

HENNING MANKELL THE RETURN OF THE DANCING MASTER 2000  
(DANSLÄRARENS ÅTERKOMST)

December 12, 1945. The Third Reich lies in ruins as a British warplane lands in Bückeberg, Germany. A man carrying a small black bag quickly disembarks and travels to Hamelin, where he disappears behind the prison gates. Early the next day, England's most experienced hangman executes twelve war criminals.

Fifty-four years later, retired policeman Herbert Molin is found brutally slaughtered on his remote farm in Härjedalen, Sweden. The police discover strange tracks in the blood on the floor . . . as if someone had been practicing the tango.

Stefan Lindman is a young police officer who has just been diagnosed with cancer of the tongue. When he reads about the murder of his former colleague, he decides to travel north and find out what happened. Soon he is enmeshed in a puzzling investigation with no witnesses and no discernible motives. Terrified of the illness that could take his life, Lindman becomes more and more reckless as he uncovers the links between Molin's death, World War II, and an underground neo-Nazi network. Mankell's impeccably researched historical thriller is "a worthy successor to the Wallander whodunits" (*The Sunday Telegraph*).

Mankell, known in this country for his Kurt Wallander police procedurals (*Faceless Killers; The Dogs of Riga*), sets this intricate, stand-alone tale of murder and intrigue in the vast pine forests of north-central Sweden. Stefan Lindman, a 37-year-old policeman in the city of Borås, sees his life, both professional and personal, as absolutely ordinary. Then he discovers a strange lump on his tongue; it's cancer, and his life changes dramatically. At the doctor's office he picks up a discarded newspaper and reads that former colleague Herbert Molin has been murdered in the northern forests. Because Lindman needs to take his mind off his upcoming cancer treatment, he decides to investigate Molin's death. As the details of the crime come to light, Lindman realizes he never knew the real Molin. The plot involves the secret world of Nazis, both past and present. The prose can be cold and spare, at least in translation: "There was a smell of paint in the house. All the lights were on. Lindman had to bow his head when he entered through the door." The unrelenting Lindman turns out to be an innovative investigator, though those seeking fast-paced action rather than meticulous introspection will be disappointed. Secrets are slowly and methodically teased from the evidence, and by the satisfying end readers with a taste for the unusual will find Lindman, and the mystery he solves, not in the least bit ordinary.

Henning Mankell has become one of my favorite mystery authors and I've discovered him late in the game. I've been reading his Kurt Wallander series but *The Return of the Dancing Master* is a stand alone book. It is a many-tiered mystery that reads along at a steady pace and like Wallander's other books, has a cold and dark atmosphere that reflects the Swedish forest where a lot of the story takes place.

Herbert Molin lived the life of a hermit in his home hidden back in the forest in Sveg, which is farther north from Wallander's Ystad in Sweden. He had a neighbor with whom he spoke once in a blue moon, but mainly Molin stayed to himself. Before he retired from the police force in Borås, Sweden,

Molin worked with a younger officer named Stefan Lindman. Lindman now discovered he has mouth cancer and while waiting weeks off duty to begin his treatments and to ease his terrible fear and anxiety, discovers that Molin has been brutally murdered. He goes to Sveg out of curiosity for why someone would kill Herbert Molin. No one knows why or even a hint at the identity of the killer.

Detective Inspector Giuseppe Larsson is in charge of the case and allows Lindman to tag along with him on the investigation. Giuseppe Larsson takes a lot of teasing from co-workers and others over his first name since it is hardly a Swedish name. He is so likeable that besides the dreary Lindman, he became my favorite character. The characters are very well developed and have distinct personalities that I found unforgettable. As I read, the title finally made sense.

Mankell's stand alone books seem to be as good as the series, and I look forward to reading the next in the Kurt Wallander series of mysteries. One thing that I appreciate very much is a map of the areas covered in the stories. I go back to this map in the front of the book to locate where characters are and to track their movements throughout the books. It makes the story more real.

Mankell is a master of creating atmosphere without lots of superfluous description. Throughout this book there's a sense of menace from the unknown murderer and anxiety exudes from the character, Lindman, a policeman who knew the victim, and who, while on sick leave awaiting cancer-treatment, gets heavily involved with the investigation of the murder. An unhappy, lonely man as a central character has been a theme in other Mankell books, for example, *Depths* and *Italian Shoes*, even Wallander can be gloomy.

The book is long and doesn't gather pace until near the end, but it never flags and I felt sucked into the investigation and followed its ups and downs as if it was happening in real-time. As in the more recent Wallander books, issues that are affecting Sweden's social fabric and national identity are woven into the story.