

The Cost of Justice

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Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander is a unique and compelling heroine who, as Niels Arden Oplev, director of the Swedish film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, told Charlie Rose¹, refuses to become a victim no matter what happens to her. Haunted, resilient, savvy, dark, unpredictable, and endlessly resourceful, she delivers ingeniously planned and colorful acts of "vigilante justice" to the irredeemable criminals who have the misfortune or poor judgment to cross her path.

Following in the footsteps of previous superheroes—she does, after all, take on evil villains—Lisbeth is a female David to all the misogynistic Goliaths in Sweden. She's the ultimate underdog: abused, abandoned, disenfranchised, and waif-like in appearance. And we love her, not despite her anger and violent potential, but because of it. Her anger is righteous. Her violence, apparently justified. After all, we neither mourn for the monsters heroes kill, nor question their choice to kill them. Killing and being killed are what monsters are for. But what are the costs to Lisbeth—and to society at large—for this violent brand of vigilante justice? And, given the exact circumstances at hand, was there anything she might have done instead that would have served both her and society better?

These questions are not posed solely for the sake of a fictional analysis. Though less common than in works of fiction, vigilantes—including female vigilantes—exist in the real world too, as of course do the inhumane individuals upon whom the vigilantes exact their

¹ Charlie Rose interview. Season 18, episode 75. April 20, 2010.

revenge.² The Millennium trilogy presents fertile ground for exploring these questions. Lisbeth may be a fictional character, but the world she inhabits is very much like the one that Larsson actually occupied and seemed to clearly want to illuminate and critique. In the words of Larsson's lifelong partner Eva Gabrielsson, "Stieg Larsson's actions, and his views of the world, can mainly be understood from a perspective of women's rights.... The Millennium crime novel trilogy is a new way of making discrimination and violence against women visible."³ By giving the reader glimpses of her tragic life and the multiple abuses endured by her and other women at the hands of these men, Larsson sends Lisbeth forth as his personal angel of justice. In this context (as social commentary), Lisbeth seems to represent one way that real justice can be achieved—not just in Larsson's world of hopelessly twisted men and broken justice systems, but also in our own. Before examining this idea further, let's take a few moments to unpack the meaning of the word justice.

Doing Justice

Justice is defined by Dictionary.com as "the quality of...righteousness, equitableness, or moral rightness," while "doing justice" is defined as "acting or treating fairly." This intertwining of the concepts of fairness, moral rightness, and deserved punishment is at the heart of what is most confusing about the idea of justice: Fairness by whose standards? Rightness according to whose morals? Deserving according to what criteria?

² Consider, for instance, the case of Kimberly Cunningham. In 2003, she learned that her then fourteen-year-old daughter Amanda was (at age nine) raped on two occasions by the girl's uncle, Coy Hundley. Cunningham bought a gun and confronted Hundley at his place of work. When Hundley did not deny the allegations, Cunningham shot him five times, reloaded the weapon, and fired five more rounds, killing him.

³ From a 2009 speech to Observatorio contra la Violencia Domestica y de Genero:
<http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/54145,people,news,stieg-larsson-remembered-by-eva-gabrielsson#ixzz1To21EaHn>

The implied answer to all these questions is “according to the law of the land.” Indeed, in democratic states like Sweden⁴ and the United States, the country’s laws are considered to constitute a social contract in which the people select representatives (i.e., legislators) to make the law and then are morally and legally bound to follow it. In this context, justice becomes equated with compliance with the law and “doing justice” becomes operationalized as the legal process of determining who broke the law and how to punish the “offending” person(s).

In this way, the concepts of justice and punishment are so thoroughly intertwined that it might initially be difficult to even conceive of the former without the latter. Yet there are, in fact, a variety of legitimate answers to the questions above other than “according to the law of the land.” Religious teachings (which vary according to the religion in question), philosophical ideas (e.g., Kant’s categorical imperative), political ideologies, and cultural frameworks all influence both individual and community notions of justice. The complexity and disagreement inherent in different answers to these questions explain, in part, both the multiplicity of “justice systems”⁵ in existence among human societies and the frequent dissatisfaction with the extent to which these systems bring about desired outcomes. While a comprehensive review of such systems is beyond the scope of this essay, a bird’s eye view of some ways in which they differ will help us examine the underlying justice themes in Larsson’s world, and our own.

One way of looking at justice systems is to examine where they may land on the “punitive” to “restorative” continuum. Generally speaking, the more punitive a justice system, the more it is concerned with what rule was broken, who is to blame, and what punishment

⁴ Sweden is technically a constitutional monarchy, with King Carl XVI Gustaf as the head of state, but, as in most contemporary constitutional monarchies, royal power in Sweden is limited to ceremonial functions. Notably, Sweden is currently ranked fourth on the Democracy Index (9.5 on the 10-point scale), an index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit that claims to measure the state of democracy in 167 countries. The United States, with a score of 8.18, is ranked seventeenth.

⁵ We use “justice system” to refer to an institutionalized process for dealing with rule violations and/or conflict in a given community. In addition to the formal criminal and civil justice systems, schools, workplaces, and families all also have institutionalized ways of “doing” justice.

would best match the severity of the rule-breaking. Examples of justice systems encompassing this approach are Old Testament justice (“an eye for an eye”) and vigilante justice—both practiced to some extent by our heroine—as well as by what we typically see in the formal, Western criminal justice system, as represented by police, attorneys, judges, and mandatory sentencing laws that treat crimes as having been committed not against individuals or communities but against the state.

On the other end of this spectrum, the more restorative a justice system, the more it is concerned with what harm was done, who was impacted by the harm, and what action would best address (restore, repair) the harm to all parties.⁶ Examples of such systems include victim-offender mediation⁷, family group conferencing⁸, and restorative circles⁹.

We all operate under some form of justice system—in our families, workplaces, relationships, and communities—even if we are not fully aware of the systems we follow (many of which we have simply inherited without examination). Thus, one of the benefits of examining justice systems this way is to make visible that which is often invisible. Doing so allows the community in question (and the individuals in those communities) the possibility of choosing a way of doing justice that is more closely aligned with its values, rather than merely going along with a system that may not actually be serving those values¹⁰. To make such choices, community

⁶ Zehr, H. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Intercourse: Good Books, 2002.

⁷ A process in which the victim of a crime and the person who has taken responsibility for committing that crime have an opportunity to talk to each other (usually face to face) with the help of a trained mediator. In the meeting, the offender and victim typically talk about what happened and the impact the event had on their lives. Sometimes there is also the additional step of agreeing on a plan to repair some or all of the damages.

⁸ A restorative approach that is designed to have child and adult family members solve their own conflicts, instead of involving courts or other professionals.

⁹ A restorative practice developed in Brazil that seeks to engage conflict without pre-identifying offenders and victims (because those roles are seen as dynamic) and that involves both those who directly participated in the conflict and the community members who are impacted.

¹⁰ The possibility of choosing how to do justice comes from the work of Dominic Barter, who, with his associates, developed (in the favelas of Brazil) a restorative practice called Restorative Circles. See <http://www.restorativecircles.org>

members must be aware of what they value as a community¹¹ and realize that the different justice systems have very different implications for those we label “victims”, those we label “offenders”, those empowered to decide how justice will be administered (e.g., judges, peers), those who carry out the administration of justice (e.g., prison corrections officers, community members), and the community itself.

Despite the mainstream justice system’s hegemony in both Sweden and the United States, the alternatives are real, not hypothetical. This is most obvious in U.S. tort law¹², where the individual harmed has the choice of addressing the harm by filing a lawsuit (i.e., engaging the mainstream justice system) or engaging an alternative justice system such as mediation, arbitration, or a restorative process. However, even in criminal law, in which the breach of a duty is considered to be against the state rather than an individual,¹³ those involved in or impacted by the alleged criminal behavior have the option of asking the District Attorney not to file criminal charges (though the D.A. may file them anyway), as well as engaging an alternative justice system (e.g., a restorative system, vigilantism) that would operate in parallel to—and often independent of—the criminal proceedings.

The Millennium series presents one such alternative to conventional justice in the form of Lisbeth’s response to the violence she encounters. In Gabrielsson’s words, “Larsson believed in ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ He never forgave and he was very clear about this: to get

¹¹ This is both an individual value and a group process, as communities (e.g., municipalities, school districts) are comprised of individuals who must reach some consensus regarding what kinds of justice systems will be available to the community.

¹² A tort is a common law term used to describe a breach of any civil duty (other than a contractual duty) owed to someone else. It is differentiated from a crime, which involves a breach of a duty owed to society in general. Examples of torts include auto accidents, defamation, product liability, environmental pollution, and any intentional act that could reasonably be predicted to result in harm to an individual.

¹³ Thus, if John brutally beats Nathan, who dies from the injuries, John’s crime, according to criminal law, is against the state (for violating the state’s prohibition against battery and homicide) not against Nathan. The implication of this distinction is that the wishes and needs of the so-called “victim” are not prioritized and sometimes completely ignored. Thus, in a homicide case, the District Attorney may ask for the death penalty (and the judge may grant it), even against the wishes of the victim’s family.

revenge, or avenge your friends, is not just a right, but an absolute duty.¹⁴” However, the Millennium trilogy takes this Old Testament model of justice one step further. It seems to advocate for vigilante justice,¹⁵ an approach that, by definition, bypasses the formal criminal system and thrusts the responsibility of judge, jury, and executioner solely into Lisbeth’s hands.

A Response to the Concept of a “Broken” Criminal Justice System

The notion behind vigilante justice is that sometimes it is necessary for citizens to dole out justice on their own. Behind this notion is the belief that the formal criminal justice system, government, or other institutional authority is hopelessly limited in its ability to deliver true justice by the presence of bureaucracy, incompetence, and/or corruption. This is evident throughout the trilogy, but especially in regard to Wennerström, the Millennium series’ unseen symbol of financial corruption. In Larsson’s words, “The Wennerström empire of obscure companies was linked to the heart of the international Mafia, including everything from illegal arms dealing and money laundering for South American drug cartels to prostitution in New York, and even indirectly for child sex trade in Mexico” (*The Girl with the DragonTattoo*). Thus, Lisbeth’s actions (e.g., toward Wennerström) are offered, in part, as a critique of the corruption and biases that Larsson believed ran rampant throughout the Swedish justice system and, more broadly, Swedish society. It’s a valid critique, and one that is equally applicable to the U.S. criminal justice system and society.

¹⁴ From Gabrielsson’s memoir *Stieg And Me* as quoted in the 2-18-2011 issue of the Daily Mail: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1358412/Revenge-girl-dragon-tattoo.html>

¹⁵ An alternative reading is that it is Blomkvist’s style of justice that the novels condone. Either way, as our editor correctly pointed out, what a man advocates for in fiction is not necessarily the same as what he advocates for in real life.

For instance, despite the fact that studies consistently show that people in different racial groups use and sell illegal drugs at highly similar rates, in some states black men have been incarcerated on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than white men.¹⁶ Nationally, the Miami Herald reports that “African Americans, who are 12 percent of the population and about 14 percent of drug users, make up 34 percent of those arrested for drug offenses and 45 percent of those serving time for such offenses in state prisons.”¹⁷ If anything, the data are even more discouraging when we examine the outcomes for the most severe crimes. In 2003, then governor of Illinois (where we currently reside) George Ryan commuted the sentence of every one of the 167 inmates on the state’s death row. His decision was not the result of popular pressure,¹⁸ nor did it come from a deep personal conviction.¹⁹ Rather, Ryan was reacting to some shocking numbers: in the twenty-three year period from 1977 to 2000, DNA and other evidence exonerated more inmates than were executed, and it is unknown whether some of those who were executed may also have been innocent of those crimes.²⁰

Lisbeth has good reasons for taking justice into her own hands. Given the biases inherent in the formal criminal justice systems,²¹ along with Lisbeth’s manipulated mental health history and Bjurman’s exalted status as an attorney, the likelihood that her accusations in a court of law

¹⁶ Alexander, M. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

¹⁷ “Five Myths About Incarceration,” *Miami Herald*. June 23, 2011, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/06/23/2281985/five-myths-about-incarceration.html>

¹⁸ Though down from a 1994 high of eighty percent, sixty-seven percent of Americans still supported the death penalty in 2003.

¹⁹ Ryan was a Republican and lifetime supporter of capital punishment who, even as he was calling for a moratorium on the death penalty, remarked “I still believe the death penalty is a proper response to heinous crimes...”

²⁰ Kukathas, U. *Death Penalty* (Contemporary Issues Companion). San Diego: Greenhaven, 2007..

²¹ The issues are not just fictional. In the United States, for example, the real criminal justice system has been rightly criticized because of the racial profiling among some portion of law enforcement personnel, the re-victimization and re-traumatization of victims from having to provide in-person testimony under cross-examination, and the relationship between the defendants’ financial resources and trial outcomes.

would lead to meaningful consequences for Bjurman is quite low, whereas the costs to her of either filing a formal grievance or not taking any action are both quite high.

In this context, in which the formal system is both incapable of delivering “eye for an eye” justice at all to the likes of Bjurman and unwilling to deliver it in full²² to men such as serial kidnapper, rapist, and murderer Martin Vanger, it seems reasonable to have a capable vigilante dole out the justice. Thus, as a result of Lisbeth’s willingness to act outside the formal justice system, Bjurman gets to experience all that his actions have created for Lisbeth: the terror and pain of being tied and raped, the helplessness and powerlessness of having one’s reputation and status hang on the actions of another (his reports; her video tape), and the frustration and shame of trying to have relationships with others while being “labeled” as dangerous and less than human (her mental status; his tattoo).

A Response to the Concept of Broken Men

In addition to being a response to a broken criminal justice system that is not seen as capable of delivering the “right” eye-for-an-eye punishment, vigilante justice also seems to involve personal and societal protection stemming from a need for safety. The latter introduces an element of subjectivity that creates considerable moral complexity. For example, it is notable that Lisbeth chooses to dispose of some criminals (e.g., the motorcycle gangsters sent to burn down Bjurman’s home) by turning them in to the formal system, rather than disposing of them through her own means. In this way, the reader is intended to understand that not all criminals (and not all criminal acts) should be treated in the same way—that some criminals are not so much “inhumane monsters” as simply humans gone awry, while others are cold-blooded, irredeemable monsters whose only functions are to do monstrous things and then be killed (or be set ablaze or

²² The death penalty in Sweden was repealed in 1921.

hacked with an axe) for doing those things. This is an important distinction. The Millennium novels are not about humans gone awry; they are about the monsters.

Yet, as already mentioned, the Millennium novels are not typical monster stories. We know that Larsson intended them as social commentary on the real Swedish underworld and on men's inhumanity towards women more globally. Martin Vanger, Bjurman, and the rest of the monsters in the stories may be fictional, but they are supposed to represent real-world criminals like serial killer Ted Bundy who, like Martin Vanger, also targeted women.²³ Like Larsson's villains, many true-life serial killers seem outwardly functional and "normal." "Most serial killers are white, male, above average in intelligence, and adroit at wearing a mask of charm and sanity," wrote journalist Myra MacPherson.²⁴ She was writing about Bundy, but the words are equally applicable to Vanger, Bjurman, and Teleborian. Yet, there is something else that the killers all have in common, and it is the exact same characteristic that Larsson's villains share: They all lack empathy.

If this seems banal and inconsequential, it is neither. The lack of empathy—defined as the ability to identify with or vicariously experience the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another—seems to be the defining characteristic of a personality disorder called psychopathy and, according to psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen's book *The Science of Evil*, is the very essence of evil.²⁵

It is this lack of empathy that sets Martin Vanger, Bjurman, Alexander Zalachenko, and Teleborian apart from the garden-variety criminals that Lisbeth (and Larsson) is willing to feed to the law. At least in the present moment, there is no effective treatment for psychopathy, no

²³ We deliberately picked Bundy as someone that American readers are likely to recognize, but for each celebrity there are many more, like Javed Iqbal Mughal, whose names and stories are less well known.

²⁴ MacPherson's article appeared in the May, 1989 issue of *Vanity Fair*.

²⁵ *Editors' Note*: See the essay on psychopathy by Stephanie Mullins-Sweatt and Melissa Burkley in this book for more on psychopaths in the Millennium trilogy.

drug, psychotherapy, or social intervention. Left to their own devices, these men (and they almost always are men) will harm others, again and again and again. Thus, Lisbeth takes justice into her own hands in cases where, according to the data, there seems no hope that the perpetrators will ever regret their actions, much less repent or change their ways.

Given this, Lisbeth not only delivers the “right” amount of vigilante justice but also exorcises their type of “evil” from the earth. That is, not all criminals who have killed someone (e.g., the motorcycle gangsters) receive the death penalty from her. Rather, we are left with the sense that it is not simply the fact they have killed that propels Lisbeth to go after Vanger, Zalachenko, and Niedermann, but rather an extra element, perhaps a lack of capacity for empathy,²⁶ that suggests they must be completely eradicated.

Given the “broken system and broken men” argument presented by Larsson, the reader feels strongly compelled to agree with Lisbeth’s approach to justice. The benefits of such an approach include a kind of efficiency, effectiveness, and “equality” in punishment that a formal court of law cannot approach, as well as a measure of safety for Lisbeth and other potential victims. Such safety is rarely guaranteed by a formal criminal process, even in the case of life sentences—complications to this may include the reduction of sentences for “good behavior,” the victimization of others within the prison system, and the “long distance” orchestration of harm to those involved in “putting someone away.”

However, as stated previously, all justice systems have both costs and benefits to those involved. What are the costs, then, to Lisbeth and to society at large, for the kind of vigilante justice Larsson seems to advocate?

The Cost of Vengeance

²⁶ The biker gang didn’t show any empathy for their victims, but they seemed to care about each other.

In Satyagraha Leaflet No. 13, Gandhi wrote: “Victory attained by violence is tantamount to a defeat, for it is momentary.” Gandhi was not speaking out of a starry-eyed idealism, but out of the conviction that violence would continue to beget a further and escalating cycle of violence, and that the de-escalation of this cycle begins with individual acts of *Satyagraha*—a refusal to either bend to the violence of the other or bend to the idea that the other is less human than you are. In this vision—shared by other spiritual leaders, sung and unsung—it is the ability to see one’s “enemy” as human that allows us to become more human ourselves, for one of the costs of living only with hatred and fear is a blunting of our own sense of humanity and life force. The idea here is not for Lisbeth to forgive Vanger or Zalachenko or Bjurman, but rather to find a way to meet their lack of compassion with an inner compassion born not of fear or weakness but of the strength it takes to see all human life—even life that has done monstrous things—as sacred.

In this view, Lisbeth’s brutal behavior prevents her own healing process, for according to Gandhi’s philosophy, if we do a monstrous thing to “right” someone else’s monstrous behavior, our hands are still stained with blood and our hearts with the inner conviction that a piece of the monster lives in us as well. As Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* about those who fight monsters, “If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” Lisbeth might be safer for the moment, but she is not left living in a “safe” world or one in which she has reprieve from her inner nightmares and demons.

There are considerable costs for the vigilantes, but perhaps theirs is a sacrifice made for the greater good. After all, by slaying the dragons, doesn’t Lisbeth create a safer kingdom for the rest of us? The answer, as previously, is that alongside the seeming benefit of safety, vigilante justice also holds costs for the rest of us.

First, like the current criminal justice system, vigilante justice precludes the voices of all who are impacted from being weighted in the justice. No human is really an island. Both the actions of Lisbeth and the men involved impact numerous people around them, including other victims and their families. At its most basic, the actions of a single vigilante remove the possibility of having other victims participate in the justice process, at best leaving them with a distant vicarious sense of justice being done. What crime victims often long for, and report finding helpful, is being heard and seen for the fullness of what they endured and having their “why” questions about the harmful action answered.²⁷ This kind of result is far more likely to occur in a more restoratively oriented justice process.²⁸

Even if their complete lack of empathy precludes the possibility of men like Bjurman and Teleborian from taking any responsibility (i.e., showing an understanding of how their actions impacted others) or showing any remorse, it is still often a powerful and healing experience for their victims and/or the victims’ families to confront their attackers and have their painful experiences (and the consequences of those experiences) heard and acknowledged. In fact, while it is ideal that the understanding and responsibility come from the offender, victims who have participated in restorative processes—like restorative circles and family group conferences—report that simply having others in their community hear and understand their pain and the impact of the actions on them also has a supportive quality.²⁹ In addition, a process where the voices of multiple affected people are included—including, for instance, the offender’s family—

²⁷ Sherman, L. W. and H. Strang. *Restorative Justice: the Evidence*. London: The Smith Institute, 2007.

²⁸ Unlike conventional (punitive) approaches to justice—which ask who is at fault and what is the appropriate punishment—restorative approaches ask what harm was done (to all parties) and how the parties to the conflict might repair the harm. While the criminal courts in both Sweden and the United States discourage contact between the so-called offender and the so-called victim, the restorative process deliberately creates a safe space where those parties can come together and, with the help of a facilitator, work toward mutual understanding (including an empathic understanding of the victim’s experience) and voluntary agreements about how to move forward.

²⁹ Sherman, L. W. and H. Strang, *Restorative Justice: the Evidence*.

Gillinson, S., M. Horne, and P. Baeck. *Radical Efficiency: Different, Better, Lower Cost Public Services*. London: NESTA report, 2010.

and agreements are allowed to emerge that are satisfying to all of these parties, tends to be perceived as both more just and more humane than a process in which justice is carried out by either the state or by independent vigilantes.

We come now to the final, and perhaps most important, question: Even if a more “humane” action may have some benefit for Lisbeth, would it not simply increase the likelihood of cruelty and abuse by current and future offenders? The argument (we believe it is originally from the Talmud) is often phrased something like this: *If we are kind to those to whom we should be cruel, we will ultimately be cruel to those to whom we should be kind.*

The words seem eminently reasonable. We can well imagine the first part leading to the second³⁰ but, as dichotomous options almost always are, the choices are false. Our choices are not limited to either being cruel or being kind. Thus, in the cases of Vanger, Niedermann, and Teleborian, our choices are NOT either to kill them or to buy them lunch and send them on their way. Both Sweden and the United States have a due process that allows an impartial body to determine culpability. If these men are determined to be guilty, we can incarcerate them for life or otherwise limit their freedom—not to punish them (because the goal of punishment is to discourage future similar behavior and we know such men cannot be discouraged), but to ensure our own safety. We should limit their freedom but treat them humanely. Though they might have done monstrous things, we don’t need to be monstrous in turn. Despite whatever corruption and bias might exist in the formal system, we should treat these offenders as human beings. The bias and corruption are not irrelevant, and we don’t intend to suggest that either should be ignored. Rather, our point is that a broken justice system does not psychologically or ethically justify Lisbeth’s cruelty any more than Martin Vanger’s painful and abusive upbringing justifies his.

³⁰ The quote suggests that if we treat psychopaths kindly (i.e., withhold severe punishment), we increase the likelihood that they will harm innocent others (i.e., those who deserve our kindness) in the future.

The Talmud quote also suggests that cruelty is a necessity. We don't agree. We don't want to choose between being cruel to someone who deserves it and being cruel to someone who doesn't. Sure, that's an easy choice, but it's set up that way to justify being cruel to *someone*. This same logic is at the heart of Larsson's novels. Lisbeth's actions of setting her father on fire and sodomizing Bjurman are undeniably cruel, but they are supposedly justified on the grounds that Zalachenko and Bjurman deserved them. We reject the dichotomous options; we don't want to be intentionally cruel to anyone.

We reject, as well, the word "kindness" in this context. Opponents of the death penalty are not advocating kindness; they're advocating fairness and compassion. The not-so-radical idea that this person who may have done some terrible things (let's assume that, as in the Millennium novels, the person's innocence is not in dispute) is still a human being who, like Martin Vanger, may have experienced profound neglect or abuse.

Compassion is not forgiveness, and it certainly is not a lack of accountability. It just means that we believe that no one is born wanting to rape and kill³¹ and the fact that some person has done so—perhaps multiple times—likely means that his or her life has been filled with so much abuse and pain that he or she was moved to violence. We don't condone or excuse such a person's choices³² and we don't want to do anything to compromise the safety of others but, along with revulsion, disgust, and fear, we also feel compassion. Consider Martin Vanger. No doubt his genes alone placed him at high risk for deviant criminal behavior—and he did

³¹ Though psychopathy may seem like an exception, it isn't. Not all people who lack empathy rape or kill, and even studies show that the heritability of most psychopathic characteristics is in the moderate range ($h^2=.50$ to $.67$) for most people who meet the criteria for psychopathy, suggesting that unique life experiences do contribute to the development of antisocial behavior, even in cases of psychopathy. Data supporting this can be found in C. Patrick's *Handbook of Psychopathy*.

³² We really do see them as choices. Though much of the variance in deviant criminal behavior can be accounted for by genetics and immediate familial environment (two lotteries Martin Vanger clearly did not win), the data suggests that even this highly combustible combination of risk factors does not guarantee deviance. Martin Vanger's sister Harriet, as well as Lisbeth herself, are proof that Larsson didn't think so either.

ultimately make the choice to follow in his father's footsteps—but we doubt he would have become the sadist he was if his father hadn't abused him.³³

We are NOT advocating putting the “perpetrator's” needs and welfare before that of the person or persons who were harmed. As readers, we care more about Lisbeth's welfare than about Bjurman's or Niedermann's or Teleborian's. Obviously! The same would be true in a real-life situation. But empathy and compassion are not about priorities, nor are they about compromise.

To be compassionate is to recognize everyone's humanity and value everyone's needs. This works because compassion is not a zero-sum game. Feelings of compassion for one person do not lessen one's ability to feel compassion for another³⁴. To the contrary, our personal experience is that, when we are in a more compassionate and loving space, we have more to give to everyone around us.

Compassion is also a choice. When act without compassion (and we sometimes do), it is usually because we have given ourselves permission to do so. When this happens, we almost always later regret it. One reason for this is that our lack of compassion rarely results in outcomes we enjoy. Another reason is that compassion is not charity. To be sure, it can be a tremendous gift to another, but it is a gift to ourselves as well. Just as torture and other acts of cruelty dehumanize both the person tortured and the torturer, so do compassion and empathy reconnect us to our own humanity. As we pointed out earlier, Lisbeth pays a price for her vigilantism. The price is hard to see because, by the time we meet her, she is already hardened and emotionally damaged by her history of abuse and trauma. She has paid a price nevertheless,

³³ *Editors' Note:* For a discussion about the propensity for violence, see Joshua Gowin's essay in this book.

³⁴ Rosenberg, M. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, 1999.

and the nightmares, the emotional detachment, and the social isolation may only be the tip of the iceberg.³⁵

Ultimately, however, our society's priorities probably come down to safety. Whether we're talking about terrorists, murderers, or rapists, as citizens we want some assurance that those who have hurt us or others before will be unable (or unwilling) to do so again. The safety needs are legitimate, but will cruelty really contribute to our safety? Though the question continues to be debated, there is no compelling evidence that either torture or the death penalty increase safety. To the contrary, in many cases (psychopathy may be an exception), restorative processes can better meet society's (and the victims') safety needs than incarceration or other punishments that fail to address the contextual or interpersonal factors that contributed to the violence in the first place.

Larsson stacks the deck in Lisbeth's favor. He pits an incompetent, morally corrupt system against a highly competent moral authority. Lisbeth's judgment of the villains' guilt is not in dispute. Her revenge-taking seems appropriately measured. Her priorities seem beyond reproach. We can live with her choices. They are just and motivated primarily by safety needs. But they are not without cost and, ultimately, are unsustainable. Larsson created a memorable heroine. Would that he had also created a memorable justice system that could replace the one that's broken or have her focus her efforts on system reform rather than circumvention. *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* was a step in that direction, but ultimately stopped short³⁶ when Lisbeth again turns to vigilantism to dispose of Niedermann. In the process, Lisbeth makes a fine

³⁵ In the case of Kim Cunningham, she does express regret about taking the matter into her own hands even though she continues to maintain that Hundley deserved to die. "As I fired that gun," she explains, "all I wanted to do was protect my family, but I ended up damaging it instead."

³⁶ *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* is the last novel of the Millennium series, but there is evidence that Larsson planned to continue the series and presumably would have, if not for his untimely death. It is possible, given this novel's focus on systemic problems, that Lisbeth might have eventually moved away from vigilantism in favor of systemic change. Unfortunately, those stories will continue to be untold.

superhero but a poor model of real-world, sustainable, compassionate justice. We can enjoy the former as a harmless fantasy, just as long as we also recognize the latter.

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