



DOWNTIME

SCANDINAVIA LOSES ITS MONOPOLY OVER 'EURO NOIR'

Time to ditch the Nordic knits – the darkest new drama adaptations are coming out of southern Europe

AMERICAN NOIR DOMINATED global crime fiction in the 20th century, starting in the 1930s with the Warner Brothers gangster movies, ripped from newspaper headlines, and the hard-boiled novelists who cut their teeth writing for

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pulp magazines. But since 2000, European noir has become a force to be reckoned with, in both publishing and televisual terms, and judging by its popularity it will be here to stay.

The invasion of Euro Noir “goes back as far as Simenon,” says crime-fiction expert Barry Forshaw, “but the irony is that when one read Simenon as a boy, you knew he had the misfortune not to be English, but then you didn’t think

that you were reading crime in translation.” Writers such as the duo Boileau-Narcejac [who wrote the novels on which movie classics *Les Diaboliques* and *Vertigo* were based], were not really thought of as foreign writers then, says Forshaw.

“It really began with Henning Mankell,” he says, “where there was a consciousness that he was an accomplished crime writer but that he was a Swede and you were getting far more about the society, in a way that was different from the France of Simenon.”

Mankell and his Inspector Wallander novels emerged as an English-language phenomenon in the 1990s, but it was the Lisbeth Salander trilogy by Stieg Larsson in the mid-2000s that first conquered US audiences, quickly followed by the Danish television series *The Killing* and *The Bridge*, both of which were popular in the UK and subsequently remade as US-based dramas. With their compelling storylines and atmospheric,

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KILLER SERIALS: The huge success of the Scandinavian dramas *The Bridge*, *Borgen* and *The Killing*, pictured right, in the UK and in America, made the idea of a subtitled series more palatable to mainstream viewers

BY
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The Killing, *The Bridge* and *Borgen* changed the average English speaking television viewer's attitudes to subtitled foreign drama.

The rest of Europe is a richer source than Britain for politically-inflected crime drama for the simple reason that most other European polities have had more troubled recent histories. The Scandinavian countries, for example, were either invaded during the Second World War or remained neutral and were infiltrated by spies from both sides, later serving in the front line of the Cold War while pioneering welfare-state capitalism. The former Soviet satellites were all police states, Spain had the legacy of Franco, Italy faced terrorism and a tradition of corruption and intrigue, while France offered something of everything.

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Forshaw, who has just published *Euro Noir*, a paperback guide to European crime fiction, film and TV, believes there "are still some terrific writers at the top of their game, and we are starting to see more fiction from other countries than those in Scandinavia, principally France". The last question at every speaking engagement he attends is: "What's next?"

Traditionally, it has been Germany that is the first take-up point for Scandinavian crime fiction in translation. Camilla Läckberg, sometimes called the Swedish Agatha Christie, is marketed there with huge displays in German bookshops, and an author's profile comparable to that of J K Rowling in Britain. She has not had quite the same impact on English book buyers, however. The excellent stable of German crime writers have yet to take hold in the UK, let alone be adapted for TV.

Forshaw believes that the Javier Falcón series of novels, set in Spain's Seville, by British émigré writer Robert Wilson, a resident of Portugal, are overdue for TV adaptation, but it's not certain that they will be filmed in Spanish and with a Spanish cast.

Some of us can recall the fiasco of the adaptation of some of Michael Dibdin's Aurelio Zen novels, set in Italy but with leading actor Rufus Sewell speaking in received pronunciation English, his gorgeous girlfriend speaking English with an Italian accent, his curmudgeonly

boss speaking English with a Northern English accent, and minor characters speaking actual Italian. Surely there are few viewers who prefer Kenneth Branagh's *Wallander*, despite its UK ratings success, to *Valander* starring Rolf Lassgard and subsequently Krister Henriksson?

The TV adaptation of Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano books, on the other hand, has found favour with British audiences because of its slight air of unreality. Although it features Mafia killers, prostitution and immigrants from North Africa and Eastern Europe, it's nonetheless set in the sleepy seaside town of Vigata.

"It's a kind of Italian *Midsomer Murders*," notes Forshaw. "Montalbano always gets a restaurant table by the sea, the one you can never get in real life." The only glimmer of Italian politics in the Montalbano novels is a single-line reference to Italy having "the wrong helmsman" in Berlusconi.

When Scandinavian television made its breakthrough in the UK (with prime minister David Cameron and the Duchess of Cornwall confessing to being addicts of *The Killing*), Sky One bought *Those Who Kill* and *Unit One*, but these proved to be fairly run-of-the-mill cop shows nowhere near the standard of *The Killing* or *Borgen* (the non-violent thriller about Danish coalition politics that spoke to Britain's newly-discovered interest in coalitions).

In Greece there are the novels of Petros Mark-

ITALIAN JOBS: The forthcoming TV adaptation of Andrea Camilleri's Montalbano books, below left, and the Sicilian-based *Gomorra*, below right, are both based in contemporary Italy



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