

## The (Swedish) Zombie and the Welfare State: Politics and Emotion in John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Handling the Undead*

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### Abstract

John Ajvide Lindqvist, renowned author of the vampire novel *Let the Right One In*, has with his writings made critics praise the horror genre. His second novel, *Handling the Undead* has a zombie theme. In this paper I will argue that the Swedish zombie is very much formed by — or part of— a typically Scandinavian literary context. This entails, among other things, that a surrounding — implied or explicit — discussion about the welfare state is present in the narrative. In this novel it is even possible to say that the welfare state is a character itself. In *Handling the Undead*, Ajvide Lindqvist describes a contemporary Stockholm, where thousands of dead people suddenly wake up, causing fear and chaos. This paper maintains that the zombie is used as a metaphor for and a means to discuss the state of the welfare state. The zombie embodies the social structures and ambitions which are failing people, causing them pain, leaving them desolate and without hope. The author intertwines two sorrows (personal and societal), sometimes making them hard to separate from each other. *Handling the Undead* is a novel that combines the political with the personal within the framework of the horror genre, making it possible to look at emotions such as pain and love in a new way.

**Key Words:** The welfare state, pain, sorrow, love, horror, Swedish crime fiction, zombies, consumerism

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### 1. Introduction

The opening sentences of the novel *Handling the Undead* (2005) frame the subsequent narrative. A drunk and possibly homeless man is standing in the exact spot where former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated in 1986. Olof Palme had for 17 years been the leader of the Social Democratic Party. This political party had introduced the welfare state system, which after the end of the Second World War, basically was to become synonymous with Swedish politics and the Swedish way of life. The man says: “‘It’s all going to hell, Olof. Down, down and further down’ (*HTU*

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1). After these words, the man nods “goodbye to the Prime Minister and trace[s] his assassin’s steps toward Tunnelgatan” (*HTU* 2). By using these words, and then choosing for the character the assassin’s way to leave the crime scene, John Ajvide Lindqvist emphasizes the fact that the murderer was never captured and it is often suggested that Sweden lost her innocence with the death of Palme and the unsuccessful attempts at closing the case. It was unfathomable that this type of crime could have happened in Sweden. Similarly, Ajvide Lindqvist ascribes the same sense of incomprehensiveness to characters in the novel when the dead wake up in Stockholm, Sweden: “Sweden, he thought, Sweden. That sort of thing doesn’t happen here” (*HTU* 274).<sup>1</sup>

The welfare state plays a significant part in *Handling the Undead*. Despite the many elements in this novel (and in all of his novels) which apparently place it in the horror/gothic genre, Lindqvist also places himself within a Scandinavian literary tradition, employing thematic elements and social commentary that are often found in crime fiction. This furthermore means that a surrounding – implied or explicit – discussion about the welfare state is present in the narrative. In this novel it is even possible to say that the welfare state is a character itself: it informs the other characters, it is in a way animate and it affects them profoundly. This paper maintains that the zombie is used as a means to discuss, and a metaphor for, the (dying) welfare state. The zombie embodies the social structures and ambitions which are failing people, causing them pain, leaving them desolate and without hope. The zombie is proven to be a useful tool; in comparison to other monstrous figures it is “embodied and material, walks and bleeds and sweats.”<sup>2</sup> The author intertwines these two sorrows (personal and societal), sometimes making them difficult to separate from each other. *Handling the Undead* is a novel that combines the political with the personal—in quite a feminist fashion—within the framework of the horror/gothic genre, using genre conventions simultaneously as reconstructing them.

In order to achieve this reading I will regard this text in relation to the zombie genre *per se*. Zombies are most commonly portrayed in the movies, so references will be made to a few examples of classic zombie movies, and critique regarding these.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore I will place the novel in the context of Swedish crime writing, and briefly discuss that as well. The analyses regarding emotions and the welfare state will be incorporated throughout these genre discussions.

## 2. What Is a Zombie?

The zombie has been discussed by many, and the most intriguing aspect is its contradictory nature. It is a “boundary figure.”<sup>4</sup> However, the zombies depicted in the novel are remarkably different from most other illustrations of zombies, visual or textual. Generally, “the zombie [is the]

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body without mind or soul that nevertheless impersonates the human.”<sup>5</sup> The image in *Handling the Undead* is not of the brain dead, flesh eating, rabid creature which is a danger to everybody and everything. The zombies in the novel are called “reliving” and not “living dead” or “zombie,” thus emphasising life instead of death or an inanimate creature, vaguely resembling a human being. Many critics write about the inherent duality of zombies: they are, for example, both dead and alive, both human and not, both slave and rebel.<sup>6</sup> Again, Ajvide Lindqvist writes in a tradition and also uses his knowledge of it, in order to depart from it, to subvert it. His zombies are also sites of ambiguity, but their dualities are of a different kind: here they are symbolic of the dual opposition hope and pain, which is reflected in the emotional reactions of the other characters.

Discussing more positive illustrations of the monstrous, Fred Botting writes that present textual examples of monsters are less often described as evil and terrifying but instead they are

sites of identification, sympathy, and self-recognition. Excluded figures once represented a malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes.<sup>7</sup>

The monsters Botting refers to do not include zombies however; they seem to largely prevail as characters of either dystopian narratives or pure splatter/gore, and sometimes a combination of both. Yet, in *Handling the Undead* the zombies, which I will hereafter refer to as the reliving, are used as sites for emotions such as love, grief, pain, hope, and empathy. It is almost as if these types of emotions have become fragments of memories which have remained also in the reliving, as echoes from the living past. The system around them is however, in accordance with Botting’s thesis, depicted as actively opposing these emotions.

*Handling the Undead* is far from the first narrative of this kind to use social commentary. George Romero’s *Dead*-series deals with racism and consumerism, for example,<sup>8</sup> though the message is at times concealed below the massive amounts of blood and ripped off pieces of flesh.<sup>9</sup> The beating of the reliving by young men with baseball bats in *Handling the Undead* is an obvious intertextual reference to George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, where a violent posse of humans kills whoever they believe is a zombie. This, in turn, is part of Romero’s social commentary: the posse can be likened to a lynch mob out to kill blacks. In Ajvide Lindqvist’s case, the mob is made up of young men who are all dressed the same way, and resemble “a

social club from The Business School” (*HTU* 326), and can thus be seen as representatives of the capital. Still, with the clear references to the horror and gothic genre, Ajvide Lindqvist’s social commentary also situates him within the traditions of Swedish crime writing, though the crimes here are neither solved by the police, nor attempted to be solved. In Ajvide Lindqvist’s subsequent collections of short stories the social commentary is extended. An even worse crime against the reliving is committed: it is revealed that the reliving are kept locked away so that cruel, medical experiments can be performed on them.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. A Swedish (and Emotional) Context

When Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö published the first novel in the series about inspector Martin Beck in 1968, *Roseanna*, the crime novel in Sweden changed. Politics became an important part of plot; the so-called reality and the social environment were issues crucial to the description of characters on both sides of the law. Crime writers before Sjöwall/Wahlöö also commented on the welfare-society in their novels, but in a more conservative way. Themes then dealt with the “conjuring up of evil” as Sara Kärrholm calls it, in order to protect and conserve the welfare society.<sup>11</sup> Since Sjöwall and Wahlöö entered the scene, many crime writers have followed in their footsteps, and many of them are internationally known.<sup>12</sup> Swedish crime fiction is sometimes referred to as the “Ulcer School,” where the protagonists are not simply doing their job—solving crimes—but also are permitted to be affected by the society surrounding them. They are allowed to “have an opinion” about the society, and that is when the ulcer enters the scene.<sup>13</sup> Discussing the success of Swedish crime writer Henning Mankell, Andrew Nestingen claims that “[r]eaders may be less interested in the crime and its investigation than in how Wallander [the protagonist] will respond to the next crisis in the investigation. [...] How does he feel?”<sup>14</sup> It is therefore possible to claim that the emotional life and development of characters are of higher importance to the genre than the elements of suspense.

John Ajvide Lindqvist writes in this tradition, and this is seen in the fact that the setting is of high importance, not just for “colour”, but “on socially defining comments on the characters.”<sup>15</sup> The before mentioned homeless man is an illustration of such socially defining comments. One of the characters, Flora, whose grandfather is a reliving, goes to meet her outcast friend living in what is called “The Heath.” The Heath is described to be “a blot of shame on the city; a failed and slightly dodgy construction project, now a gathering place for those displaced from the rest of the city” (*HTU* 116). The Heath is carefully depicted by the author. The only sounds audible are sounds of people. There are no trees, no bushes and therefore no birds or sounds wind through leaves. “Broken glass crunched underfoot and the sound was magnified, bouncing back and forth between the bare concrete

walls (*HTU* 116). The place has a clear hardness to it, a place evidencing governmental amnesia or simple ignorance, and this is also fittingly where the authorities will place (or rather store) the reliving.

Flora is the character which most openly comments on her society. For her, society has collapsed already, and when the news of the reliving has reached her she says: “Everything is different now. ...Everything they’ve based all their shit on...pfff! Gone! Death, life. Nothing makes sense” (*HTU* 92) and “I really want to see how they fix this one” (*HTU* 93). Flora talks about ‘they’ here, without being specific, but it is obvious she has the social and governmental authorities in mind. She predicts chaos, of course, but adds that at least it “is something else, and damn if I don’t think that’s good (*HTU* 93). Flora wants change, and the change she longs for is on a societal level. She has a vision of Stockholm and its inhabitants wrapped in plastic, and it is symbolic of a society that affects its people. It is an image of artificiality and of emotional and physical stagnancy.

#### 4. Consumerism, Gender and the Welfare State

One aspect of society which stands out as being a major factor in the deconstruction of the welfare state concerns consumption and the ideals of consumerism. The images presented are painful and even associated to death and evil.

One of the characters is a stand up comedian and when his son asks him why the audience laughs he replies “I think that people laugh because they want to laugh. They have paid to come and laugh, and so they laugh” (*HTU* 10). This conversation illustrates the idea that people can buy happiness, or at least that they have decided, or have been told, that they can buy it. The same character uses a picture “every time his ideas dried up, when he felt hesitant,” and the picture “was death; the thing you struggle against” (*THU* 7). The picture of ‘death’ is a photo of a sculpture called “Supermarket Lady.”<sup>16</sup>

A woman, obese, in a pink top and turquoise skirt, pushing a loaded shopping trolley. [...] Her gaze is empty. [...]. But the trolley is full. Filled to bursting. Cans, cartons, bags. Food. Microwave meals. Her body is a lump of flesh forced inside her skin, which in turn has been crammed into the tight skirt, the tight top. The gaze is empty, the lips hard around the cigarette, a glimpse of teeth. (7)

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In line with Baudrillard's theories, consumption rather than production is stressed. Since the zombie "has become an existential term, about mental and physical enslavement"<sup>17</sup> the woman can be seen to resemble a traditional zombie rather than a woman. The empty gaze should be seen in comparison to her outfit, shopping trolley and her obesity. She is symbolically trapped in the supermarket and her own body. The sharp colors emphasize the surface, and her body size and the filled shopping trolley show the never-ending appetite, and could be an illustration of Steven Shaviro's words about the zombie: "We all know those shuffling idiot bodies, wandering obliviously [...], wailing with a hunger that can never be sated [...]."<sup>18</sup> Conformity, again, is a keyword here, because as David Punter and Glennis Byron state: "Conformity is central to one of the earliest of Gothic monsters established in the twentieth century: the zombie."<sup>19</sup> This is evidence of the fact that conformity is part of the critical discussion on both consumerism and the zombie as a symbol.

Another example of the attitudes to consumption is detected in the description of when Flora's parents return home from a trip, bearing gifts. "There it was. The rustle that always announced her parents' return from a trip. The shopping bags" (*HTU* 197). Flora says that she does not need a new iPod, and "[s]ilence fell. A plastic bag crumpled up with a sound like a sigh. Flora savoured it. Not everything can be bought, no, not everything can be bought" (*HTU* 199). Jean Baudrillard writes: "The fundamental, unconscious, and automatic choice of the consumer is to accept the life-style of a particular society,"<sup>20</sup> and throughout this narrative, Flora links this attitude to the values of the middle-class. She feels "contempt for the middle-class world she had been born into" (*HTU* 214). Emotions have been replaced with goods, and when she was younger, Flora used to react by cutting herself. It is a perhaps natural consequence since, as Baudrillard states: "Conformity and satisfaction are interrelated."<sup>21</sup> Flora does not accept the values associated with the middle-class, she does not "conform" to them and therefore can receive no satisfaction, only pain.

Flora shares the physical and emotional pain with her grandmother and it is a pain that has no place in the welfare society due to its gendered nature. The female characters belong to different generations but are both described to be sensitive and have a sixth sense, and thus have been labeled by society. As a comment on the strict (and brutal) gender structures, Flora has hidden her razor blade in the *Pretty Woman* DVD case, and in the 1950s, Elvy was diagnosed 'hysterical'.

In the fifties, as the welfare state flowered and the final victory of rationality seemed imminent, it was not a nice thing to be hysterical. Even Elvy had cut her arms and legs then—inner pain, outer pressures.

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This problem hadn't even existed back then. No one had the right to be unhappy. (*HTU* 38)

In a manner of speaking these two women represent on the one hand, the consequences of a gender blind welfare society, and on the other a quite anti-materialistic attitude to life due to their ability too see and hear things other people cannot.

In another society, in another time, they might have been shamans. Or burned at the stake, for that matter. In Sweden in the twenty-first century they were hysterical and self-destructive. Overly sensitive. (*HTU* 39)

Apart from being someone who 'feels too much,' Elvy furthermore represents the traditional woman who married a man 'for better or for worse.' It is after her husband's long illness and subsequent death, that Elvy has created an independent life of her own, partly with her granddaughter. At the sight of her reliving husband she is depicted to feel "not terror or horror" but "only surprise and...a kind of exhaustion" (*HTU* 64), and she asks him: "'What are you doing here?'" (*HTU* 64).

## 5. Love and Pain

What all of the reliving are doing when they have woken up is trying to go home. From one reliving "came only a single mournful note, "Oooooooooommmmm... oooooooooommmmm..." and a witness to this knows "with immediate comprehension, what it was she wanted. The same as everyone wants. To go home" (*HTU* 52). Despite the fact that the reliving are medically speaking dead, and the descriptions of them verify this, as do various authorities and experts throughout the narrative, they act as if they have memories of life and of emotions, quite the opposite to most other descriptions of zombies. Simply put: when they wake up they start heading home. When they died, their family members stopped living as well, in a sense. The pain of those still alive is shown in various ways: one character contemplates suicide every day, and one man thinks that "[t]he world had congealed, all sense and meaning sucked out of it" (*HTU* 20). It is possible to claim that the reliving are created this way so that they can respond to the unbearable pain and grief of their loved ones. In Ajvide Lindqvist's writing, love must exist for there to be pain and with love the risk of experiencing pain is enlarged. Characters in the novel take extreme measures to be

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reunited with their reliving loved ones, and one of them contemplates: “All this work. For this little scrap of life” (*HTU* 245). By meeting them again, the pain of losing them in the first place can be erased.

The reliving are described by authorities to be a logistical problem, and all human emotions connected to them are initially ignored. The reliving are handled by and shuffled between various authorities to eventually be placed in The Heath. The relatives to the reliving end up going through the same pain all over again, and as one character says: “As an old Social Democrat I am very disappointed in the government’s actions. I think I speak for many when I say that this will have an impact when I go to vote next month” (*HTU* 225).

Yet, the reliving are not just logistically problematic. What is ironic is that all characters in the novel, when they are in close proximity to the reliving they become exposed to other characters’ thoughts, and thus also emotions:

Large numbers of dead people were having an effect on the minds of the living, but the large numbers of the living were also affecting the dead. As if through a system of prisms, emotions were being enlarged, reflected in each other, reinforced, and this went on until the force field was unbearable. (*HTU* 296)

Due to the fact that people have come back to life, the metaphorical plastic wrapping of Stockholm bursts, and there is really no way to escape emotion. The end of the novel is tragic and in line with the general inability to deal with so much emotions. Yet, the author describes hope as well. A few of the characters have a new chance to say a proper goodbye to their loved ones: “*I believe*. There is a place where happiness exists. A place, and a time” (*HTU* 356). Above all, the link between the reliving and hope that the author provides—despite the many instances of various sorts of violence performed by authorities and private citizens<sup>22</sup>—is not dystopic. This link forms the horror narrative in new ways, and the zombie is neither a symbol for end of the world nor gore, but rather love and ways to overcome pain.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> This reaction is shown throughout the novel, for example: "...makes no sense whatsoever, how can it...here in Sweden..." (HTU 57), "...it was difficult to see how this could be Sweden" (HTU 257).
- <sup>2</sup> Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 358.
- <sup>3</sup> Glennis Punter and David Byron write: "One the whole zombies proliferate more in film than in printed fiction [...]," *The Gothic*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 265. Marina Warner also talks about this (361).
- <sup>4</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, 'A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism', in *boundary 2*: 35: 1, 2008, p. 90.
- <sup>5</sup> Punter and Byron, p. 285
- <sup>6</sup> See for example Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry. Jacques Derrida writes that "zombies infect the oppositions grouped around them." Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin, *Introducing Derrida*. Cambridge: Icon, 2005, p. 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Fred Botting quoted in David Punter and Glennis Byron, p. 265.
- <sup>8</sup> See for example, Jen Webb and Sam Bynard's 'Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope,' in *Body & Society*, 14: 83, 2008, Stephen Harper's 'Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*', in *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture 1900 to Present*, Fall 2002, Vol. 1, Issue 2, and A Loudermilk's 'Eating 'Dawn' in the Dark: Zombie desire and commodified identity in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*,' in *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3: 83, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> John Powers compares the tragedy of hurricane Katrina with the zombie movies by George Romero. Robert Mighall quotes him: "The living dead becomes a metaphor for everything white consumer society wants to repress: powerless black people, dying people." His also makes the similar claim to the characters in *Handling the Undead*: "This couldn't be America." In "Gothic Cities" in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic* (62). Furthermore, Steven Shaviro states: "[T]he zombies converge on a huge indoor shopping mall because that is where they were happiest when they were alive. Even in death, they continue to enact the rituals of rapacious, yet basically aimless, consumerism." *Connected, or, What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 171.
- <sup>10</sup> John Ajvide Lindqvist. *Pappersväggar* [Walls of Paper]. Stockholm: Ordfront, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Sara Kärrholm, *Konsten att lägga pussel. Deckaren och besvärjandet av ondskan i folkhemmet*. Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Förlag, 2005.
- <sup>12</sup> Bo Lundin writes: "Martin Beck started a trend in Swedish crime writing and a number of post-Sjöval/Wahlöö novels feature runny-nosed, harried and worn-out policemen, beaten to the ground by a welfare society gone off course: powerful sociological reports, politically often far from socialist. There is a typical Swedish disappointment to be found in these books, an injured idealism which does not appear as easily in countries where political repression, violence and class antagonism are more a part of everyday life: the big disappointment has its basis in a dream which once seemed close to fulfillment." *The Swedish Crime Story*, Bromma: Jury, 1981, p. 10. Furthermore, Risto Saarinen also discusses this in "The Surplus of Evil in Welfare Society: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 2003:2, pp131-135.
- <sup>13</sup> Lundin, 10. Lars Wendelius further explains: "Police work here means team work. The brilliant individualistic detective well-known from early crime fiction is replaced by gloomy anti-heroes deeply frustrated with their work. And the villains are no demons but equally frustrated people who for various, often quite understandable reasons are joining the criminal world. Suspense and curiosity are important factors in arousing the reader's interest. [...] The investigation of the crime is turned into an investigation of the social and political conditions of our society." *Rationalitet och Kaos. Nedslag I Svensk kriminalfiktio efter 1965*. Södertälje: Gidlunds Förlag, 1999, p. 260.
- <sup>14</sup> Andrew Nestingen. *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia. Fiction, Film, and Social Change*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, p. 225.
- <sup>15</sup> Lundin 10.
- <sup>16</sup> This is a photo of Duane Hanson's plastic sculpture called "Supermarket Lady."
- <sup>17</sup> Warner 359.
- <sup>18</sup> Shaviro, p. 171.
- <sup>19</sup> Punter and Byron 264
- <sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society" in *Selected Writings*, ed by Mark Poster, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, p. 40.
- <sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, p. 40
- <sup>22</sup> Flora thinks: "That evening in Elvy's garden she had wishes...she had known...that something was going to happen. Something that would change Sweden forever. Now it had happened, and what was the change? *Nothing*. Terror gave birth to terror, hatred begat hate and all that was left in the end was a pile of burnt bodies. As everywhere; as always" (HTU 348).