

JOURNAL *of* NORTHERN STUDIES



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The *Journal of Northern Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic publication issued twice a year. The journal has a specific focus on human activities in northern spaces, and articles concentrate on people as cultural beings, people in society and the interaction between people and the northern environment. In many cases, the contributions represent exciting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Apart from scholarly articles, the journal contains a review section, and a section with reports and information on issues relevant for Northern Studies.

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KATARINA GREGERSDOTTER

North Actually

The Meaning of Place in Åsa Larsson's Crime Novels About Rebecka Martinsson

ABSTRACT The article discusses and examines Larsson's thus far five crime fiction novels to investigate how the formation of identity are connected to the peripheral North—the “real” North of the globally popular crime fiction subgenre Nordic Noir. Certain key concepts will be used to examine the novels: hyperlocalisation, neo-romanticism, anthropomorphism, borders, and history. This article will argue that in Åsa Larsson's novels, place and its nature, borders and history are crucial in identity formation, and the place with its nature, climate and animals is an active agent in all the narratives.

KEYWORDS Nordic Noir, Åsa Larsson, place, hyperlocalisation, neo-romanticism, anthropomorphism, borders, history, nature, animals

Introduction

Åsa Larsson's crime novels about tax attorney and prosecutor Rebecka Martinsson are situated in the peripheral far north of Sweden, in the Arctic, above the polar circle, in and around the mining town Kiruna. The novels have been translated into many languages, and in 2017 one of the novels, *The Blood Spilt*, was translated into Northern Sami, one of the languages spoken in the area where the novels are set. In the first novel, *The Savage Altar*, Rebecka Martinsson leaves the urban, hectic life in Stockholm, to return to the far north of her childhood and teen years and eventually decides to permanently settle there again, despite traumatic memories and equally traumatic recent events. The aim of this article is to analyze Larsson's thus far five novels in order to investigate how the formation of identity are connected to the peripheral North—the “real” North of the globally popular crime fiction subgenre, or rather umbrella term, Nordic Noir. The novels will not be examined separately, instead the discussion is divided into subsections which contain concepts and ideas that are of importance to discuss identity and place: Place, Hyperlocalisation, and Neo-romanticism; Anthropomorphism: Obscuring the Borders; and Place, History and Identity.

That the novels effortlessly lend themselves to a combined discussion, points of course to the seriality of the stories but also to the accentuation of the relevance of the

topics of identity and place. This article will argue that in Åsa Larsson's novels, place and its nature, borders, and history are crucial in identity formation, and the place with its nature, climate and animals is an active agent in all the narratives. The novels are: *The Savage Altar* ([*Solstorm* 2003] 2006); *The Blood Spilt* ([*Det blod som spillts* 2004] 2007); *The Black Path* ([*Den svarta stigen* 2006] 2008); *Until thy Wrath be Past* ([*Till dess din vrede upphört* 2008] 2011); and *The Second Deadly Sin* ([*Till offer åt Molok* 2012] 2014).

Place is for understandable reasons decidedly relevant in crime fiction, and not only because the scene of a crime, or a police station, usually is central. Stewart King claims that crime fiction has an inherent promise to the reader that they will gain knowledge about the place where the novel is set (King 2020: 213). Moreover, David Geherin notes in his *Scene of the Crime. The Importance of Place in Crime and Mystery*: "Crime and mystery novels present an ideal opportunity to examine some of the artistic ways setting is used in fiction" (Geherin 2008: 8). This is so due to the genre's general aim to be realistic, and also "because crime novels are often published sequentially as part of an ongoing series, authors of crime fiction have multiple opportunities to create a distinctive sense of place" (Geherin 2008: 8). What must be added here is of course that with a series, questions of identity can likewise be properly explored. Louise Nilsson asserts that the genre is "deeply rooted in a *local* place" (Nilsson 2018: 342, original emphasis), but the themes are universal. Yet, as David Schmid points out, criticism of the genre has to a large degree focused on narrative structure and temporality rather than place, "mostly because of the teleological bent given to that criticism by its emphasis on the solution of the crime" (Schmid 2012: 7). Although criticism is focused more often on place now than before, it has often been regarded as a "backdrop or scenery" (Schmid 2012: 8) instead of as an active component in the narrative. As will be demonstrated below, place in Larsson's crime novels is highly active and influential, often it is even anthropomorphized.

Place, Hyperlocalisation, and Neo-Romanticism

There are trends in crime fiction, as in most popular fiction genres. The importance of place is accentuated in the homecoming theme. Eva Erdman, quoted in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, describes contemporary crime fiction as the new *Heimatroman*, or homeland novel (King 2020: 214). This is a predominant subject matter in Swedish crime fiction, more and more places—urban and rural—are used as settings in crime literature and are especially emphasized in those stories using the homecoming theme. It is not only Rebecka Martinsson who returns home, but all over literary Sweden, characters are revisiting home, where they grew up, often to permanently stay there. Neo-romantic tendencies have additionally become more common today, moving towards the British traditional crime novel and thus partly abandoning the American, urban, and more hardboiled setting and style (Bergman 2011: 34). Lastly, a widespread depiction of nostalgia can be seen. Protagonists often look back in time, reminiscing and mourning a Sweden, or an actual place in Sweden, that no longer exists (Gregersdotter 2012). What these thematic elements have in common is place. Stewart King suggests that

place is that which gives the crime and the investigation meaning, especially those tangible and intangible elements that provide some understanding of the society and the culture that, while not explaining the crime, make it possible. To understand place, then, is to make sense of the world. (King 2020: 212)

In the novels by Åsa Larsson, however, to understand place is to make sense of a human being, to understand her development, psychology and entire being.

Crime fiction from the Nordic countries, Nordic Noir, has certainly been marketed, and often read, as a subgenre (in spite of how diverse it actually is, and in spite of how loose the definition of *noir* has become) which describes and uses—to non-Nordic readers—exceptional, even “exotic” (Nilsson 2016; Nilsson 2018) geographical places. Gudmundsdottir and Meany note that there is a specific “visual aesthetics” that is associated with these crime narratives. Blue, grey, and white are dominant colours used in the descriptions of the landscape (Gudmundsdottir & Meany 2020: 7). However, considering the two authors who can be said to have largely contributed to the success of Nordic Noir, Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell, other colours and landscapes dominate: the yellow rapeseed fields of southern Sweden in Mankell’s Kurt Wallander series, and Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy is to a large extent situated in Stockholm. Gudmundsdottir and Meany also assert that fiction, art, design and so on often regard the Nordic countries as separate and different from the rest of Europe. This, in turn, leads to that the Nordic countries are seen as similar, or the same; “topographically, politically and culturally” (Gudmundsdottir & Meany 2020: 9). Yet, as hinted above, there are not only great differences between the Nordic countries; there are also great differences within a specific country. The north and south of Sweden, for example, are seen as north by non-Nordic readers, which is most often not the case for a Swede. As Peter Davidson argues:

“True north” goes beyond the idea of the prodigious (or malign) north and suggests that, for each individual, there exists somewhere the place that is the absolute of the north, the north in essence, northness in concentration and purity. (Davidson 2005: 11)

For Nordic readers as well as for those Nordic readers living in the north, Larsson’s novels indeed visualize a north “in essence.”

Characters, both alive and dead, in Åsa Larsson’s novel have a very close relation to the place where they live, and in particular, the protagonist. Louise Nilsson remarks that in Nordic Noir,

natural environments [...] matter, and these descriptions, articulated in different media, have recognized one of the dominant motifs in Swedish crime fiction. Ice, snow, and forests are common ingredients, often determining specifics of the plot and affecting the minds of the characters, even the dead bodies. (Nilsson 2016)

This is something Kerstin Bergman similarly has argued in a discussion about Åsa Larsson; the characters in Larsson’s novels “have an almost symbiotic relationship with the landscape of the far north” (Bergman 2014b). Finally, Steven Peacock discusses John Sutherland’s notion of hyperlocalisation of crime fiction, meaning that crime fiction writers’ settings are highly and firmly specified and that Scandinavian crime novels generally are “ripe with ‘overdetermined’ eccentric locations” (Peacock 2014: 113–114). Sutherland himself discusses crime fiction from the US and UK and notes that crime fiction authors root their narratives

not just in some metropolitan setting, but in one which is loaded with a “solidity of specification” (as Henry James called it) far in excess of what that narrative strictly requires. (Sutherland 2007)

As Peacock maintains, this is something that also applies to much crime fiction from the Scandinavian countries. The landscape in Larsson’s novels is certainly hyperlocalized,

but whether it really is eccentric, must depend on who the reader is, as stated above. In the works by Larsson, this setting often represents home in more than a geographical meaning, it evokes feelings of awe and pure happiness in a close to spiritual manner, and it is clear it evidently helps form the identity of characters, as will be demonstrated below.

In most of Åsa Larsson's novels a map of the geographical region is included, to help readers locate the place, but also to enhance the importance of the place. The closeness to the Norwegian and Finnish borders, and also the Russian border, is visualized through that image. That the area is sparsely populated is also noticeable. Steven Peacock writes that north of Kiruna, "there is only roadless, uninhabited land. To the East, boreal forests stretch for hundreds of miles into Finland and Russia" (Peacock 2014: 125). To Rebecka Martinsson, however, that place is beautiful and peaceful—despite the many violent crimes committed, and despite Rebecca's personal, traumatic past. To an outsider who is not an intentional tourist, exemplified by Rebecca's Stockholm-based boyfriend Måns, it represents "Nowheresville" (Larsson 2011: 209). Rebecka notes that he always becomes restless when he visits her, he complains about everything from the cold winter's darkness and the summer's light to dogs and mosquitoes. What he would find a nuisance had he settled there, Rebecka desires. She says she wants to

glanc[e] out over the river from time to time. I want to drink coffee on my porch before going to work on summer mornings. I want to dig my car out of the snow in winter. I want frost patterns on my kitchen windows. (Larsson 2011: 22)

These sentences serve as an illustration that the novels communicate, contrary to popular opinion, the darkness and cold of the long winters can be positive to a person, life becomes simpler with less to take in and process, there are fewer colours and smells. The shorter days means that a person can rest her head (Larsson 2006: 301). In *Until Thy Wrath be Past* Rebecka Martinsson welcomes the snow and cold because it is

good to feel small beneath the sparkling Northern Lights, small beside the mighty river. Nature and the universe are so close to us up here. My troubles and difficulties just shrivel up. I like feeling insignificant. (Larsson 2011: 23)

The perceived smallness is therapeutic for her; with her own insignificance, her problems simultaneously become insignificant.

Relatedly, wandering about in nature, can affect a person in a similar way, in a Wordsworth-like fashion. When Rebecka is walking towards a bar, she can hear the trees whispering behind her, urging her to turn around. Immediately her mind visualizes what a visit in the woods would feel like:

You walk and walk. At first the thoughts in your head are like tangled skein of wool. The branches scrape against your face or catch in your hair. One by one the threads are drawn from the skein. Get caught in the trees. Fly away with the wind. In the end your head is empty. And you are transported. Through the forest. Over streaming bogs, heavy with scent, where your feet sink between the still frozen tussocks and your body feels sticky. Up a hill. Fresh breeze. The dwarf birch creeping, glowing on the ground. Your lie down. And then the snow begins to fall. (Larsson 2007: 106–107)

In this example an actual physical experience is not necessary, the place is hyperlocalized in Rebecka's mind: when her head is emptied with help from the tree branches, she is

psychologically “transported,” more than anything. The neo-romantic view of nature is unconcealed: the trees lure her, the way a close friend or lover would, whispering a promise of tranquility, as her thoughts are removed, one by one. Yet, to be actually physically close to the place is also of importance, it is an act of (neo-romantic) intimacy that affects Rebecka’s mental state.

Rebecka Martinsson is lying in the snow outside her grandmother’s house in Kurravaara. She is wearing her grandmother’s old blue quilted nylon jacket, but is not fastened. It is good to feel cold, it makes her feel better inside. The sky is black and studded with stars. The moon above her is sickly yellow. Like a swollen face with pitted skin. (Larsson 2008: 368)

Apart from being physically close to the place, she is also comforted by her family history by wearing her grandmother’s jacket, her personal history and ancestry are one with the place.

Tourists from all over the world travel to Kiruna, the mountains, and to Jukkasjärvi where the internationally famous Icehotel is built up every winter, so they might not visit the area necessarily to rest their heads, or become one with the place, but enjoy the, to them, striking outdoors environment (Larsson 2007: 59). The tourists are mentioned already in the first novel of the series. They arrive at the same time as Rebecka, when she is returning to Kiruna after many years in Stockholm.

The plane to Kiruna was almost full. Hordes of foreign tourists off to drive a dog team and spend the night on reindeer skins in the ice hotel at Jukkasjärvi jostled for space with rumpled businessmen returning home clutching their free fruit and newspapers. (Larsson 2006: 55).

While she is going back home, they are visiting a new, unknown and, for them, exotic place. Later in the series of novels when she has decided to permanently stay, she thinks “I don’t want to be a guest and a stranger. Never again” (Larsson 2011: 23). The tourists seek the unfamiliar landscape and beautiful sights in contrast to Rebecka, a homecomer, who desires the familiar, and considers the smallest detail worth looking at. Even “[t]he damned flies buzzing over the fireweed at the side of the road. The places where the asphalt’s split because of the frost. Dead things. Squashed on the road” (Larsson 2007: 52). Rebecka’s regional aesthetics include what is not considered traditionally awe inspiring, “damned flies” and “dead things” are included.

Compared to other novels where tourism is a topic, the tourists are not seen as intruders or exploiters. In Larsson’s novels it is as if the nature is so strong nothing can disturb it, illustrated by the split asphalt mentioned above. If applying a broad definition of an ecocritical perspective on the five novels, we can certainly see an intimate link between human and nature, but not any overt environmental concerns.¹ Rather, as mentioned, the novels can be viewed as partly neo-romantic; nature and natural phenomena are often described as sublime, with a beauty that can make someone “burst” (Larsson 2011: 3) and deeply move the person on numerous levels. In her *Swedish Crime Fiction. The Making of Nordic Noir*, Kerstin Bergman claims that “[t]he Swedish countryside has always occupied a special place in Swedish crime fiction” (Bergman 2014b: 103), that in turn can be linked back to Swedish literature history *per se*, Selma Lagerlöf being an evident example. However, the neo-romanticism prevalent in Larsson’s novels, is in my opinion closely tied to anthropomorphism—discussed below—and thus the experience of nature is more than sublime or sensational. Nature and animals are constantly provided human qualities, making them active participants in the narratives.

Anthropomorphism. Obscuring the Borders

The combination of hyperlocalisation, neo-romanticism, and anthropomorphism contributes to obscuring the borders between nature, human, and animal. Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, and John T. Cacioppo explain anthropomorphism as essentially “[i]mbuing the imagined or real behaviour of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions” (Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo 2007: 864–865). In the first novel in the series, *The Savage Altar*, the narrative is accompanied by the Aurora Borealis. “She” moves over the pages and the heads of the characters, and “[s]tars and planets are compelled to give way to her, this great miracle of shimmering light” (Larsson 2006: 1). The Aurora Borealis exceeds a natural phenomenon, it is a she, who attends both characters and readers. When it starts to snow heavily, she “hurls herself recklessly across the heavens. Writhing like a snake. Opening herself up to the constellations” (Larsson 2006: 225). Kim Toft Hansen writes about a new spirituality found in contemporary Scandinavian crime novels, and indeed Larsson incorporates religious themes in several of the novels. Yet, as Hansen claims, there is an “interest in aspects of human existence transcending empirical and rational realism” (Hansen 2011: 231) and the clear obscuration of perceived borders between human and non-human in Larsson’s novels can be seen as placing her works in this category of novels.

The border between human and animal is likewise blurred. Kerstin Bergman writes that the place in Martinsson’s novels is one where “people and animals co-exist, dependent on each other for food, shelter and protection. Animals—dogs in particular—also play important parts in Larsson’s crime stories” (Bergman 2014a: 109). Rebecka Martinsson is constantly accompanied by dogs, for example in *The Black Path*, she celebrates New Year’s Eve with one (Larsson 2008: 31). In *The Second Deadly Sin*, she is forced to kill a dog in order to save a child, and this child had in turn pretended to be a dog in order to cope with severe trauma. He was walking on all fours and only communicated through barking. The killing of the dog affects Rebecka nearly as deeply as when she had killed three men in self-defense. To kill a dog is to kill an equal, a close friend. Bergman asserts that both “animals and nature are equipped with a soul” (Bergman [ed.] 2014c: 80). In the case of the young and traumatized boy, to act like a dog, serves as both defense and protection. The man Rebecka eventually falls in love with, Christer, is a survivor of a fire with a face severely damaged. He is not unimportantly the police dog handler, and the first time they kiss, the dogs surround them. Christer probably compares himself to Rebecka’s urban boyfriend Måns when he sees himself as “her man here in the forest” (Larsson 2014: 27), who takes care of her dogs when she is away and is waiting patiently for her to fall in love with him.

It is in Rebecka’s intimate relationship to dogs throughout the series, and in the character of Wilma in *Until Thy Wrath be Past* that the classic conceptual divide between human and animal is erased. Wilma narrates parts of the novel although she is dead. She has been murdered together with her boyfriend Simon when diving in Lake Vittangijärvi, a lake which hides dark secrets dating back to the Second World War. Like the Aurora Borealis in *The Savage Altar*, Wilma accompanies the story, and most of all Rebecka. In John Lingard’s words Wilma is “freed from the constraints of time and place” (Lingard 2015: 106). Wilma narrates: “I visit the Prosecutor [Rebecka]. She’s the first person to see me since I died. She’s wide awake. Sees me clearly when I sit down on her bed” (Larsson 2011: 32). Often in the company of ravens, Wilma travels across time and place, landing in different settings, “meeting” different people, dead and alive. For example, in Rebecka’s bedroom, Wilma meets Rebecka’s dead grandmother who is watching over her grand-

child. As this raven like being, she also affects how other characters act. Hjalmar Krekula, an aggressive, but sad and lonely man, is partly involved in the crimes committed. He is also someone who can help Rebecka. Wilma visits Hjalmar at his home and can see how he wishes he were somewhere else, in the forest, or in his remotely situated cabin, away from his brother and mother (Larsson 2011: 92). In a crucial moment, Wilma realizes she must act.

I land in the prosecutor's hair. I'm like a raven on the top of her head. I dig my claws into her dark locks. I turn her head to make her look at Hjalmar. She sees him sitting there in the police car, blinking. She opens the door and talks to him. I peck at her head. She must wake up now. (Larsson 2011: 157)

In the end of the novel, it seems as if Wilma is content, her murder has been solved, the buried secrets have been revealed, and she now can become one with nature, with Lake Piilijärvi. She is rowing on the lake, with her great-grandmother Anni, and two ravens circle in the sky above them.

The sun is hot. The ravens open their beaks. They are silent now. I feel nothing but happiness. It wells up inside me like the sap in a birch tree [...] I row. I am as strong and untamable as the river, and I row [...] I'm coming, I think happily. I'm coming now. (Larsson 2011: 315).

Here, the ravens are as silent and content as Wilma. She likens herself to the river with newfound strength and mobility and she feels happiness that can only be explained in a natural metaphor.

In addition, and importantly, *The Blood Spilt* alternates between chapters about Rebecka Martinsson and the others, and a wild version of a dog, a wolf named *Yellow Legs*. Yellow Legs wanders across the northern regions of Russia, Finland, and Sweden exemplifying how the north is connected, that borders do not matter to her, she is free to move. The landscape makes past concerns and future worries disappear, and “[e]verything is now” (Larsson 2007: 407). Yellow Legs’ feelings reverberate Rebecka’s in this way who feels she is “one with it all ... With everything. Everyone” (Larsson 2011: 30). Yellow Legs is part of another theme in the novel as well, the never ending infected national debate about whether or not to kill wolves. As Yellow Legs is anthropomorphized—given agency and human emotions—it is certainly a possible interpretation that the message is to protect wolves. She is sometimes “overwhelmed by her great loneliness” (Larsson 2007: 349). During her long journey she runs into people, and she recognizes their suffocating smell (Larsson 2007: 70), but towards the end of the novel she is met with care and respect by a veterinarian and a researcher in wolf behaviour from the Nature Conservancy Council. They consider the wolf beautiful, “a real princess” (Larsson 2007: 350). They help her, give her vitamin injections and then leave her alone, hoping that she will not be hunted down and killed. The wolf is of no real importance to the actual murder plot in the novel, nor does she meet any of the characters in it. She is still an essential figure, her storyline increases the reader’s knowledge of the place and its borders, and stresses that the manmade, conceptual divide between human and animal is smaller than one may think; Yellow Legs is shown to have an emotional life.

Place and History

When dead, Wilma in *Until thy Wrath be Past* remembers how her boyfriend used to touch her.

He liked to explore me. Count all my birthmarks. Or tap his fingernail on my teeth as I smiled, ticking off all the peaks of the Kebnekaise massif: "South Peak, North Peak, Dragon's Back, Kebnepakte, Saksasapakte, Kaskasatjåkko, Tuolpagorni." (Larsson 2011: 2)

The connection between the nature of the place and identity is illustrated through a story about two young lovers. This connection is very intimate, the nature is as familiar as the body of the lover. Moreover, in one of Rebecka's many childhood memories she is in the forest with her father. She asks him where she will end up if she would walk in a certain direction.

And her father's reply. New poetry, depending on which direction the finger was pointing in, and where they were. "Tjålme." "Latteluokta." "Across the river Rauta." Through Vistasvage and over the Dragon's Back. (Larsson 2011: 107)

The beauty—the "poetry"—lies in the names of the places, unknown places ("new poetry") to her but known and traditional poetry to her father who shares his knowledge and personal history of the place with his daughter. When Rebecka has left Stockholm, and returned to Lappland, she mentions numerous times that she is "home" and "at peace." On several occasions, she physically shows her feeling of home and peacefulness; as mentioned above, she often places her body close to the earth. Åsa Larsson writes:

Without warning Martinsson is overcome by a feeling of pure, white happiness. It flows through her body and into her hands. She stands absolutely still. Dares not move for fear of frightening the moment away. She is at one with it all. With the snow, with the sky. With the river as it flows along, hidden beneath the ice. [...] With everything. Everyone. I belong here, she thinks. Perhaps I do belong, irrespective of what I want or feel. (Larsson 2011: 30)

Here too, the body and self are one with the place and nature. Additionally, Rebecka lives in her grandmother's house, and she likes to keep it exactly as her grandmother used to keep it. She sleeps well there, compared to Stockholm, and in the third novel, *The Black Path*, she realizes that she never "made a real choice" until she returned to Lappland (Larsson 2008: 69). Living in her childhood home again surrounded by the snow, sky and river transforms her and as she says above, even gives her agency. Even though returning to her childhood home with all its memories is crucial in her development as a person, it is the natural surroundings that are most important to her.

I'm at peace, she thought. She [...] suddenly turned and walked a few metres into the forest. The fir trees stood in silence, gazing up towards the stars which were just beginning to appear. Their long blue-green velvet coats moved tentatively over the moss. Rebecka lay down on the ground. The pine trees put their heads together and whispered reassuringly. The last mosquitoes and blackflies of the summer sang a deafening chorus, seeking out whatever parts of her they could reach. She could cope with that. (Larsson 2007: 69–70)

Yet again, the trees are whispering, and Rebecka is depicted to engulf the entirety of it, not just the objective beauty and tranquility, but mosquitoes and black flies. The trees have heads, dressed in soft, green coats and above all, they are reassuring, comforting.

In *The Blood Spilt*, Rebecka seeks out places which are linked to her personal trauma, and they transform into offers of comfort, making the places themselves therapeutic, something also Sara Kärrholm discusses in her article about the region of Lappland and Åsa Larsson (Kärrholm 2014). Rebecka thinks about swimming in the river, and it is described as she plans to sink herself into her personal history. She is so familiar with the river that she “knows how it will feel” (Larsson 2007: 276). She will experience

that inexplicable feeling of being at one with yourself at different ages. She’s bathed there, swum there as a six-year-old, ten-year-old, a teenager, right up until she moved from the town. The same big stones, the same shoreline. The same chilly autumn evening air, pouring like a river of air over the river of water. It’s like a Russian doll with all the little dolls safely inside, so that you can screw the top part and the bottom part back together, knowing that even the tiniest is safe and sound inside. (Larsson 2007: 276)

There are a multitude of aspects of the link between place, history and identity detectable here. The familiarity of the swim she only envisions, and has not yet experienced, gives her comfort in the well-known sensations. It also notably renders her a history and reacquaintance of her own personal past and development. This goes far beyond the physical feelings. The different ages of Rebecka Martinsson coexist in the water and despite growing older, the safety that comes with the familiarity of the water and the stones, produces a safe place, here likened to a Russian doll. Rebecka’s personal history is linked to the history of this specific place.

In most crime fiction, history usually means secrets, it is seldom or never uncomplicated. Two of the novels—*Until thy Wrath be Past* and *The Second Deadly Sin*—are partly set in a historical past. The titles of the novels have religious connotations, to signal the graveness of the crimes committed and of war. They narrate a story about Sweden during the two world wars, but in addition demonstrate how history is part of the present now and continues to affect and form characters. In a way, the history of the world wars also transforms the remote and peripheral Kiruna in the Arctic to a global place, much closer to the (European) center than one might assume.

Alongside the present-day plot, *The Second Deadly Sin* tells the history/story of the “birth of Kiruna.” With the expanding mining industry, Kiruna represented the future, and in 1914 it was the newest town in Sweden. The young woman Elina is on her way by train to Kiruna to work as a schoolteacher. She looks forward to starting a new life and feels liberated: “She has just celebrated her twenty-first birthday, and she is on her way to Kiruna. The world’s newest town. That is where she belongs. In this new age” (Larsson 2014: 53). During the train ride the Swedish landscape amazes her, and she feels as if she were a pioneer, travelling to a place few people have visited.

So much snow, and so much forest. It is incredible how big Sweden is, how far north it stretches, she has never been so far north before. And nor has anyone she knows been so far north. (Larsson 2014: 53).

She sees and is overwhelmed by the largeness of Sweden, and despite where Kiruna is situated, in the Arctic, Elina nevertheless sees the town as a global place, and not peripheral: It is the “world’s newest town” and to her it is a town epitomized by modernity. On the train, Elina meets and falls in love with Hjalmar Lundbohm (a real historical person), who is managing director of LKAB, the big mining company. Lundbohm has grandiose ideas for the town, which he calls “his,” and envisions a town that is permanent: “with

schools and bathhouses and adult education—as, in Pullman City in the U.S.A. and Henry Ford’s Fordlandia in South America. Those are models to live up to” (Larsson 2014: 76). He too sees Kiruna as global, and far more than a capitalist venture; this is a place where people will flourish and come to stay. The war that just has erupted in Europe will benefit Kiruna and their production of iron ore. The train ride through Sweden consequently represents progressing into the future for both Elina and Hjalmar, and Kiruna is a glittering promise of transformation, erasing borders between old and new, and periphery and center, and it will deeply affect them and their identity.

Despite its alleged modernity, Kiruna is nevertheless not so different from most other places; the rich—represented by Hjalmar Lundbohm—have the power, and the working class—here the miners, and of course women—are more or less powerless. Lundbohm is described as a man who embraces a more liberal view, he “mixes with the Lapps” (Larsson 2014: 139) for example, and on some level recognizes the plight of the miners: “the injured, the maimed. The widows of dead miners, and the little fatherless children staring poverty in the face” (Larsson 2014: 75). That the violent crimes committed in the present-day part of the novel can be traced back to Lundbohm, the son he never acknowledged, and the murdered schoolteacher Elina, shows however, that old structural injustices and old crimes are difficult to erase. Elina and Hjalmar illustrate two sides of modernity. Elina’s views of literature and feminism are opposed by Hjalmar. He prefers more traditional contemporary art and invites the cultural elite to Kiruna: Carl Larsson and Anders Zorn are advised when he builds his country house. Elina is raped and killed, and in the end, Lundbohm loses his fortune and his friends. When Hjalmar Lundbohm is on his deathbed, the border between life and death is again distorted when Elina visits him and asks him to go with her.

And then there is just snow and sunshine and a laughing schoolteacher with whom he has linked arms, and whom he will never let go. And the glories of spring that are lying underneath all the whiteness, waiting to burst forth in all its majesty. (Larsson 2014: 377)

The place and its beauty remain while people leave, and when dying this is what Hjalmar Lundbohm takes comfort in. Crime fiction author P.D. James, quoted by Stewart King, has stated that place in a crime novel “should be perceived through the mind of one of the characters, not merely described by the authorial voice, so that place and character interact” (King 2020: 212). In Larsson’s novels place is hardly ever described by an external narrator, it is experienced and described through the characters.

The mining industry in Kiruna was a source for money for Kiruna and the nation as a whole, during the First World War, which can be seen as a moral issue since Sweden had declared herself neutral. As in *The Second Deadly Sin*, crimes from the past—the Second World War—have repercussions in the present-day narrative of *Until Thy Wrath be Past*.

The train ride as a metaphor discussed above is problematized in *Until thy Wrath be Past*. Sweden did not want to take a stand during the Second World War, although the neighboring countries Denmark and Norway had been occupied by Nazi Germany. Yet between 1940 and 1943 the Nazis were allowed passage through Sweden to reach their northern occupied territories. The train ride still symbolizes erasing of borders, and connecting center and Arctic periphery, but by allowing German troops to travel through Sweden to reach their troops with supplies this erasure also means allowing neighbors to suffer.

In the present-day plot told in *Until Thy Wrath be Past*, crimes dating back to war lead to multiple murders, partly because what went on in the 1940s is today shameful.

Nobody wants to remember what went on. And before long all those who can will be dead and buried. The girls who used to stand by the railway lines and wave to the German soldiers in the trains on their way up to Narvik, all those who celebrated the arson attack on [the Communist, anti-German newspaper] in 1940—and all those who fraternized with the Germans stationed in the north. (Larsson 2011: 184)

This implies that even if this is a history best forgotten, it still shapes many people, even those who were not yet born during the war. The history is shared, even though, from the outside, it may be an individually experienced event. This is further emphasized when Rebecka Martinsson visits the cemetery. She is there to see her grandparents' grave but takes her time because she

usually reads the inscriptions on all the gravestones as she passes by them. She loves all the old-fashioned titles, small-holder, certificated forester, parish treasure. And all the old names. Gideon, Eufemia, Lorentz. (Larsson 2014: 231)

She realizes that it is not at the cemetery she can feel her grandmother's presence, it is rather everywhere else, perhaps "without warning in the forest" (Larsson 2014: 231). Once she is depicted to press snow to her face, almost in passing, outside her late grandmother's house (Larsson 2008: 73), as if by pressing the snow to her body not only physically moves her closer—into—the place, but also her grandmother. Seeing how close Rebecka Martinsson is to the place, it is perhaps not surprising that the person she was the closest to, can turn up there, where every new word is like poetry.

Concluding Remarks

Stewart King argues that in crime fiction, "nothing makes sense without place" (King 2020: 211). In Åsa Larsson's series of crime novels, it is specifically characters that do not make sense without place, at times also those who are deceased. The homecoming Rebecka experiences shows how she is shaped by the place with its natural surroundings, animals, and history. When tourists seek adventure and grandiose scenery, Rebecka can appreciate squashed things on the road, a state of belonging that a visitor cannot reach. Place in Åsa Larsson's five novels is often depicted as fundamental to the development of characters, it is a liminal space where nature, climate, animals and humans are intensely connected. Despite that the places in her novels are certainly hyperlocalised and the concept of borders is highlighted, the borders seem important because they do *not* limit transgression; they can constantly be crossed and blurred. This is emphasized by the descriptions of the animals, nature and climate. Finally, characters' personal history is always present, and so is European history in the form of the two World Wars, to a large extent due to the expanding mining industry in Kiruna, and this is shown to transform the place and its people from the local and peripheral to global and central, and therefore those borders are also distorted.

NOTES

¹ There is some environmental criticism in *The Black Path*. A Swedish corrupt mining company takes advantage of less developed countries, and willfully ignores environmental legislation.

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