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The Man Who Smiled: A Kurt Wallander Mystery

Henning Mankell
Laurie Thompson, translator
Dick Hill, narrator
Blackstone Audio (October 2006)
Unknown $90.00 (pp)
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A chilly fog-shrouded Sweden, where the locals drink plenty of coffee, provides the backdrop for Henning Mankell's latest mystery featuring Kurt Wallander, the Swedish police detective. The book begins with an off-the-wall killing, featuring an "ordinary kitchen chair" placed completely out-of-context, and a reluctant and possibly permanently sidelined Wallander, who is dealing with his own existential demons. We meet the "man at Farnholm Castle" early on as well, the "…stranger with a smile that did not belong with that sun-tanned face" who gives the book its name.

The Man Who Smiled is the fourth in the series of six Kurt Wallander books Mankell has written; it was recently translated into English. Other Wallander mysteries include *Before the Frost*, which teams the Ystad-based detective with his daughter Linda. This audio book is read by Dick Hill who lends a touch of an accent to his characters and authentically reads the Swedish place and people names, lending just enough darkness to Laurie Thompson's able translation of the dialogue.

Mankell's detective is starkly different than the customary American policeman. His angst stems from his reaction to a violent incident, while hard-edged American cops in crime fiction plow through such situations without a thought, much less angst. Now, on leave for nearly a year, Wallander has "surrendered to his self-disgust." While he's deciding whether or not to return to police work, the keystone victim is murdered: "He was dead before his body hit the damp asphalt. It was 9:53 pm. The fog was now very dense."

Wallander gets assistance from a new cop, a woman, who represents a new era in police work, and a new Sweden, where "crime became more frequent and more serious…we started finding criminals among people who had previously been irreproachable citizens…but what set it off? I have no idea." And he's annoyed by the police bureaucracy, represented by an obnoxious chief who tells Wallander, "You always seem to find yourself in situations outside normal procedures."

Listeners of *The Man Who Smiled* will quickly become attached to the moody dark detective and find themselves transported to frozen Scandinavia and a troop of very cool criminals. At times, especially in the first third of the book, Wallander may seem relentlessly morose, but his soon-to be relentless pursuit of his quarry soon dispels the dire atmosphere.

Mankell's *The Man Who Smiled* presents an intricate crime mystery that also creates a rich and tangible sense of place with its dour Swedish backdrop. Readers will doubtless need to reach for a cup of coffee or two while listening to Kurt Wallander solve the crime and maybe give a thought or two to that "ordinary kitchen chair" in their house.

CHRIS ARVIDSON (April 10, 2007)

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