The Man on the Balcony (1967), they confront child sexual abuse; in The Fire Engine that Disappeared (1969) increasing drug traffic in the welfare state; and in The Abominable Man (1971) a heavily armed sniper on an apparently impregnable perch. In The Man Who Went Up in Smoke (1966) Martin Beck is called upon to work outside his usual jurisdiction to solve a possible crime with potential political implications in Eastern Europe, and The Locked Room (1972) converts the traditional "locked room mystery" into a novel of crime in the city.

Several of the novels call upon Beck and his colleagues to solve crimes new to Sweden. While The Terrorists introduces Sweden to the international problem of terrorism, in The Laughing Policeman, the Homicide Squad is confronted with the first Swedish mass murder. Because The LaughingPoliceman vies with The Terrorists for identity as the best of the series, special mention should be made of it here. Perhaps what brings this novel to life and exceptional praise is the search for motive. Apparently fruitless investigations into the private lives of each of the murder victims to see if any one of them inspired the gunman acquaints the audience with a range of fascinating characters and slices of Swedish life worth savoring. One of these investigations, for instance, which puts the police no nearer to a solution of the killing, results in the incidental breakup of a drug ring. The plot of The Laughing Policeman is taut, the crime relevant and terrifying, and the conclusion satisfyingly ironic. One notable subplot to this novel is worth mentioning. In it, the Swedish Christmas holiday is revealed as a commercial carnival comparable to that in the U.S. and both Beck and the authors seem to be cynical toward it. In The Terrorists, six years later in Beck's and the author's lives, Martin Beck can sympathize with colleagues who must be away from their families at Christmas. As Beck grows happier and the authors' children grow older, apparently, the observance of Christmas takes on meaning beyond its surface materialism.

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