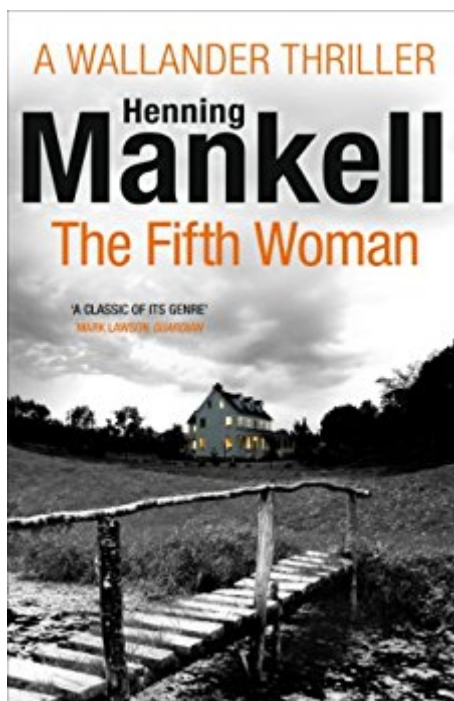


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The Fifth Woman: Kurt Wallander



Synopsis

Four nuns and a fifth woman are killed in a savage night-time attack in Africa. A year later, Inspector Kurt Wallander investigates the disappearance of an elderly birdwatcher and discovers a gruesome and meticulously planned murder - a body impaled in a trap of sharpened bamboo poles. Then, another man is reported missing. Once again Wallander's life is put on hold as he and his team work tirelessly to find a link between the series of vicious murders. Winner of the CWA Gold Dagger for *Sidetracked*.

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Customer Reviews

Swedish writer Mankell's graceful, unadorned prose provides an affecting voice for his melancholy protagonist, Ystad police detective Kurt Wallander, whose own mid-life difficulties give way to the pursuit of a cunning serial killer. As the book opens, a woman receives information that her mother has been murdered along with four nuns in an African convent, the crime hushed up. Then an old man who writes bird poetry is impaled on sharpened bamboo stakes embedded in a ditch on his property while the woman watches from his bird tower. Wallander, just home from a pleasant trip to Italy with his father, a rejuvenation of their taciturn relationship, investigates a break-in at a flower

shop from which nothing was taken, receives reports of a growing vigilante militia movement and eventually discovers the body of the bird poet. Meanwhile the reader learns that the flower shop proprietor is a captive, slowly starving. He is missing more than a week - supposedly on an orchid-buying trip - before anyone realizes. The grisly narrative builds slowly, in plain, unhurried cadences. The fits, starts and frustrations of police procedure mingle with Wallander's concerns for his father and plans for a future with his lover, Baiba - all against a thrum of background tension - the bound, terrified man, the woman ticking off plans on a meticulous schedule, selecting her next victim. As the murder count rises, Wallander and his team delve into the background of the victims, uncovering dark secrets, making tenuous connections, inching toward a solution that horrifies them all. Mankell's ("Fearless Killers," "Sidetracked") plot organization and pacing is masterful and his perplexing, atmospheric story is all the more gripping delivered in measured, understated prose.

I picked up "The Fifth Woman" by Henning Mankell because a reviewer favorably compared it to the classic "The Laughing Policeman" by Maj Sjöwall & Per Wahloo (Swedish wife/husband writing team). It doesn't disappoint. This is a book that is worth the price of a hardcover -- meaty, substantive, intricately/well plotted, with great characters. The three things I noticed that bind all three authors in their works are: 1) the Swedish people's dislike and distrust of the police, 2) the chill and loneliness that seems to pervade human relationships, and 3) police inspectors who are brilliant, meticulous, conscientious, introspective and given to depression. These Swedish police procedurals are not a barrel of laughs, but rather they are thoughtful, well written, and original. "The Fifth Woman" starts out with the murders in Africa of 4 nuns and a female visitor. The rest of the novel takes place with these murders' ramifications in Sweden where a serial killer is dispatching men, each very differently. The title refers not only to the 5th woman murdered in Africa, but also the 5th woman in Sweden who leads police inspector, Kurt Wallander, to the Swedish serial murderer. American police procedurals tend to reveal more murder motives from the get-go. In this novel the motive is a core plot element and isn't revealed until later in the book. The reader also knows a few things about the killer early in the book that the police don't know and it is fascinating to watch the police reach the "same place in the book" as the reader. I was reading a well regarded American mystery writer and stopped the book to read "The Fifth Woman". When I returned to the American book after finishing Mankell's opus, it was sophomoric in comparison. This is a book for the serious mystery reader and well worth the effort.

Ystad, Sweden is not a place where one would expect a homicide wave. Yet three brutal murders

have shook up the citizens and stunned the police. Inspector Kurt Wallander sees no link between the vicious killings except that they were all well planned in advance and fierce and slow in terms of the victim. Wallander and his staff begin looking for an apparent serial killer. However, to the shock of the Inspector, evidence points towards a female culprit. While the law enforcement officials struggle to switch paradigms, the killer becomes angrier, more hateful, bolder and deadlier. Even Wallander wonders if the killer can truly be a genius and a lunatic at the same time? THE FIFTH WOMAN is the fourth Wallander tale to come to the States and like its predecessors is a fine police investigative novel. The story line slowly evolves as the audience spends much time inside the minds of Wallander and his foe. This turns the who-done-it into more of a psychological thriller than a typical serial killer investigation normally is. Not for anyone who wants fast-paced in your face action, Henning Mankell provides those readers who enjoy a more gradual speed with a wonderful police procedural. Harriet Klausner

Kurt Wallander is both the main character and setting of Mankell's 'procedural' crime series. While based in southern Sweden, "The Fifth Woman" is in fact grounded in the rugged landscape of Wallander's interior life - his memories, hopes, shopping lists, prejudices and anxieties. Not since Lawrence Sanders' Matt Scudder have I read such an angst-ridden and ethically driven protagonist. This is the ultimate introverted hero - he solves crimes using weapons of solitude, intuition, memory-interrogation and a phenomenal eye for detail. How could you not love a policeman who reminds himself in the midst of the chase to book the laundry room, alert his superiors to a colleague's excessive workload or take time to grieve for his father. Mankell also provides a vivid account of the broader issues that confronted Swedish society in the 1990s - refugees, law and order, social capital and shifting moral foundations. Wallander characterises the times as an age where people have forgotten how to darn their socks, preferring to discard a blemish rather than repair a resource. And the storyline of "The Fifth Woman"? Like Laurie King's "Night Work", "The Fifth Woman" explores issues of violence, revenge and enforcing justice when the system cannot deliver. It is, like Mankell's other Wallander titles, a monumental chronicle of detail, connection and the unfolding of a tightly-bound investigation. The Swedish atmospherics will also help take one's mind off an endless summer.

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