

General Discussion Questions

If you want to get under the skin of a foreign culture, skip the guided tours of cathedrals and art galleries, and read its crime thrillers. Here you will see its darkest nightmares, though these usually turn out to be much like our own. . . .

—PAUL HOGGART, “KENNETH BRANAGH IS KURT WALLANDER,” *THE TIMES* (NOVEMBER 29, 2008)

If you dare to look “under Sweden’s skin” through the eyes of writer Henning Mankell, you just might find human trafficking, cyberterrorism, and teenagers who resort to suicide and murder. And all these disturbing discoveries take place in the most unlikely of Swedish provinces—Skåne, the southernmost part of Sweden, better known for its bucolic landscapes and sandy beaches than for gruesome murders.

But the success of Henning Mankell’s mystery novels featuring Kurt Wallander extends beyond their ability to illuminate the social, political, and economic changes in today’s Sweden. The best-selling Wallander series has been published in 33 countries due mainly to the appeal of its main character—Kurt Wallander, all-too-human Everyman and reluctant hero. Masterfully portrayed by the accomplished actor Kenneth Branagh in three MASTERPIECE film adaptations (*Sidetracked*, *Firewall*, and *One Step Behind*) premiering in May 2009, Wallander is a compassionate, dogged, and often overwhelmed detective who fights crime at the expense of his crumbling personal life and health. And even if readers and viewers cannot always relate to Wallander’s “darkest nightmares,” they surely can envision sharing a whiskey with him and finding out just how he has solved his latest case.

A Changing Sweden

The Wallander novels are deeply rooted in the realities of Sweden in the 1990s and came directly out of author Henning Mankell’s reaction to the changes he saw when he returned to his native country after spending years in Africa. Because the collapse of communism in the Eastern bloc countries in the 1980s had led to a flood of refugees pouring into Sweden, Mankell saw his nation’s reputation for tolerance and hospitality deeply tested. As he explained in a 2003 interview in *The Guardian*: “I had been away from Sweden for some time. When I returned, I became aware that racism was

exploding, and I decided to write about that. Because, to me, the expression of racism is a crime, I decided I should write a crime story. So I needed a police officer. I came up with Wallander. It was that way round—I didn't invent Wallander and then search for a story to give him."

- 1 Why is it ironic that Mankell's most popular character—Wallander—harbors feelings of xenophobia, or fearful feelings towards strangers and foreigners?
- 2 How is Wallander's perception that "the world had shrunk and expanded at the same time" manifested in all three stories?
- 3 Why do you think Mankell chose to create a detective who voices these concerns about the state of Sweden and the world? What do you think of Wallander's fears? How are geopolitical changes reflected in your own community or region?

Setting and Cinematography

The cinematography in all three Wallander films was greatly enhanced by the invention of the "Red One," a new kind of camera technology that gives the depth, definition, and luminance of a 35mm camera in a device that is handheld. The Wallander films represent the first uses of this technology in a UK dramatic production.

- 1 How do the clarity, beauty, and light in the cinematography in these films contrast eerily with the dark plotlines and emotions? How do the director, Philip Martin (*Prime Suspect*), and the cinematographer, Anthony Dod Mantle (*Slumdog Millionaire*), visually capture a feeling Wallander articulates in one of the novels: "When I drive by one of the beautiful old Scanian [in the province of Skåne] farms, I sometimes think: there might be a huge amphetamine factory hidden in there."?
- 2 Ystad, Wallander's hometown, is located in southern Sweden. How does the area's geography play a role in the stories? For example, how does Ystad, a port town just 200 kilometers away from the Baltic states, play a symbolic and logistical role?
- 3 To explore the geography of the area, use Google Maps at www.googlemaps.com. Enter "Ystad" in the search box and then study it in relation to the rest of Sweden and Europe. Note the "E65" highway, significant in many of Mankell's stories, that runs from Ystad to Malmö. Then click on the "photos" feature (contained in the "More" drop-down menu) to see images of Ystad, the E65 route, and its surrounding countryside.

The Rumpled Detective

In an article about the Wallander character in *The Times*, Stephen Armstrong wrote: “Inspector Wallander is Sweden’s most successful literary export, an international brand, yet it’s hard to see why at first glance. He is astonishingly miserable... and so monumentally unhealthy... He eats too much fried food, drinks heavily and—across eight novels—has been sued for police brutality, been shot and stabbed, lost his wife in a messy divorce, struggled to build a relationship with his daughter and gunned down a man by accident. He is wonderfully pessimistic about the citizens he guards and usually solves crimes through luck and slog, not cunning inspiration. It’s little surprise that he increasingly believes he shouldn’t be a policeman any more.”

- 1 Why are detectives with troubled personal lives such a staple of crime fiction? What other detectives from fiction, film, or television can you name who fit this description? How does Wallander compare to the immensely popular MYSTERY! detectives Inspector Morse (played by John Thaw) and Jane Tennison (played by Helen Mirren in *Prime Suspect*)? Given that lineage, why do you think MASTERPIECE chose the Wallander series?
- 2 Why do you think Mankell himself, in a 2003 interview in *The Observer*, said about Wallander, “If we met, we’d never get on. I’d prefer to meet Sherlock Holmes”?
- 3 How do you feel about the decision to cast Kenneth Branagh, an actor famous for his eloquence in Shakespearean and other roles, in a part that, as Armstrong notes, is “not typical Branagh material”? How does Branagh inhabit the role? Does he transform it? If so, how? Do you agree with critic Paul Hoggart in *The Times* (November 29, 2008) that “this could well turn out to be one of the finest screen roles of his [Branagh’s] career”?
- 4 Kenneth Branagh, who loved the Wallander books so much that he approached Henning Mankell himself about playing the role, describes Wallander as “an existentialist ... who is questioning what life is about and why he does what he does every day, and for whom acts of violence never become normal. There’s a level of empathy with the victims of crime that’s almost impossible to contain, and one of the prices he pays for that sort of empathy is a personal life that’s a kind of wasteland.” How does Branagh show Wallander’s empathy and vulnerability? What scenes from any of the films you watched especially show an empathy that’s “almost impossible to contain”?

For more about Kenneth Branagh’s thoughts on Wallander, click on <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/wallander/branagh.html>.

Novel to Film

In the MASTERPIECE film adaptations, the Wallander mysteries—novels of 400 or more pages—have been condensed into 90 minutes. The changes the screenwriter and director made serve to streamline the plots and distill the information about Wallander’s personal life and professional world.

- 1 To some degree, all three novels on which these films were based give the reader some access or insights into the mind of the murderer, yet we never see that perspective in the films. Why do you think the filmmakers made that choice? What is gained or lost?
- 2 In general, do you think a film version of a much-loved book should stand on its own, or be judged by how well it captures the spirit of the original book and its characters? What films can you think of that have done a particularly good job of capturing the essence of a book? Why? How well do you think these films capture the Wallander novels—the characters, plots, tone, setting, and so on?

Generation Gap

All three films involve adolescents—teenagers who are misunderstood or ignored by their parents, and whose hardness takes Wallander aback. (A suicidal teenager in *One Step Behind* tells him, “Some people hate jam, some people hate football. I hate being alive. It’s not such a big deal.”)

- 1 What habits and attitudes of teenagers and young adults especially baffle Wallander and his colleagues? What do you think these generational differences might say about a changing Sweden?
- 2 How does this lack of understanding between generations further heighten themes of loneliness and vulnerability that are present in all the Wallander stories, especially in regard to his relationship with his own, once-suicidal daughter?
- 3 What do you think of Wallander as a parent? How do his struggles with the generation gap—between him and young people, between him and his dad—compare to your own experiences?

Music as Refuge

Mankell includes many references to opera in the Wallander mysteries. We learn in the first Wallander mystery, *Faceless Killers*, that Wallander had longed to become an opera singer before he settled for a career in the Ystad police force. Even while he is fighting crime, he often uses opera as a source of release and refuge. (In *Faceless Killers*, he listens to the overture to *Fidelio* to “fill the darkness inside the car.” In *Sidetracked*, he plays *The Marriage of Figaro* so loudly in the car that it “thundered.” And on the eve of his monumental trip to Rome with his father, Wallander “sat down with a glass of whisky and listened to *La Traviata*.”)

- 1 What does the fact that Wallander is an opera buff add to our understanding of who he is? How are the larger-than-life themes of opera—love, loss, fidelity—echoed throughout the Wallander series?
- 2 What songs or music genres would you include on your own soundtrack, especially when you need to escape or cope with stress? What do these songs represent? How are they related to your past, present, or future?

Midsummer’s Eve

Despite the films’ dark content, both *Sidetracked* and *One Step Behind* begin with opening scenes shot in blinding sunlight, perhaps to underscore the midsummer season. Midsummer’s Eve, which marks the summer solstice, is a national holiday in Sweden. Its cultural significance dates back to ancient times and is commonly celebrated by bonfires, dancing around the maypole, and even divining one’s future. For most Swedes, Midsummer is celebrated in the countryside and marks the beginning of five-week vacations. Businesses often shut down and cities become ghost towns in anticipation of the holiday. In *Sidetracked* and *One Step Behind*, the murderers intentionally decided to pursue their victims during celebrations taking place on Midsummer’s Eve.

- 1 Do you think there is a symbolic significance in Mankell’s decision to have his murderers strike on such a significant Swedish holiday? If so, what might be his message?
- 2 What other films or books can you think of that take place on Midsummer’s Eve? How do they compare to Mankell’s crime novels?

Crime and Punishment

In the course of solving mysteries, Wallander regularly cites many self-proposed “rules” about crime and punishment. Some are lessons he has learned himself the hard way; others are precepts taught him by his late mentor, Rydberg (who is a prominent character in the first Wallander mystery, *Faceless Killers*).

- 1 How many of the following (taken from all three films and books, as well as from *Faceless Killers*) apply to the film or films you are watching?
 - a “You should always stop every now and then and look behind you.” (*One Step Behind*)
 - b “Each room has its own life and breath. You have to listen for it. A room can tell you many secrets about the person who lives there.” (*Firewall*)
 - c “Criminals often leave a greeting at the scene of a crime. Sometimes it’s deliberate, sometimes by accident.” (*Firewall*)
 - d “Justice doesn’t only mean that the people who commit crimes are punished. It also means that we can never give up seeking the truth.” (*Faceless Killers*)
 - e “All successful criminal investigations reach a point where we break through the wall. We don’t know what we’re going to find. But there’s always a solution somewhere.” (*Faceless Killers*)
 - f “He knew that the first impression of a crime scene was often crucial. During an investigation that was long and difficult, he would return to that first moment.” (*Sidetracked*)
 - g “There’s always another question you can ask.” (*Sidetracked*)
- 2 Which ones do you think can be tweaked to apply to everyday aspects of life? What three to five rules might you create from your own areas of expertise that might also apply to life in general?



HENNING MANKELL IS PUBLISHED BY VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD,
AN IMPRINT OF VINTAGE BOOKS, RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

WALLANDER IS A LEFT BANK PICTURES/YELLOW BIRD/TKBC SERIES FOR WGBH CO-PRODUCED WITH THE BBC, DEGETO, WGBH BOSTON, AND FILM I SKANE.
THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ARE FRANCIS HOPKINSON, ANDY HARRIES, KENNETH BRANAGH, OLE SONDBERG, ANNI FAURBYE, REBECCA EATON, AND HANS-WOLFGANG JURGAN.
REBECCA EATON IS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF MASTERPIECE. FUNDING IS PROVIDED BY PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.

MASTERPIECE, MASTERPIECE THEATRE, AND MYSTERY! ARE TRADEMARKS OR REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF THE WGBH EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION.
CLOSED CAPTIONED FOR VIEWERS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD-OF-HEARING. ©2009 WGBH EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION.



MASTERPIECE

pbs.org/masterpiece  PBS