



What is American Culture?

By David Kipen



Fans of the late crime novelist Stieg Larsson tour Sweden in search of Hedestad, the quaint town featured in Larsson's popular mystery series. Though it flourished in America, the detective novel continues to defy cultural boundaries. ©AP Images

"... plainly, American culture no longer belongs to America, and in truth it never did."

The easy joke would be, "Sum up American culture in 500 words? Isn't that too many?"

The hard fact is that American culture may not exist anymore. Thanks to the Internet — the very medium that now enables you to read, on another continent, an essay I'm writing in

North America in response to a question probably asked on another continent entirely — all the old sentry boxes guarding our national cultures are seriously understaffed. Look at the three art forms that most of my countrymen think of as somehow intrinsically American originals: musical comedy, jazz and the detective novel.

Not too long ago, one of the hottest tickets on Broadway, and one that garnered 11 Tony Award nominations and won three of them, was *Fela!*, a musical about the late Nigerian multi-instrumentalist Fela Kuti. Fela's influence on jazz only grows and helps demonstrate how the breakdown of formerly "national" cultures parallels a

similar cross-pollination between once discrete genres. Like the sentinels guarding the ramparts of erstwhile “American” culture, the customs officer working the borders between jazz, pop, and musical theater has long since given up and gone home. Wherever that is.

In detective fiction, the dissolution of American culture appears even more pronounced. One of the most eagerly anticipated recent novels, detective or otherwise, was the late Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, the third in a series of Swedish mysteries. *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, a Swedish film based on Larsson’s second book about the aloof hacker vixen Lisbeth Salander, has graced stateside screens. Larsson’s first installment in the series, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, followed the trailblazing novels of his fellow Swede Henning Mankell onto

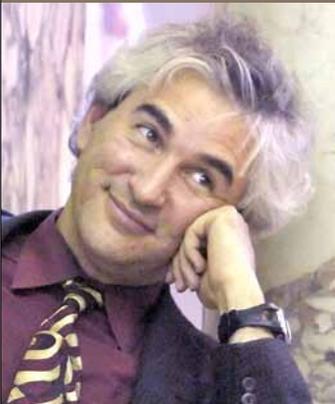
American nightstands. Salander looks to be a genuine heroine for our time, born of the Internet, and ultimately as universal as she is thoroughly Swedish.

Before we all join hands and start singing *It’s a Small World* (to borrow a tune from one of America’s most globalized corporations — from which an invoice is probably in my inbox already), it’s fair to point out that an American movie studio bought for the British director-producer Ridley Scott the rights to remake all Larsson’s books in English. Apparently subtitles are still a higher hurdle than any border checkpoint, and the money to be made from a multi-novel series is, as J.K. Rowling could tell you, magic.

But, plainly, American culture no longer belongs to America, and in truth it never did. Musical comedy owes its provenance to opera, of course, which harks back to Monteverdi’s Italy and Lully’s France at least. Jazz came out of New Orleans by way of the Caribbean and, before that, Africa. And the trail of detective fiction winds back quite a ways — through the quintessentially British Sherlock Holmes, to Poe’s oddly French Inspector Dupin, to Dickens’s Inspector Bucket from *Bleak House*, all the way to Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* — before it ever goes cold.

The roots of American culture branch even more convolutedly than the four freeways that carve up Boyle Heights, the Los Angeles neighborhood where my Yiddish-speaking ancestors lie buried, where Spanish is as common as English, and where I write these words.

David Kipen is a book critic, author and owner of Libros Schimbros, a used-book store and free lending library in Boyle Heights, California. As director of the National Endowment for the Arts’ National Reading Initiatives from 2005-2009, he spearheaded the agency’s Big Read project. *Courtesy photo*



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