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## August 2010

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### Jenny McPhee

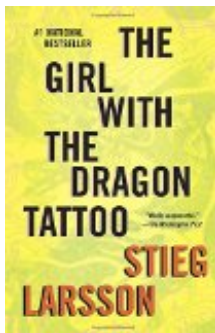
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### The Bombshell

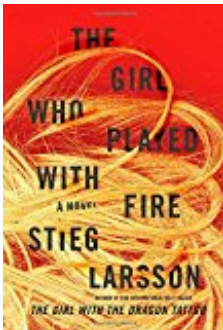
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### Lisbeth Salander, the Millennium Trilogy, and My Mother

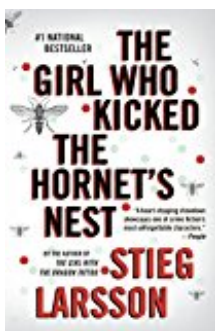
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My mother had been urging me to read Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*. Like her, I love a good thriller but a ways into the first book, I had my doubts. There just wasn't much thrill in this thriller. Then, on page 263 of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, whose original title is *Men Who Hate Women*, protagonist extraordinaire Lisbeth Salander performs an act that made me laugh out loud, shiver with vicarious revenge, and definitively confer upon her Bombshell Status. (She has short black hair but makes ample use throughout the trilogy of a blond wig.) Under five feet and an anorexic-seeming 90 pounds (she eats voraciously), Salander uses a taser to immobilize her evil guardian, who previously had raped her brutally, and straps him to his bed. She then proceeds to tattoo across his belly "I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST." I almost stood up and clapped.



Though the *Millennium Trilogy* does not offer up particularly great sentences, it does bestow upon us a truly great character in Lisbeth Salander. She is unpredictable and possessed of an Asperger-type social diffidence and secret genius. She has a photographic memory, is one of the world's most talented hackers, has expert financial savvy, and at one point solves Fermat's Last Theorem. Her petite body is a



showcase of piercings and tattoos. She is bisexual, likes to use props during sex, and has a penchant for much older men. An excellent boxer (trained by a champion heavy-weight), she is a natural with an array of weaponry. Her fierce protectiveness of her mother is the catalyst for the entire saga. She fits squarely into the tradition of anti-heroes who defy a corrupt authority and answers only to a higher morality: her own. She does not hesitate to use violence to right wrongs—usually injustices against women. She is a feminist version of Dirty Harry.

She is no Lara Croft or Charlie's Angel who must pay the price for her physical prowess by titillating the phantom male reader/viewer with her 36-24-36 scantily clad body. In fact, Lisbeth's breasts are so underdeveloped that in the second book she has them enhanced (begging the question: do women undergo plastic surgery to feel better about their self-image or to change how they imagine they appear to a male gaze? Lisbeth's motivation is clearly the former). The books contain plenty of titillation, including sexual violence towards women. I put such easy manipulation on a par with using terminally-ill children or the Holocaust to raise emotional content. The author, however, balances the sexual violence with other kinds of titillating sexual encounters between consenting adults. The possibilities are infinite for sexual fantasy, Larsson indicates, and need not be limited to the porn industry's paltry choices. Furthermore, Larsson seems to be acutely aware of what will turn on his readership. The ideal reader of these books is a heterosexual woman with a fairly fluid concept of sexual preference. Not a bad strategy given that women make up the vast majority of the fiction reading population.

I fully understand why my mother, a member of NOW since the '70s, had been urging me to read these books. Revenge is sweet; for women it rarely comes in such a guilt-free, hugely entertaining package. Few women have been so violently abused as the twenty-something Lisbeth Salander, but as epigraphs in the first book note, a very high percentage of women in Sweden (and by extrapolation everywhere since Swedish society claims to be the most egalitarian in the world) will encounter some form of sexual harassment during their lifetimes. Many female characters in these books triumph over relentless male aggression in deeply satisfying ways. The *Millennium Trilogy* is one long female revenge fantasy.

Throughout the trilogy an overt feminist consciousness presides. The first book takes on domestic violence, abuse, rape, torture, and the serial murder of women, within a wealthy industrial family. The second book confronts sex trafficking and the exploitation of immigrant women. The third book examines severe sexual harassment within a major newspaper and entrenched sexism in the police force and criminal justice system. The narrative consistently brings the reader's attention to minor and major instances of sexism. Though this agenda is both repetitive and emphatic, it is so convincingly integrated into the plot and into the characters' lives that rather than feel harangued, a reader feels refreshingly represented.

My mother is convinced that Larsson's girlfriend, Eva Gabrielsson, is the real author of the trilogy, or was assisted by Larsson rather than vice-versa. In any case, the author(s) have produced a stunning feminist manifesto within a series of thrillers that goes down like honey. S(he) has done what no one yet has quite been able to do: formulate a feminism palatable for the masses. The trilogy raises our awareness of sexism and institutionalized unfairness towards women, reminds us of our duty to rectify these injustices legally, and if this becomes impossible, calls us to arms. Indeed, the final book incorporates short essays on the history of women warriors.

The most successful aspect of these books perhaps lies, not in the revenge fantasies, nor in thriller conventions (conspiracies and labyrinthine plotting...), but rather in the ultimate female sexual fantasy expressed by the relationship between the other two principle protagonists:

Mikael Blomkvist and Erika Berger. Erika, a successful magazine editor, is happily married to a man whom she adores and who adores her. They have a great sex life and thoroughly enjoy each other's company. Erika also has a lover, her colleague, the charming, renowned investigative journalist Blomkvist. Erika's husband knows about the affair and understands his wife's need for periodic outside affirmation of her sexual self. He himself has no one on the side, Erika being enough for him, even if he is not quite enough for her. For men the mistress paradigm has been around a long time, but this is a particularly female construction of the age-old triad: no children are involved (the guilt would be overwhelming) and the "betrayed" partner is fully acquiescent with minimal needs of his own.

I'll sign up for that. And my mother will too.