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The Shadow Girls

Henning Mankell
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Henning Mankell is best known as a crime writer. *The Shadow Girls* is a novel about a different sort of crime: the treatment of desperate immigrants in the country where they hoped to find safety and freedom.

Tea-Bag, from Nigeria, Tanya, from Russia, and the Iranian Leyla are illegal immigrants living in Sweden. Through a series of accidental encounters, Jesper Humlin, a well-known Swedish poet, finds himself teaching a writing course to the girls. Vain and self-absorbed, Humlin is dominated by his mother, his girlfriend, his publisher, and his broker. The interactions between Humlin and these companions provide a comic counterpoint to the harrowing stories of the immigrants, with jarring contrast underscoring the vast differences between the life of an illegal immigrant and that of a blasé citizen of a Western nation.

In a bit of irony, Humlin's publisher pressures him to write a crime novel, but Humlin realizes that he is caught up in something more important. Through his association with these girls, his life becomes as riotous and unpredictable as that of a crime novel character. As they slowly reveal their stories to him, the girls become more to Humlin than a source of good material for a new book—they become individuals. Humlin tells his publisher he is not going to write a crime novel; he is going to write about "these girls in Gothenburg. I'm going to weave their stories together, with me the main protagonist." *The Shadow Girls* is Humlin's book.

Mankell deftly foresees and deflects one criticism likely to come his way with this book. Humlin is accused by his girlfriend of "stealing" the girls' stories. But later, Leyla's sister asks him, "Who is going to speak for me? Who is going to tell my story? … I am no writer. You are."

Interspersed with the real-time narrative are sections in which each girl tells her story. Tea-Bag: "Countries can be like hungry animals with a thousand mouths. They eat us up when their need is great and they spit us out when they are done." The writing here poetically and credibly conveys the character and background of each girl and the suffering she has endured.

The dehumanization of these girls is the crime in this Mankell book, first published in Sweden in 2001. Among Henning Mankell's many awards is the Crime Writer's Association's Macallan Gold Dagger. His Kurt Wallander mysteries are the basis for the PBS Masterpiece Mystery's *Wallander* series.
KAREN MULVAHILL (December 3, 2012)

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