

Historical Trauma and Moral Complexity in Scandinavian Crime Fiction: A Study of Jo Nesbø's *The Redbreast* and Camilla Läckberg's *The Hidden Child*

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Abstract:

This article examines the portrayal of historical trauma and its psychological aftermath in Jo Nesbø's *The Redbreast* (2006; [Rødstrupe, 2000]) and Camilla Läckberg's *The Hidden Child* (2011; [Tyskungen, 2011]), two key works of Scandinavian crime fiction that explore World War II's enduring impact on the Nordic psyche. Both novels investigate how wartime experiences continue to shape personal and collective identities, revealing the lingering moral and emotional consequences of the past. In *The Redbreast*, Nesbø links a modern murder investigation with Norway's Nazi past, showing how historical trauma still shapes the present. Detective Harry Hole faces both a killer symbolising national guilt and his own moral conflicts. Similarly, *The Hidden Child* follows Erika Falck as she uncovers family secrets connected to World War II, revealing how hidden histories affect current relationships. Both authors use Scandinavian crime fiction not only for suspense, but also to explore moral and historical complexity. By engaging deeply with wartime memory, Nesbø and Läckberg prompt readers to reflect on unresolved historical wounds and the psychological burdens borne by individuals and societies alike.

Keywords: Scandinavian crime fiction; historical trauma; World War II; collective memory; psychological aftermath; moral ambiguity; Jo Nesbø; Camilla Läckberg.

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The term Scandinavian crime fiction, often used interchangeably with Nordic noir, denotes a distinctive and influential subgenre of crime literature originating in the Nordic countries. While unified by shared thematic and stylistic concerns, it encompasses a diverse body of literary works from the Nordic countries, each shaped by specific national histories and cultural contexts. This article examines *The Redbreast* (2006; [Rødstrupe, 2000]) by the Norwegian writer Jo Nesbø and *The Hidden Child* (2011; [Tyskungen, 2011]) by the Swedish author Camilla Läckberg in order to explore how the subgenre engages with the legacies of World War II in Norway and Sweden. Both novels reveal how historical trauma, defined by Cathy Caruth as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden, or claustrophobic events, in which the responses to the event occur in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’ (‘Unclaimed Experience’ 181), reverberates across generations, reshaping ethical frameworks and national identities. By interweaving wartime histories with contemporary investigations, the two novels confront suppressed or selectively remembered national pasts. The article argues that Scandinavian crime fiction thus constitutes a narrative space in which memory, justice, and moral ambiguity converge, while simultaneously questioning the possibility of narrative closure.

Scandinavian crime fiction is characterised by a distinctive aesthetic and thematic signature. Frequently described through the lens of Nordic noir, it is marked by desolate settings, a sombre tonal register, and protagonists burdened by psychological and moral conflict. As Glen Creeber observes, the subgenre is defined by a ‘mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives’ (21), a formulation that captures both its visual and narrative sensibilities. These elements are not merely stylistic but are deeply embedded in the socio-political realities of the Nordic region. Emerging from literary traditions of social critique, the subgenre reflects tensions within welfare societies confronting processes such as urbanisation, neoliberal restructuring, immigration, and the erosion of collective trust. Consequently, crime fiction frequently interrogates systemic failures, exposing fractures within social models often idealised as stable, egalitarian, and progressive.

Critics note that crime fiction is driven as much by what remains hidden as by what is ultimately disclosed. As Mary Evans argues, ‘the hidden, or what is not said, are central themes in crime fiction’ (149). In Scandinavian contexts, this dynamic assumes particular significance, as concealment is frequently tied to history. Present-day crimes are often revealed to be rooted in unresolved past events, whether personal, familial, or national. The investigative process thus becomes an act of uncovering not only immediate perpetrators but also deeper layers of historical causation. At the same time, such revelations do not necessarily culminate in clear or satisfactory resolution. While the subgenre stages encounters with buried truths, it often resists closure, leaving moral

tensions unresolved and ethical questions open-ended. This tendency is especially pronounced in works such as *The Redbreast*, where the exposure of truth does not restore moral order but instead underscores its fragility.

The preoccupation with hidden histories and their detrimental, haunting influence upon the protagonists in the present aligns Scandinavian crime fiction with Gothic narrative structures. As Catherine Spooner notes, both detective fiction and the Gothic are fundamentally concerned with ‘the return of the past upon the present’ (248). Within this framework, the act of investigation acquires an almost archaeological dimension: it becomes a process of excavation through which suppressed histories are brought to light. Such revelations frequently expose not only individual guilt but also broader patterns of historical injustice, implicating communities and institutions alike. The past, in this sense, is neither stable nor complete but constitutes a site of ongoing disturbance that continues to shape contemporary experience. In Scandinavian crime fiction, trauma operates across multiple registers, encompassing personal memory, family secrets, and collective or national histories.

These thematic concerns are inseparable from wider socio-political developments in the Nordic countries. Scholars such as Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (2017), Gunnar Iversen (2020), and Andrew Nestingen (2008), among others, have demonstrated that Scandinavian crime fiction responds to the perceived instability of contemporary societies, reflecting anxieties related to globalisation, shifting identities, and the weakening of traditional social bonds. At the same time, the narratives often register a sense of nostalgia for an imagined past characterised by cohesion, solidarity, and mutual trust. Yet this nostalgia is rarely uncritical; rather, it is interrogated and destabilised, revealing the exclusions, silences, and moral compromises upon which such idealised visions depend. The protagonists’ flaws, introspection and emotional burdens, as seen for example in Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander, embody these tensions. As they navigate complex criminal investigations, these protagonists are confronted with personal crises, health issues, and broader societal contradictions, positioning them as mediators between past and present, as well as between individual and collective experience.

It is precisely this dynamic that informs this article. Both *The Redbreast* and *The Hidden Child* trace contemporary crimes back to the era of World War II, exposing the enduring consequences of collaboration, betrayal, silence, and selective remembrance. In doing so, they challenge dominant national narratives that tend to emphasise resistance, heroism, or neutrality while marginalising more ambiguous or troubling aspects of the past. However, rather than offering straightforward resolution, these novels complicate the relationship between past and present. The uncovering of truth does not lead to moral clarity or closure; instead, it reveals further layers of ambiguity, guilt, and unresolved tension.

Jo Nesbø's *The Redbreast*

Jo Nesbø's *The Redbreast* reflects the intricate interplay of historical trauma and moral ambiguity in post-war Norway. At the centre of this dynamic stands the war veteran Gudbrand Johansen, whose memories and actions exemplify the enduring fractures within Norwegian society and the persistent difficulty of confronting a national past marked simultaneously by resistance and collaboration. As Mitzi M. Brunsdale observes, Nesbø 'draw[s] edgy parallels between Norwegian pro- and anti-Nazi activity in World War II and Norway's present-day neo-Nazi movement', emphasising 'the complexity of Norway's response to Nazism through depictions of young Norwegians who joined the Nazi Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front because they feared Soviet Communism more than German Nazism' (333). This historical ambiguity acquires an even more personal dimension when considered in relation to Nesbø's own family history, particularly the experiences of his father, who fought on the German side during the war. Rather than presenting history through clear moral binaries, Nesbø appears interested in exploring the psychological and ideological uncertainties that shaped individual choices during wartime. The figure of Gudbrand Johansen thus becomes not only a representation of collective national trauma but also a reflection of Nesbø's attempt to understand how fear, loyalty, and political conviction could lead ordinary individuals into morally compromised positions whose consequences continued to reverberate long after the war had ended.

Set against the façade of a peaceful and modern nation, the narrative resurrects the unresolved spectres of World War II. Through its intricate plotting and psychological nuance, Nesbø not only constructs a compelling narrative but also interrogates the mechanisms through which nations remember, repress, or distort their most painful historical episodes. During the German occupation of Norway, collaboration and betrayal were not confined to the margins but permeated political and cultural elites, thereby unsettling the dominant post-war narrative of unified resistance. The novel repeatedly invokes what it terms 'the great betrayal' of Norway's elite during the war (Nesbø 13). A striking articulation of this sentiment appears in the words of neo-Nazi activist Sverre Olsen, who proclaims during a meeting:

The previous great betrayal took place on 9 April 1940, when our so-called national leaders fled from the enemy to save their own skins, and took the gold reserves with them to finance a life of luxury in London. Now the enemy is here again. (14)

These thematic concerns resonate strongly with *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) where Caruth examines how trauma manifests through its deferred return in both individual and collective experience. Caruth develops a theory of trauma centred on belatedness,

repetition, and haunting, arguing that traumatic experience is not fully grasped at the moment it occurs but rather returns later in life, since ‘catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them’ (1), and because ‘its very unassimilated nature [...] returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (4). Gudbrand’s recollections of the Eastern Front exemplify precisely this delayed manifestation of trauma. His memories are not stable historical accounts but fragmented, affect-laden returns of an unassimilated past. In Caruth’s terms, Gudbrand is ‘possessed’ by history, unable to integrate his wartime experiences into a coherent narrative of self or nation.

The novel also explores these unresolved tensions through intertextual allusion, notably to the poet Nordahl Grieg and his poem ‘King’ (‘Kongen’ published in *Freedom [Friheten]* in 1943) which re-imagines King Haakon VII’s retreat from Norway as an act of moral fortitude, presenting it as an honourable decision rather than an abandonment of his people. Nesbø, however, problematises this literary canonisation by recasting the monarch through Gudbrand’s reminiscences of the past, in which he observes people in the Palace Gardens preparing for 17th May celebrations, as ‘yet another of those exiled majesties who held moving speeches for sympathetic upper-class women over entertaining dinners, as they clung to the hope that their little kingdom would one day want them back’ (509). This irony highlights the contradictions at the heart of Norway’s wartime legacy and challenges the sanctification of exile as resistance.

As previously mentioned, at the heart of this narrative is Gudbrand Johansen, an aging war veteran whose personal history functions as a micro-cosm of Norway’s troubled relationship with its past. His recollections of volunteering for the Waffen-SS and fighting on the Eastern Front reveal an unsettling reality: not all Norwegians resisted the Nazi regime; some actively supported it, often framing their involvement as a crusade against Bolshevism. This ideological rationale is echoed by Gudbrand’s comrade, who argues:

There are only two people strong enough to stop Europe’s nosedive into chaos now: Hitler and Stalin. That’s the choice we have. A sister nation or barbarians. There’s almost no one at home who seems to have understood what good luck it was for us that the Germans came first and not Stalin’s butchers. (67)

Viewed through this lens, Gudbrand’s memories are imbued with disillusionment, betrayal, and a nostalgic yearning for a lost sense of honour – emotions that mirror the broader societal struggle to reconcile the moral complexities of wartime conduct with the construction of a post-war national identity.

Nesbø also demonstrates how unresolved historical trauma resurfaces in contemporary forms. His depiction of neo-Nazism in modern Norway and Sweden serves as a cautionary reminder of the dangers inherent in a national narrative that elides or simplifies difficult truths. By portraying extremist

groups intent on reviving discredited ideologies, Nesbø highlights the peril of ignoring, repressing, or distorting the past. This danger is highlighted through the character of Professor Even Juul, a historian specialising in neo-Nazism, who warns that the resurgence of far-right movements is ‘not merely a reaction to factors in the current social situation, such as unemployment and immigration; it wanted to set up an alternative to social democracy. The catchword was re-armament – moral, military and racial’ (159). However, Juul is not portrayed as a neutral scholar; rather, he is implicated in the state’s propagandistic historiography, one that selectively crafts wartime narratives to present Norway in a favourable light. Juul, who is said to write ‘myths about Norway during the war in the way the victors wanted them presented’ (351–52), thus functions as a narrative foil to Gudbrand, representing the institutional suppression of historical complexity.

One of the most significant motifs in the novel is Gudbrand’s quest for retribution against those he deems traitors. His campaign is not portrayed as the indiscriminate violence of a disillusioned veteran but rather as a calculated effort to administer justice for what he perceives as both a historical and moral betrayal. The objects of his vengeance include wartime collaborators who evaded prosecution, profiteers who capitalised on the occupation, and fellow soldiers he regards as having abandoned either him personally or the nation at large. In this sense, Gudbrand enacts a violent, extrajudicial reckoning that confronts moral failures the post-war Norwegian state had largely suppressed in its pursuit of national reconciliation. The psychological and ethical rationale underlying his actions gradually emerges through a series of dialogues between Gudbrand – who has assumed the identity of Sindre Fauke after murdering him – and the police officer Harry Hole. In one such exchange, the veteran admits that he had been ‘obsessed by the thought of revenge’ and driven by a desire ‘to settle a score with all those who had really betrayed our country’ (268). The confession reveals how Gudbrand frames his violence not merely as personal vengeance but as a distorted form of patriotic justice rooted in trauma, guilt, and ideological disillusionment.

The Redbreast also foregrounds the injustices endured by many Norwegian soldiers upon their return from the war, men who, in their own words, had believed they would be ‘hailed as heroes in our beloved Norway’ (68). Contrary to such expectations, those who had fought for the German side, particularly on the Eastern Front, were instead branded as traitors. On returning home, they were stripped of civil rights, subjected to legal sanctions, and confronted with intense public condemnation. Edvard Mosken, one such veteran, articulates this sense of betrayal: ‘What smarted was being labelled a traitor. But I console myself with the fact that we know that we defended our country with our lives’ (296). Gudbrand’s bitterness reflects the broader disillusionment of veterans who believed their actions to be part of an

ideological crusade against communism and in defence of Norway yet were later vilified and erased from official narratives of heroism and resistance. Professor Even Juul corroborates this perspective, observing that ‘many men from the front see themselves as the real patriots in the war’. Believing they ‘acted in the best interests of the nation’, they ‘consider the fact that we sentenced them as traitors to be a total travesty of justice’ (244). For these men, condemnation by the state and society constituted not merely a political judgement but a profound moral and existential betrayal. Nesbø portrays this societal rejection as an additional trauma that compounded the psychological scars of combat. The veterans’ resentment and alienation endure across decades, epitomised in Juul’s description of them as ‘the old incorrigibles’ who continue ‘pouring out their bitterness against the great betrayal, the Nygaardsvold government and the general state of things in the world’ (303). Excluded from national memory, these men find solidarity in their shared resentment and in the conviction that history has misjudged them.

The psychological consequences of war thus emerge as a persistent theme in *The Redbreast*. Veterans such as Gudbrand are plagued by recurring nightmares, intrusive memories, and a deep sense of estrangement from post-war society. Nesbø renders these psychological wounds with nuance and empathy, suggesting that the trauma of war extends far beyond the battlefield. Social ostracism, moreover, intensifies their suffering, leaving these individuals not only psychologically damaged but also morally isolated. This tension culminates in a poignant scene in which Gudbrand and his fellow veterans, now elderly and disillusioned, gather in a bar, a moment that highlights both their marginalisation and their enduring sense of loss. Their conversation reveals the depth of their emotional injuries and existential fatigue, casting them as figures that live in a state of internal exile within their own nation, figures who are, in essence, the ‘dead-in-life’:

‘Do I look dead?’ [...]

‘No, you don’t look dead. Sick, yes, but not dead.’

He stretched out an enormous, grimy hand and the old man recognised the sweet stench of sweat, urine and vomit.

‘What’s up? Don’t you want to shake an old comrade’s hand?’ His voice sounded like a death rattle. (125–26)

These individual traumas mirror a broader collective wound in Norwegian society, one that has never fully healed.

In *The Redbreast*, Nesbø presents the past not as a linear narrative of heroism or villainy but as a contested and ambiguous terrain. This complexity is underlined by the portrayal of figures such as Sindre Fauke, who was believed to have deserted during the war. In a conversation with Harry, Edvard defends Sindre, remarking that he at least ‘took sides at a time when no one knew how

the war would end. That's more than you can say about most Norwegian men' (294). This statement encapsulates Nesbø's broader critique of reductive historical narratives. Rather than affirming the post-war myth of a unified and resistant Norway, the novel foregrounds a more nuanced reality in which individual choices were shaped by competing loyalties, fear, desperation, and, at times, personal ambition. A key narrative device through which Nesbø explores this ambiguity is the motif of the 'Traitors' Archives', which, as Juul explains, are 'filed according to name along with all the data from the court cases' (242). These archives function as a symbol of latent truths that threaten to destabilise the sanitised post-war image of Norway. Their fictional presence accentuates the idea that historical truths, no matter how deeply buried, inevitably resurface, and that collective efforts to suppress the past cannot eliminate the ethical demands it continues to impose. Within this framework, Gudbrand's campaign of vengeance, directed against those who escaped accountability, transcends the level of personal vendetta. His violence assumes the form of a distorted, extrajudicial reckoning with unresolved history. Though his actions are criminal, they are narrated with a tragic inevitability: Gudbrand personifies the spectre of historical reckoning, a reminder that suppression of the past carries profound moral consequences.

The figure of Vidkun Quisling, the infamous Norwegian military officer, Minister President of the National Government of Norway (1942–45) and Nazi collaborator whose very name has become synonymous with treason, also haunts the novel. Quisling represents the ultimate betrayal, yet Nesbø cautions against locating Norway's wartime guilt solely in such conspicuous villains. In one episode, the narrative recalls that 'it was there they had shot Vidkun Quisling and the others who had been tried for war crimes and sentenced to death' (494–95). This historical reference situates Norway's reckoning with treason in both physical and symbolic terms. Yet Nesbø ultimately shifts attention from singular, infamous figures like Quisling to the far more insidious minor betrayals committed by ordinary citizens, as portrayed by the narrator's reference to criminal or immoral activity of Hallgrim Dale, one of the Norwegian soldiers after the war: 'Harry's eyes ran down the list. Vagrancy, drunkenness, harassment of neighbour, petty larceny, affray' (273). These everyday moral failures, while individually less dramatic, collectively shaped the complex ethical landscape of both wartime and post-war Norway and left a psychological residue that persists into the present.

Significantly, the novel foregrounds an internal disagreement over how a past shaped by World War II ought to be approached and understood in contemporary Norway. On one side stand characters such as Gudbrand, whose relationship to history is governed by a rigid moral framework and a pronounced desire for retribution. His perspective is rooted in the conviction that the moral categories of betrayal and loyalty remain clear-cut and enduring,

and that acts of treachery demand accountability regardless of the temporal distance from the war. In this view, justice is not diminished by time; rather, it is deferred, awaiting recognition and redress. In contrast, this position is implicitly challenged by Harry's investigative approach, which reflects a more analytical and reconstructive engagement with history. Instead of imposing fixed moral judgements, the police officer seeks to assemble disparate fragments of the past into a coherent narrative. His inquiry is driven less by condemnation than by a desire for understanding: he uncovers obscured connections, interrogates silences, and acknowledges the moral ambiguities that shaped individual choices under extreme historical conditions. Beyond these two interpretive frameworks, Nesbø introduces a third, equally significant response to the past: suppression. This stance is exemplified by characters such as Professor Juul, who participates in the construction of a sanitised national historiography. Through such figures, the novel gestures toward an institutional impulse to regulate collective memory, containing, reshaping, or even erasing uncomfortable aspects of the past in the interest of preserving social cohesion and a stable national identity, the approach similar to that of Police authority at the end of *The Redbreast*.

The novel's conclusion further underscores this critique. Gudbrand's crimes are never exposed but are instead deliberately suppressed by the Police authorities. This institutional silencing, articulated by Harry's superior Møller, reflects a broader societal reluctance to disturb the fragile consensus of national memory. As Møller insists: 'The only thing we'll achieve by stirring up things now is ripping open old wounds for the next of kin, and there's a risk someone will poke around and dig up the whole story. The cases were closed' (613). Nesbø thus exposes the politics of memorial culture in post-war Norway, suggesting that the preservation of a coherent and heroic national identity frequently comes at the expense of truth and justice. Ultimately, *The Redbreast* constructs a deeply unsettling vision of Norway's historical consciousness. By weaving together themes of personal trauma, political betrayal, and moral ambiguity, Nesbø resists the comfort of simple resolutions. The novel demonstrates how the past continues to exert a powerful, often destructive, influence on the present, and how the failure to confront historical trauma leaves societies vulnerable to its resurgence in new and dangerous forms.

Camilla Läckberg's *The Hidden Child*

Camilla Läckberg's *The Hidden Child* skilfully intertwines the suspense of contemporary crime with a profound engagement with the historical traumas of World War II. As Brunsdale notes, it 'carries out her conviction that Swedes need to be constantly reminded of the horrible consequences of human ignorance and extreme right-wing thoughts because she sees neo-Nazism growing in Sweden as well as all over Europe' (463). At its core, the novel

critically examines the enduring impact of the war's legacy on both individual subjectivities and the collective consciousness of Swedish society. Rather than functioning merely as a historical backdrop to a murder mystery, the war emerges as a pervasive and unsettling presence, intricately woven into the narrative and illuminating the entanglement of past atrocities with present-day moral and social dilemmas. Seen in this light, Läckberg, while recalling the cloistered atmospheres of Agatha Christie's crime fiction, 'deals in', as Barry Forshaw remarks, 'far darker and more gruesome territory, with evil that has a wider reach' (42).

The narrative opens with a crime writer Erica Falck uncovering a Nazi medal among the possessions of her recently deceased mother. This seemingly innocuous artefact, described as 'a Nazi medal that had been hidden in the stained cloth' (Läckberg 4) and 'so intimately connected with that dark, evil period' (44), quickly assumes central narrative significance. Referenced more than twenty times throughout the novel, the medal functions as a narrative hinge between the personal and the historical: 'The medal continued to haunt Erica' (52), and in doing so becomes a metaphorical conduit into the repressed and painful history of her family, as well as Sweden's contested wartime legacy. More than a plot device, the medal symbolises secrecy and collective denial, destabilising the dominant national narrative of Swedish neutrality and humanitarianism during the war. Through Erica's investigation, Läckberg foregrounds the persistence of intergenerational trauma, demonstrating how silences within familial memory mirror the wider societal unease with confronting uncomfortable historical truths.

Much like Nesbø's *The Redbreast*, Läckberg's *The Hidden Child* introduces a broad array of characters, each embodying distinct perspectives on World War II and thereby illustrating the complexities of memory, historical interpretation, and moral judgement. Among these figures are historians and journalists driven by a commitment to uncover historical truths unfiltered by nationalist mythologies. Central to this group is Erik Frankel, who, together with his older brother Axel, emerges as one of the novel's pivotal characters. Both brothers are marked by a lifelong preoccupation with the war, though their approaches diverge significantly, as Erica observes when she notes that 'the elderly bachelors shared a fascination with Germany and Nazism, each in his own way' (43). Erik's engagement with the war is primarily intellectual and academic. He devotes his life to publishing scholarly articles and historical studies, an orientation rooted in research and interpretation, similar to Professor Juul in Nesbø's novel, who contributes to shaping a sanitised version of national history. From a young age, Erik finds comfort in the perceived stability of historical knowledge: 'mostly he read history books. There was something about all the facts, the names and dates and places that he loved. Those things didn't change; they were something he could rely on, depend on' (88). Axel, by

contrast, transforms his obsession into action, dedicating his life to the pursuit and prosecution of war criminals, a mission driven less by scholarly curiosity than by an unrelenting pursuit of justice, an approach akin to Nesbø's Gudbrand, as both characters are consumed by a desire for revenge against perceived traitors to their nations.

A particularly poignant moment that accentuates this contrast occurs when Axel, preparing to return to France after arranging Erik's funeral, pauses to reflect in his brother's study. The scene highlights not only the brothers' divergent approaches to the past but also offers a meditation on the varied ways individual people process historical trauma, whether through intellectual engagement or moral reckoning:

Axel smiled when he went in and sat down on his brother's bed. The room was filled with books. [...] Erik had never grown tired of his books, his facts, his dates, and the solid reality that they offered him. [...] Axel had based his whole life on the absence of ambiguities. He had built his life around right and wrong. [...] But Erik had fought hard. For sixty years he had watched Axel come and go, heard him talk about the efforts he'd made in the service of good. (394–95)

Axel's unwavering commitment to tracking down war criminals and exposing hidden collaborators underscores the enduring human need for moral reckoning in the aftermath of atrocity. Yet his pursuit of justice is depicted as deeply fraught, raising difficult ethical questions: How long should guilt be borne? Is forgiveness possible? And what does justice mean when perpetrators are long dead or have lived unremarkable lives in the intervening decades? Läckberg explores these ambiguities with nuance, revealing that the legacies of wartime crimes are not confined to history but persistently shape the present. The novel suggests that such unresolved legacies exact a profound emotional toll, not only on those who directly experienced the war but also on subsequent generations, who inherit the ethical and psychological burdens of choices they did not make yet remain defined by. Viewed through this intergenerational lens, Läckberg foregrounds both the persistence of historical trauma and the difficulty of achieving genuine reconciliation.

Another compelling example of diametrically opposed responses to the legacy of World War II and Nazism is presented through the characters of journalist Kjell and his father, Frans. If the contrast between Axel and Erik reflects two different strategies for processing the past – intellectual interpretation versus moral absolutism – the conflict between Kjell and Frans dramatises how those unresolved legacies fracture contemporary families and societies. In *The Hidden Child*, this familial clash functions as a broader allegory for the deep ideological divisions within Swedish culture regarding its wartime past and the resurgence of extremist movements. Kjell, a respected correspondent, is portrayed as a public intellectual frequently called upon by

national television as ‘an authority on the destructive forces of neo-Nazism and how society could best deal with them’ (173). In stark contrast, his father emerges as a staunch supporter of neo-Nazi ideology, embodying the continued presence and danger of radical right-wing beliefs in contemporary Scandinavia. The tension between father and son is not only personal – Kjell accuses his father of indoctrinating Kjell’s son Per – but also symbolically charged, representing the intergenerational and ideological rifts that persist in post-war society. This antagonism is rendered palpable in the narrative: ‘He’d condemned his father long ago, and now they stood on opposite sides of a wall so high that it was impossible to peer over the top’ (125). The metaphor of the wall encapsulates their irreconcilable divide. Yet this conflict is also internalised, particularly through Kjell’s recognition that he shares the very rage he despises in Frans:

There was so much anger inside Kjell, and he could feel every ounce of it. It was the same all-consuming rage that had afflicted Frans ever since he could remember. [...] They shared the same capacity to hate, the same burning anger. (126)

This nuanced depiction of inherited emotion and ideological conflict highlights Läckberg’s broader thematic preoccupation with the enduring psychological and societal scars left by World War II. Her narrative suggests that the past is never truly past; rather, it continues to shape contemporary identities and political landscapes. While some characters attempt to confront historical truths, others retreat into denial, clinging to romanticised or sanitised versions of the past. Still others, unable to reconcile with unresolved anxieties, channel their disquiet into dangerous ideologies, most notably neo-Nazism, which resurfaces in the novel, like in Nesbø’s narrative, as a chilling reminder of the unhealed wounds of history. Through these divergent portrayals, Läckberg offers a pointed critique of the selective nature of collective memory and the ways in which societies construct narratives that serve political and psychological ends. Her work ultimately highlights how the refusal to engage critically with history can foster both personal guilt and the re-emergence of extremist ideologies in the present.

The novel further interrogates Sweden’s morally ambiguous position during World War II by juxtaposing characters that collaborated with Nazi Germany against those who undertook significant personal risks to resist Nazism. Läckberg reinforces this tension through historically precise references, such as the plight of the *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) prisoners, who ‘would receive no court trial, no sentence would be passed’ (332) and who ‘were regarded as already dead, and hence were at the bottom of the pecking order’ (333), individuals subjected to enforced disappearance, ‘sentenced to forced labour and worked to death in the camps’ (365), or extrajudicial killing

under the Nazi regime. Equally significant is her invocation of the Swedish Red Cross's White Buses operation, which repatriated Scandinavian prisoners from German camps at the war's end. This reference is afforded a lengthy, detailed description, underscoring its narrative importance:

They were picked up from the concentration camp in Neuengamme. It was rumoured that the white buses had first had to remove a lot of other prisoners, including Poles, from the camp before they could make room for the Nordic prisoners. It was also rumoured that this had cost a number of people their lives. The prisoners of other nationalities had been in much worse shape than the Scandinavians, who had received food parcels by various means and so had managed to survive the camps in relatively better condition. It was said that many failed to survive the journey, while others had endured terrible suffering during their transport from the camp. But even if the rumours were true, nobody dared think about that now. Not when freedom was suddenly within reach. Bernadotte had negotiated with the Germans and secured permission to bring home the Nordic prisoners, and now they were finally on their way. (435)

These historical allusions ground the narrative in verifiable events, lending authenticity and depth to Läckberg's exploration of moral complexity. Particularly noteworthy is the depiction of the White Buses, which underscores Sweden's paradoxical wartime role: at once a humanitarian refuge and, simultaneously, a passive participant in the broader machinery of wartime politics. By invoking these events, Läckberg challenges the conventional portrayal of Sweden as wholly neutral or altruistic during the conflict. Instead, she advances a more nuanced account that exposes the tensions between national mythology and historical accountability.

It is important to note that in *The Hidden Child*, the past is not shown as something finished. Instead, it remains a constant part of the present. The author shows how history keeps shaping, interrupting, and complicating life today. This dynamic is exemplified in the character of Axel, who frequently finds himself caught between temporal planes, as reflected in the observation that he often 'forced himself back from the past and tried to find an answer in the present [and] the two were hopelessly intertwined' (218). The trauma of World War II permeates the narrative, shaping personal relationships, social values, and constructions of identity. Erika's emotional struggle to comprehend her mother's ties to Nazi sympathisers thus functions as a broader allegory for Sweden's own fraught engagement with its wartime history. The novel further suggests that acknowledging and confronting these concealed historical narratives, however painful, are essential for both individual healing and collective moral clarity. Yet, this process is depicted as neither straightforward nor comfortable. It requires grappling with unsettling truths about national myths, familial pride, and latent complicity, while resisting the temptation to

obscure or sanitise the past. This imperative is emphasised by Erik's assertion that 'without having things that we can see and touch, we so easily forget what we don't want to remember. I collect things that will serve as reminders' (44). The importance of memory is further affirmed by his brother Axel, who stresses the necessity of maintaining connections to history, noting that 'it is vital to have ties to the past. Even if those ties are based on inanimate objects' (100). In this way, Läckberg foregrounds the material and symbolic dimensions of memory, positing remembrance as a necessary, albeit difficult, path toward understanding and reconciliation.

By weaving together themes of historical trauma, moral ambiguity, and political critique within the framework of a crime narrative, *The Hidden Child* functions as a reflective meditation on the enduring weight of history and the intricate workings of memory. Läckberg employs the familiar tropes of crime fiction as a vehicle for interrogating deeper philosophical and ethical questions, particularly those concerning justice, truth, and the lingering effects of war that 'was now threatening to upset these familiar routines and their everyday existence' (23). The narrative compels readers to confront how the legacies of World War II continue to shape contemporary Scandinavian society and prompts a critical reckoning with the moral costs of historical amnesia. In this regard, Läckberg's novel exemplifies the capacity of fiction to engage with history in nuanced and resonant ways. *The Hidden Child* not only captivates its audience through layered storytelling and complex characterisation but also provokes thoughtful reflection on the transmission of trauma and the construction of collective memory. It challenges reductive binaries of good and evil, remembrance and forgetting, thereby positioning itself as a significant contribution both to Scandinavian crime fiction tradition and to broader literary and cultural discourses on memory, identity, and historical accountability.

Conclusion

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen observes that the different subgenres of Scandinavian crime fiction 'registered the individual and social consequences of societies bent on "consuming" their way out of the past, and in various ways sought to establish more "authentic", more "reasonable" bonds through their detectives' development of communal responsibilities' (116). This observation is particularly relevant in the context of *The Redbreast* and *The Hidden Child*, two novels that demonstrate the subgenre's capacity to engage deeply with historical reflection and moral inquiry. In both works, contemporary criminal investigations are embedded within broader narratives of unresolved historical trauma, particularly the enduring repercussions of World War II. By intertwining past and present, Nesbø and Läckberg illustrate how individual and collective identities are shaped by silence, complicity, and the contested remembrance of historical events.

In both novels, crime fiction becomes a narrative mechanism through which suppressed histories are gradually uncovered, yet never fully resolved. The investigative structure does not simply restore order or deliver closure; instead, it exposes the fragility of national myths and the instability of moral categories when confronted with the complexity of historical experience. In this sense, both texts resist the conventional consolations of the subgenre. Rather than reaffirming coherence or justice, they foreground ambiguity, contradiction, and the ethical weight of unresolved pasts.

At the same time, the novels suggest that the legacy of World War II continues to shape contemporary Scandinavian societies not only at the level of collective memory but also through intergenerational transmission of trauma. Families, institutions, and national narratives are shown to be structured by what is remembered, what is suppressed, and what is deliberately reinterpreted. As a result, history emerges not as a closed chapter but as an active force that continues to influence present-day moral and political realities. The past, in both *The Redbreast* and *The Hidden Child*, is thus not archival but experiential, persistently intruding into the present in ways that destabilise attempts at coherence or resolution.

This dynamic is further illuminated by Caruth's theory of trauma, which emphasises that traumatic experience is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly through repetition, fragmentation, and haunting. From this perspective, characters such as Gudbrand in Nesbø's novel and Erica in Läckberg's narrative function as narrative sites through which unresolved historical violence resurfaces. Their experiences illustrate how trauma exceeds individual psychology and becomes embedded within cultural and historical frameworks, continually re-emerging in distorted or displaced forms. The persistence of war memory in both texts therefore reflects not only personal psychological disturbance but also broader cultural processes of remembering and forgetting.

Significantly, by foregrounding the enduring presence of the past, both novels expand the thematic and ethical scope of Scandinavian crime fiction. The subgenre becomes a critical space in which national histories are interrogated, suppressed narratives are recovered, and dominant moral frameworks are questioned. In doing so, Nesbø and Läckberg challenge simplistic distinctions between guilt and innocence, resistance and collaboration, memory and forgetting. Instead, they reveal the extent to which ethical judgement is entangled with historical context and shaped by the limitations of narrative representation itself.

Ultimately, *The Redbreast* and *The Hidden Child* function as cultural artefacts that resist the closure of historical consciousness. They demonstrate that confronting the past is not a finite act but an ongoing ethical responsibility, one that demands continuous reinterpretation and reflection. By refusing

resolution, these novels insist on the necessity of engaging with historical ambiguity rather than resolving it, thereby positioning Scandinavian crime fiction as a powerful medium for exploring the enduring entanglement of history, memory, and morality in contemporary society.

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