A MARTIN BECK MYSTERY

"A modern classic. . . . Lively, stylistically taut. . . . Sjöwall and Wahlöö changed the genre."
—HENNING MANKELL, FROM THE INTRODUCTION

ROSEANNA

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY HENNING MANKELL

MAJ SJÖWALL | PER WAHLÖÖ

MAJ SJÖWALL
AND PER WAHLÖÖ

Roseanna

Translated from the Swedish by Lois Roth

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

I read *Roseanna* almost as soon as it came out, back in 1965. Now, as I'm reading the novel again, I realize that my first reading took place forty years ago and I was only seventeen at the time. Right now that seems to me incomprehensible. How many books have I read since then? And why is it that I remember *Roseanna* so well? I have a strong and indisputable memory that back then I thought of the novel as straightforward and clear, a convincing story presented in an equally convincing form. Today, as I reread the novel, I see that my first impression still holds true. The book has hardly aged at all. Even the language seems energetic and alive. But what *has* changed is the world, and I have too. Back then everybody smoked all the time, and there were no mobile phones; public telephones were in use. Everyone went to cafes for lunch, no one had tiny tape recorders in their pockets, and computers were still practically unknown. Sweden was still a society with closer ties to the past than to the future. The huge waves of immigrants hadn't yet begun. Workers arrived to take jobs in certain major industries, but as yet there was no steady influx of refugees. And everyone showed their passports at the border, even those who were travelling only to Norway or Denmark.

Per Wahlöö has now been dead for many years, while Maj Sjöwall has grown older along with me and all the readers they reached a generation ago. Now I'm rereading the novel *Roseanna* on a December day forty years after its first publication. I've forgotten a great deal, of course, but the novel still stands strong. It's well thought-out, well structured. It's evident that Sjöwall and Wahlöö had carefully laid the groundwork for their plan to write ten books about the National Homicide Bureau — in fictional form but based on reality.

The aim is quite clear. From the very first pages of the novel, for instance, the authors present a thorough examination of the joint decision-making process of various agencies as they organize the dredging of a sludge-filled area of the Göta Canal. This desire to be as thorough as possible continues throughout the entire novel. The intent of the authors is evident — they build up a trust in their readers by presenting meticulous and credible descriptions of various institutions and structures within Swedish society, as it was in the mid-1960s. A country in which Tage Erlander was the prime minister, and cars still drove on the left-hand side of the road.

There is one small detail on the second page of the novel that fascinates me when I see it again. The story begins in early July, with the date clearly specified. A dredging boat has arrived at the canal in Östergötland. The authors write: 'the vessel… moored at Borenshult as the neighbourhood children and a Vietnamese tourist looked on.' A Vietnamese tourist! In Sweden in 1965! That may have happened once, at most. But here the authors are giving a nod to the major event of my generation, the Vietnam War. It was the period in Sweden's post-war history when the world had begun to open up. This is worth pointing out, since the authors had a radical purpose in mind for the books they were planning about the National Homicide Bureau. They wanted to use crime and criminal investigations as a mirror of Swedish society — and later on include the rest of the world. Their intent was never to write crime stories as a form of entertainment. They were influenced and inspired by the American writer Ed McBain. They realized that there was a huge, unexplored territory in which crime novels could form the framework for stories containing social criticism.

I can't even count how many times I've been asked what Sjöwall and Wahlöö's books have meant to me. I think that anyone who writes about crime as a reflection of society has been inspired to some extent by what they wrote. They broke with the previous trends in crime fiction. In Sweden Stieg Trenter dominated the market in the 1950s, along with Maria Lang and H. K. Rönnblom. They wrote detective stories in which solving the mystery was the main concern. In Trenter's books, the streets, pubs and food are all described in great detail, but the setting is merely the setting — there is never any direct, real-life connection between the crime and the place where it occurred. The British-style detective novel was the dominant form until the publication of *Roseanna.* Of particular importance was the fact that Sjöwall and Wahlöö broke with the hopelessly stereotyped character descriptions that were so prevalent. They showed people evolving right before the reader's eyes.

Before 1965 I had read several of Per Wahlöö's novels. I recall especially *The Lorry*, which was set in fascist Spain. He wrote well, using a straightforward and simple language that gave his story a certain force. I liked what I read. But the publication of *Roseanna* signalled something very different. I don't know exactly what it meant for Maj Sjöwall to become his collaborator, except that she must have been a source of great inspiration. I have a clear memory that I went back and reread *Roseanna* after a couple of weeks. I can't remember ever having done that before.

Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall have said that they did find inspiration for their work in the United States. I've already mentioned Ed McBain. But I suspect that they most likely sought inspiration farther back in time, at least as far back as Edgar Allan Poe in the nineteenth century. Many consider Poe's stories from the mid-1800s to be the basis for modern crime

fiction. I don't agree. This seems to indicate a serious lack of understanding even today, because the roots of crime fiction go back much farther. Read the classic Greek dramas! What are they about? People and society tangled up in hostilities which lead to violence, crime, and punishment. And there is also an element of crime writing mirrored in the works of Shakespeare. Of course there aren't any police, but there are investigations, analyses, and attempts to understand who and what lie behind certain brutal crimes. We are continuing traditions, whether we're conscious of doing so or not.

In many ways *Roseanna* is an incredibly fascinating book. I don't intend to discuss the plot or the resolution of the crime, but let me say that it's probably one of the first crime novels in which *time* clearly plays a major role. There are long periods during which nothing happens, when the investigation into who murdered Roseanna and threw her into the Göta Canal seems to be standing still; then it may move a few centimetres before coming to a halt again. It's quite clear that for Martin Beck and his colleagues, the passage of time is both frustrating and a necessary evil. Homicide investigators who have no patience lack a key tool. It takes six months before the crime is solved. By then we, as readers, know that it could just as well have taken five years, but the police would not have given up. The book describes the fundamental virtue of the police: patience.

I haven't counted how many times Martin Beck feels sick in *Roseanna,* but it happens a lot. He can't eat breakfast because he doesn't feel good. Cigarettes and train rides make him sick. His personal life also makes him ill. In *Roseanna* the homicide investigators emerge as ordinary human beings. There is nothing at all heroic about them. They do their job, and they get sick. I no longer remember how I reacted forty years ago, but I think it was a revelation to see such real people as police officers in *Roseanna.*

And the book still holds up today. It's lively, stylistically taut, and the unfolding of the story is skilfully planned.

Of course it's a modern classic. It was the first one in the series of ten books that Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö had planned. And even with their very first book, they hit the mark.

Henning Mankell

1

They found the corpse on the eighth of July just after three o'clock in the afternoon. It was fairly well intact and couldn't have been lying in the water very long.

Actually, it was mere chance that they found the body at all. And finding it so quickly should have aided the police investigation.

Below the locks at Borenshult there is a breakwater which protects the entrance to the lake from the east wind. When the canal opened for traffic that spring, the channel had begun to clog up. The boats had a hard time manoeuvring and their propellers churned up thick clouds of yellowish mud from the bottom. It wasn't hard to see that something had to be done. As early as May, the Canal Company requisitioned a dredging machine from the Civil Engineering Board. The papers were passed from one perplexed civil servant to another and finally remitted to the Swedish National Shipping and Navigation Administration. The Shipping and Navigation Administration thought that the work should be done by one of the Civil Engineering Board's bucket dredging machines. But the Civil Engineering Board found that the Shipping and Navigation Administration had control over bucket dredging machines and in desperation made an appeal to the Harbour Commission in Norrköping, which immediately returned the papers to the Shipping and Navigation Administration, which remitted them to the Civil Engineering Board, at which point someone picked up the telephone and dialled an engineer who knew all about bucket dredging machines. He knew that of the five existing bucket dredgers, there was only one that could pass through the locks. The vessel was called *The Pig* and happened just then to be lying in the fishing harbour at Gravarne. On the morning of 5 July *The Pig* arrived and

moored at Borenshult as the neighbourhood children and a Vietnamese tourist looked on.

One hour later a representative of the Canal Company went on board to discuss the project. That took the whole afternoon. The next day was a Saturday and the vessel remained by the breakwater while the men went home for the weekend. The crew consisted of a dredging foreman, who was also the officer in command with the authority to take the vessel to sea, an excavating engineer, and a deck man. The latter two men were from Gothenburg and took the night train from Motala. The skipper lived in Nacka and his wife came to get him in their car. At seven o'clock on Monday morning all three were on board again and one hour later they began to dredge. By eleven o'clock the hold was full and the dredger went out into the lake to dump. On the way back they had to lay off and wait while a white steamboat approached the Boren locks in a westerly direction. Foreign tourists crowded along the vessel's railing and waved excitedly at the working crew on the dredger. The passenger boat was elevated slowly up the locks towards Motala and Lake Vättern and by lunch time its top pennant had disappeared behind the uppermost sluice gate. At one-thirty the men began to dredge again.

The situation was this: the weather was warm and beautiful with mild temperate winds and idly moving summer clouds. There were some people on the breakwater and on the edge of the canal. Most of them were sunning themselves, a few were fishing, and two or three were watching the dredging activity. The dredger's bucket had just gobbled up a new mouthful of Boren's bottom slime and was on its way up out of the water. The excavating engineer was operating the familiar handgrips in his cabin. The dredging foreman was having a cup of coffee in the galley, and the deck man stood with his elbows on the railing and spat in the water. The bucket was still on the way up.

As it broke through the surface of the water, a man on the pier took a few steps towards the boat. He waved his arms and shouted something. The deck man looked up to hear better.

‘There’s someone in the bucket! Stop! Someone’s lying in the bucket!’

The confused deck man looked first at the man and then at the bucket which slowly swung in over the hold to spit out its contents. Filthy grey water streamed out of the bucket as it hung over the hold. Then the deck man saw what the man on the breakwater had seen. A white, naked arm stuck out of the bucket’s jaw.

The next ten minutes seemed endless and chaotic. Someone stood on the pier and said, over and over again: ‘Don’t do anything; don’t touch anything; leave everything alone until the police come …’

The excavating engineer came out to see what was going on. He stared, then hurried back to the relative security of his seat behind the levers. As he let the crane swing and the bucket open, the dredging foreman and the deck man took out the body.

It was a woman. They laid her on her back on a folded tarpaulin out on the breakwater. A group of amazed people gathered around and stared at her. Some of them were children and shouldn’t have been there but no one thought to send them away. But all of them had one thing in common: they would never forget how she looked.

The deck man had thrown three buckets of water over her. Long afterwards, when the police inquiry was bogged down, there were people who criticized him for this.

She was naked and had no jewellery on. The lines of her tan made it apparent that she had sunbathed in a bikini. Her hips were broad and she had heavy thighs. Her pubic hair was black and wet and thick. Her breasts were small and slack with large, dark nipples. A red scratch ran from her waist to her hipbone. The rest of her skin was smooth without spots or scars. She had small hands and feet and her nails were not polished. Her face was swollen and it was hard to imagine how she had actually looked alive. She had thick, dark eyebrows and her mouth seemed wide. Her medium-length hair was dark and lay flat on her head. A coil of hair lay across her throat.