

Possible topics for *The Laughing Policeman* papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- Here we have perhaps the clearest example yet of a crime story set against a backdrop of social unrest— in this case, the changes taking place in Sweden in the 1960's. The police are constantly distracted by protests, and respond excessively, and ineffectively. The crime is often compared to American mass murders, which are blamed on our own social problems, and we have characters suspicious of minorities or paranoid about communism. How do these elements shape the story? Is this story more or less molded by its social background than others we've read? You could compare a few.

- Police incompetence has been a theme in many of our readings, but here we see it from a new perspective: the homicide unit inside the police department. We admire the detectives even as we, and they, become exasperated by the bumbling nature of their superiors. Analyze this book as a portrait of a police department at war with itself, inside a nation also at war with itself.

- This book has an unusual voice, compared to others we've read. It's an omniscient third person that moves easily among the characters— but it is highly opinionated, always editorializing, often to comic effect. Why would the writers choose such a voice to tell us about such a grim subject? Compare it to the voice of other third-person stories you've read.

- As is often the case this semester, this novel has sexuality at its center: the crime, of course, turns out to have been related to the murder of a prostitute, and sexuality comes powerfully into play with the discovery of Stenström's photos of his girlfriend, Åsa, and Kollberg's subsequent (and quite moving, in my opinion) interrogation of her. Feel free to add this to the pile of stories for your blockbuster sexuality-in-crime-fiction paper.

- The mystery itself here is very, very complicated, with all kinds of misdirection and confusion. One thing I like about mystery writing is the cognitive pleasures of sifting through disparate material, trying to make sense of it. So far, nobody in the class has tried writing about this— the way that crime fiction exploits the natural pleasure we take in filling in the blanks, making a narrative out of seemingly unrelated points of data. It would be interesting to read a paper about the psychology of the reader— why this process, for the mystery fan, is so addictive.

- There are many detectives here, each with a distinctive personality— the dour Beck, the hostile Larsson, the gentle but short-tempered Kollberg, staid Melander with his flawless memory. Analyze the characters here and what strengths they bring to the investigation. Compare them to our other literary detectives.

- Sjöwall and Wahlöö, by the way, were a married couple who wrote together; they alternated chapters. Per Wahlöö said that they intended to “use the crime novel as a scalpel cutting open the belly of the ideologically pauperized and morally debatable so-called welfare state of the bourgeois type.” Politically-driven fiction often fails to work; such books can easily lose their relevance over time. Are the authors' politics here distracting, or do they serve as an enhancement to the narrative? Compare the book, if you will, to other socially conscious stories we've read.

- Here's a nice recent article, by the way, about Sjöwall, who is still alive, and how the series (there are 10 novels in total) came to be: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/22/crime-thriller-maj-sjowall-sweden>