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**The 1933 Norwegian nonfiction novel *Two suspicious characters:*  
thirty-three years before *In cold blood***

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# The 1933 Norwegian Nonfiction Novel

## *Two Suspicious Characters:*

### Thirty-three Years before *In Cold Blood*

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*The drama inherent to murder stories is a natural subject for literary reportage. This is no less so in Norway. Long before Capote, there was Gunnar Larsen.*

In 1926 one of the most reported cases in the history of Norwegian crime took place. “The Country Policemen Murders” it was called in the news. Two policemen were killed after a robbery. The young journalist Gunnar Larsen in the daily newspaper *Dagbladet* covered the two months’ intense chase for the two murderers. Seven years later, in 1933, he published a book based on the case—*Two Suspicious Characters*.<sup>1</sup> The book has been described as Norway’s very first “documentary novel”—thirty years before this genre term came into use in Scandinavia,<sup>2</sup> and thirty-three years before Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood*, claiming that he invented the “nonfiction novel,”<sup>3</sup> a claim numerous scholars have long demonstrated has little real basis.<sup>4</sup> Larsen’s *Two Suspicious Characters* provides further evidence not only that the claim was spurious, but that the genre was practiced well beyond the shores of the United States. The similarities between the two books are striking. Among the more salient, Capote and Larsen both use reconstruction as their main method. Both depict two murderers’ attempt to escape from the police after having committed brutal murders. Some of the similarities might be coincidental or driven by the fact that both books may be viewed as “true crime,” a nonfiction genre in which the author examines an actual crime. This genre

was popular in the 1930s not only in the United States but also in Norway when Larsen wrote his book.

However, one important cultural and discursive difference should be emphasized from the outset: Reconstruction historically has not been acceptable in Norwegian literary reportage. But it is acceptable in the Norwegian conception of the “nonfiction novel” transplanted from the United States after Capote invented the term.

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, it is partly a comparison of *Two Suspicious Characters* with *In Cold Blood*. I am not the first to do this. Norwegian scholars have already compared the two books, and as journalism scholar Martin Eide notes, “the comparison usually comes out in favor of the Norwegian journalist.”<sup>5</sup> My focus in the comparison is on how true the two books are to the facts. Second, I want to highlight Gunnar Larsen’s place in the history of literary journalism and to show to an international audience of scholars his valuable contribution to the nonfiction novel genre in Norway. In my opinion, if Larsen had published his book in English, he would be considered to be in the same league as Capote and Norman Mailer. In fact, they all wrote “true crime.”

Ultimately, *Two Suspicious Characters* is the better of the two, I would suggest. But then, of course, I bring to it a Norwegian perspective.

#### BACKGROUND

Gunnar Larsen, who lived from 1900 to 1958, came to the daily newspaper *Dagbladet* in 1923 educated as a lawyer. He became news editor in 1930 and editor-in-chief in 1954. Four years later, at age fifty-eight, he died. As a reporter and newspaper columnist he was famous for his modern and elegant style. According to Randi Bård Størmer, his biographer, “Many of his texts are among the best ever written in [the] Norwegian press.”<sup>6</sup> Similar to some of the New Journalists from the 1970s, Larsen had serious alcohol and drug problems that became worse when he left his wife and two children and started a new life with a divorcée. It was a notable scandal at the time. Larsen was often found sleeping in his office in the morning with manuscripts and bottles around him. To break through the alcohol intoxication so that he could write, he used amphetamines. His drug abuse apparently caused his early death. At the time of his death, in addition to his prodigious work as a newspaperman, he had published five novels and was working on his sixth, according to Størmer.

*Two Suspicious Characters* is Larsen’s second “novel,” although it can make, of course, a claim to being journalism or nonfiction, but a claim not readily acknowledged in Norway where what constitutes “journalism” and

“nonfiction” is different from how it is viewed in other countries such as the United States. Told in the third person, the book charts the dramatic story of the two murderers sought by the police, based on the true event of “The Country Policemen Murders” reported initially in the newspaper press. After a robbery the two policemen in pursuit of the perpetrators were killed. One died immediately; the other lived long enough to identify the murderers. This is the starting point for an extensive police pursuit of the criminals in a large area of eastern Norway. In Larsen’s “novel” the chase is mainly perceived through the young and sensitive boy Gustav. The reader only comes close to the older and tougher man, Ekstrøm, in the last part of the book. In the work Larsen has changed the names of the originals, probably for ethical and legal reasons. Gustav’s real name was Henning Sigurd Madsen, and Ekstrøm’s was Anton Emanuel Oskar Svensson.

The style has been said to resemble that of Ernest Hemingway, particularly through the tone, its impression of reportage, of being there, and the lean descriptive style reflecting dramatic suspense. As his publishing house puts it, the novel “depicts the chase with nerve and intensity.”<sup>7</sup> After two months the murderers are surrounded by the police, and Ekstrøm kills himself with a revolver, ending the book.

#### DISQUALIFIED AS NONFICTION?

Journalism scholar Thore Roksvold calls *Two Suspicious Characters* a “dramatized fiction” based on the newspaper account of the chase for the murderers. He states that this dramatization “disqualifies the text as nonfiction,” even if the novel is based on a real event, and even if “Larsen himself had driven and walked the route [the murderers] fled to make the account as authentic as possible.”<sup>8</sup> That Larsen uses the third-person point of view apparently does not trouble Roksvold. Rather, to him “What makes the text fiction and not journalism is first of all that he quotes the thoughts of . . . one of the two criminals that died,” someone “Larsen could not possibly have talked to.”<sup>9</sup> Roksvold’s observation suggests he could have accepted the book as nonfiction if Larsen had met and interviewed both murderers, as Capote did. But Larsen only met the murderer who survived the chase, which in Roksvold’s view weakened the documentary basis for reconstruction. I will return to this at the end of this essay. But at this point I have three criticisms to Roksvold’s argument. First, the part dealing with Ekstrøm covers only fourteen pages out of 155, less than 10 percent of the text. It is only in this part that Larsen “quotes the thoughts” of the criminal who died before Larsen could have interviewed him. Second, this is the last part of the book, where the author changes third point of view from the young man Gustav (“The boy”) to the

elder man Ekstrøm (“The man”), who kills himself at the end of the chase. Gustav survives and is sentenced to prison for life. Larsen said he met and interviewed Gustav in prison, though not by any means as comprehensively as Capote interviewed the murderers for his book. Third, my reading of the two books clearly shows that Capote used reconstruction that was not based on interview or observation much as Larsen did regarding Ekstrøm. Even if he met both his murderers in prison, he never met the members of the murdered Clutter family, who are described extensively and in detail in the first part of the book. But he writes as if he had, using third-person point of view and even interior voice. He based this reconstruction on “hundreds of hours with the killers” and a long correspondence with them.<sup>10</sup>

#### CONFUSION ABOUT THE GENRE

The reception of *Two Suspicious Characters* has always been divided. The Norwegian literary scholar Ellen Rees writes that the text’s hybridity—the fluid border between fact and fiction in the narrative—“has resulted in the lack of scholarly consensus regarding the genre status of the text.”<sup>11</sup> But she disagrees with scholars who say the text should be interpreted as a fictional novel, which would privilege the purely literary and aesthetic quality of the text. She argues that the book’s “factual basis (the newspaper reporting done by Larsen in 1926) is both unavoidable and theoretically compelling,” adding, “The text’s documentary sources are in my view crucial elements of the plot and structure.”<sup>12</sup> Rees calls Larsen’s book a “documentary novel,” but realizes that this genre most often is associated with the 1960s and 1970s and so suggests considering less period-specific terms: “One might, for example, define the text as an outstanding early example of creative nonfiction with elements of the sub-genre known as true crime.”<sup>13</sup>

But as noted earlier, some influential scholars have insisted, and still insist, that *Two Suspicious Characters* should be interpreted as a fictional novel. In addition to Roksvold, Geir Gulliksen argues that its factual elements are subordinate to the fictional, and that “the act of rewriting a story previously written about as a journalist effectively transform[s] the events into fiction.”<sup>14</sup>

Such a conclusion, however, has not been the most common in the reception of the book. Sigurd Hoel, a major Norwegian author and publisher, wrote in 1955 that Larsen “has collected everything possible of facts,” that “everything in the book is based on concrete observation,” and that Larsen “very clearly has followed this principle: give such a precise and correct depiction as possible of all tangible factuality, then the not tangible—thoughts, feelings, moods—will appear by itself.”<sup>15</sup> Another well known scholar from the next generation, Philip Houm, wrote in 1981 that the book “is as close to the factual event” as it is possible to get.<sup>16</sup>

There is another point to emphasize that both Hoel and Houm agree on: Larsen was influenced by Ernest Hemingway's style. No wonder, perhaps, since Larsen was Hemingway's first translator in Norway (*The Sun Also Rises/Solen går sin gang*). Furthermore, Hemingway had the same double relation to fact and fiction as Larsen, being both reporter and fictional novelist. Hoel writes that *Two Suspicious Characters* "is the most successful work in the Hemingway style I know."<sup>17</sup> In fact, at the end of his essay Hoel goes even further to compliment Larsen: "I am tempted to say that Gunnar Larsen has fulfilled the demands on style even tougher than the Master himself."<sup>18</sup> Not everyone agrees, however, with the comparison. Norway's internationally most celebrated author today, Per Petterson, calls it "tiresome."<sup>19</sup> He recommends reading Larsen for himself, independent of the perception of Hemingway's influence.

#### CLOSE TO LITERARY JOURNALISM

It is *not* my opinion that *Two Suspicious Characters* should be part of the canon of journalism. I have argued that *In Cold Blood* is not journalism, but something *between* journalism and fiction, a mix of the two genres.<sup>20</sup> I would say the same is the case with *Two Suspicious Characters*, even if it can be argued that this book is closer to journalism than *In Cold Blood* because Larsen worked closely on the case as a reporter from the beginning, something Capote did not do. While Gulliksen argues Larsen's prior work as a journalist on the murders ensured that his book about them would necessarily be fiction, I see that background history bringing the book closer to nonfiction. I will return to this argument later.

As a whole the two books are both expressions of a hybrid genre. That means they both contain elements of what we traditionally consider to be fiction. In general my point of view is that we have to "distinguish between reportage and documentary on the one hand and nonfiction novels on the other."<sup>21</sup> In other words, a nonfiction novel is not literary journalism (or reportage). Literary journalism is, in my opinion, not a hybrid genre; it is journalism with literary qualities. Both the books, however, are *close* to literary journalism, and therefore are often described as such. In Scandinavia *In Cold Blood* is sometimes even recognized as "one of the best examples of New Journalism."<sup>22</sup> The confusion about the genre is demonstrated in what a Norwegian publishing house wrote about the book when it was reprinted in 2006: "One of the classics within the documentary genre, a shocking reportage and a masterly novel."<sup>23</sup> In my opinion it cannot be all this at the same time; at least, if it is reportage, it cannot be a novel. But of course the author might enter a "double contract" with his readers, which means that the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are not clear.<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, fiction writers

may enter such a double contract, while reporters cannot.<sup>25</sup>

The genre “confusion” goes further than the Norwegian discourse. It is hard to find any universally accepted definitions of literary journalism. Norman Sims has argued that “Written definitions of literary journalism are, at best, abstractions.”<sup>26</sup> He writes that he always wants to see an example: “Without some examples, I feel like a dinner guest with an empty plate.”<sup>27</sup> The two examples in this essay are on that plate. Do they taste like literary journalism? Even if Larsen’s and Capote’s books are not reportage or literary journalism according to Norwegian genre categories, they are relevant for literary journalism history and discourse, since they clearly demonstrate and challenge the borders between fact and fiction.

In an interview in the newspaper *Tidens Tegn*,<sup>28</sup> Gunnar Larsen declared that the book was based on solid facts. He was asked if anything in the book was invented by the author.

No, the author answers.

—In the whole book there is not a spruce-fir or a fence that the two men didn’t pass.

—But the talks they had with the few persons they met?

—I have visited these witnesses and stenographically recorded their statements . . .

—And the conversation between the two themselves?

—They didn’t talk much. And most of it is retorts that Madsen (“The Boy”) recounted during the examination.

—Did you talk to Madsen?

—I was allowed to as long as Madsen, who is now in prison at Akershus, accepted, and was informed what it was for. . . .

I don’t think it is possible to point out any factual errors in my book. Of course I could have invented a story inspired by the events, but it is the same for me as it is for many journalists, I cannot do it really well if I don’t know that what I’m saying is really true. . . . The need to find the truth is the very trigger in a real journalist’s business.”<sup>29</sup>

The *Tidens Tegn* interview deals with what is fact and what is not. Gunnar Larsen was very much aware of a distinction between journalism and fiction. He does not say that the book is journalism or reportage. He must have known it was some kind of “novel,” and that is how it was presented by the publishing house. But in the interview he insists on being a journalist and having used journalistic research methods in his work with the book.

The Norwegian scholar Steen Steensen writes that “*Two Suspicious Characters* was written at a time when the distinction between fiction and journalism was not well established.”<sup>30</sup> But even if the concept of journalism became clearer in the decades after *Two Suspicious Characters* was published, historical

evidence suggests that legitimate debates about professional journalism were taking place in Norway already in the 1920s.<sup>31</sup>

In the interview in *Tidens Tegn* Larsen stresses, "The need to find the truth is the very trigger in a real journalist's business." By truth he seems to mean factual accuracy, that the factual basis must be solid, that the sources are sufficient. The idea that the use of specific literary techniques could harm the factual basis probably did not occur to him. It was a premature issue. This is mainly a debate that turned up in Norway in the 1960s and 1970s, connected to the new hybrid genre called documentary novel.<sup>32</sup> It is a paradox, though, that some American scholars today probably would accept *Two Suspicious Characters* as literary journalism, like they do *In Cold Blood*.

#### THE NEWSPAPER AS TEACHER

One year before *Two Suspicious Characters* was published, Larsen published his first novel, called *This Summer*. Størmer, his biographer, writes that this is mainly a "roman à clef."<sup>33</sup> Larsen uses quite a lot of material from his newspaper articles, "much more than in later novels."<sup>34</sup> One of the main characters is the journalist Anton, "who is the author's spokesman in the book."<sup>35</sup> We recognize that what Anton says in the novel coincides with what Larsen himself said in the interview above: "The difficulty is that I can never get myself to write anything other than what I have seen and experienced."<sup>36</sup>

This attitude appears to be deeply rooted in Larsen's critical consciousness at this time in his career. His biographer notes of his first two books:

The reportage . . . pretends to describe the factual basis of a case; it pretends to be "true." In Gunnar Larsen's case, the borders seem to be somewhat vague, particularly in the personally-colored reportages, where the journalist stands up as the participant he in fact is. When he uses reportage material in his books, he brings in his person in ways that are not easy to interpret.<sup>37</sup>

Størmer states further that for the author, "his years in *Dagbladet* were his most important teacher."<sup>38</sup> Truman Capote never had this kind of tough journalism teacher. He never worked at a daily paper; rather, his journalism experience was gained through writing for *The New Yorker*. This magazine was known for its fact checking and accuracy, but some confusion about accuracy seems to have arisen in the case of Capote. *The New Yorker's* fact checker called Capote "the most accurate writer whom he had ever worked with."<sup>39</sup> But Clifford Hope, the executor for the murdered Clutter family, took a different view: "There were inaccuracies, sure," said Hope.<sup>40</sup>

Larsen learned research and respect for facts at the newspaper. Before he wrote *Two Suspicious Characters*, he read all the statements from the experts, all the papers from the court, and statements from witnesses in police inter-



rogations. So did Capote in his case, but he felt free to change the facts of reality, and even admitted to have “giv[en] way to a few small inventions.”<sup>41</sup> One famous and major example is that he invented the last scene in the novel. “Since events had not provided him with a happy scene, he was forced to make one up,” Gerald Clarke writes in his book *Capote: A Biography*.<sup>42</sup> Few have accused Larsen of inventing, and he never admitted to giving way to “small inventions.” On the contrary, he rejected the idea of inventing a story, and insisted that the book was based on solid, tangible facts and that there were no factual errors.<sup>43</sup> As a reporter he followed the actual events as closely as he could. What scholars have discussed are mainly his literary techniques, not his research.

#### IT ALL STARTED IN THE NEWSPAPER

As noted, Gunnar Larsen covered “The Country Policemen Murders” as a newspaper reporter in 1926 in what has been described as “a brand new and unusual form of reportage.”<sup>44</sup> He did not write using the singular first person, *I*, but rather *we*, in a descriptively impressionist style. Here is an example of the newspaper reportage:

Into this wasteland . . . we drove Saturday evening just as dusk was falling. The air was cool, a breath of autumn. A pair of cranes flew low over the treetops, with out-stretched gangly necks into the last of the day’s shimmering rays. The evening dew spread itself in solemn procession over the moors and gave a picturesque expression of fairytales, and Kittelsen-bog whortleberries stood blood-red and the cotton grass bowed low.<sup>45</sup> Soon it became pitch black under an overcast sky; the car headlights, which flickered over the grey-bearded spruce boughs, laid a mysticism and dread over the forest. It sent shivers down our spine; we tried to push aside our observations of nature as we at once remembered why we were driving through this dismal forest landscape: supposing suddenly that the murderers stood out there in the groves!

We were, after all, hunting down murderers.<sup>46</sup>

The reportage changes from depictions of nature and the environment to a reminder of why they are there. Larsen, in the form of the first person plural, places himself in the middle of the action, a way of writing that later would be common in Norwegian feature writing, one that brings the reader in as participants: they are part of the “we.”

Despite obvious similarities between his newspaper coverage and the book—he was writing about the same events—his way of writing, or his writing strategy, is different. In the book, he largely uses the third person the way one might find it in a realistic novel. In the first 90 percent of the text the third person point of view is that of Gustav’s, and Larsen even uses interior voice; the reader is taken into Gustav’s head and also shares his feelings,

suggesting the technique of free indirect discourse as it would be called in Norwegian, or the paraphrase of indirect quotation reflecting interior third-person monologue in English:

The boy suddenly understood:

It is now he (Gustav) shall die. That is why Ekstrøm took that detour into the densest forest. To do it in peace and quiet.

Gustav feels himself become prickly red; he squints shyly to the side. He can't move, can't say a word. He can't even summon up enough courage to be afraid. The silence pounds in his ears like heavy stomping. He smiles.<sup>47</sup>

In parts of the book, mostly when he depicts nature and describes the two men's movements in the landscape, Larsen is an omniscient narrator. This is different from the point of view in the original newspaper reportage such as in the following:

They have arrived at the more open pine forest and look down towards the track. There is a warehouse there; between the tree trunks they see glimpses of white, children at play.

They make a turn to the left, coming further down where the narrow path curls itself between rows of light birch. There is wilted fireweed everywhere, grey tufts on red stalks.

They step over the sand hill down towards the forest, which already has evening darkness under its foliage.

They go down a path, slippery from evergreen needles and pine cones. It gets dark, brown mushrooms clustering along the sides, and the trees have hazy contours.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, the description of nature is prominent both in the reportage and the book. But recall that in the reportage expresses the "we" of the reporter's first person plural impressions: "a pair of cranes flew low over the treetops, with out-stretched gangly necks into the last of the day's shimmering rays."<sup>49</sup> "We" were observing it. In the book, however, there is a subtle but significant difference: "And the dawn breaks, and they've never had a more beautiful morning. A pair of cranes awakens; they fly with out-stretched gangly necks towards the east."<sup>50</sup> Note the invocation of the third-person plural, "they." Thus, our view of nature shifts to one closer to that seen through the eyes of the murderers by means of the omniscient narrator, not through the eyes of the reporting "we."

In the interview with *Tidens Tegn*, Larsen is confronted with the fact that he makes his characters almost lyrical. The interviewer asks:

—At least *something* is wrong in your book. If the two of them had sensed nature the way the reader does through your depictions, they would hardly have become murderers.

Larsen answers:

—No one knows how these two beings of nature felt about nature. They would not have known how to express it themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Larsen's answer might seem strange, since he insists on authenticity and actuality. He states that nobody knows how the two men felt about nature, and they would not have known how to express these feelings (if you asked them). One could as well ask why the interviewer puts up that question. Does he think that murderers cannot have feelings, including feelings about nature?

In the newspaper reportage, Larsen witnessed the beauty of the morning. But in the book he attributes the perception of such beauty to the killers. And the cranes he witnessed as the "we" he now attributes to the killers as seeing.

This relates to Capote's attitude; to defend his intimate portraits of the murderers, he insisted he knew them as well as he knew himself.<sup>52</sup> The opposite is the case with Larsen: he says nobody could know these killers' feelings about nature. But in using their imaginations, both authors appear to take a bit of license with the facts. Whether Larsen made up the two characters' strong impressions of nature, or he had some support in the interview with Gustav, remains an unanswered research question. But we cannot rule out that most of these depictions express the author's own impressions and imagination from following in the murderers' footsteps. There is no doubt that he attempted to get the details as correctly as he could. According to Larsen's biographer, the author "was hunting for his reconstruction in the forests and landscapes of Vinger and Eidskog and east towards Sweden. His ambition was not only to follow the same route as the murderers did seven years ago, but also even at the same points of time. The farmers stopped and glanced at the tall city guy that bustled about on roads and paths, even walking in circles, picking up small things from the ground in the forest. He was even observed walking backwards while taking notes."<sup>53</sup> What the biographer does not note is that Larsen could not get the details absolutely correctly from the time of the murders because he was returning to the scene much later.

#### DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

There are many similarities between *Two Suspicious Characters* and *In Cold Blood*, due to the facts of each story. I have already mentioned that the main characters in both books are two males on the run after they have committed murders. In Larsen's book their escape attempt is the main story, while it is only one part of Capote's more complex story (taking up about forty-four pages, until they are caught on page 208). In both books these characters are vagrants with a criminal record. In *Two Suspicious Characters* the murderers

are caught by the police after two months, as is the case in *In Cold Blood*. Another similarity is that both books were published seven years after the murders were committed. The authors spent a lot of time on their research and finding the literary form.

I find it more interesting that both books have one weak and one dominant character. In Larsen's book Gustav ("The Boy") is young, often afraid, and quite dependent on the older and more dangerous man, Ekstrøm ("The Man"). In Capote's book Perry is a daydreamer who writes poetry, while Dick is a more violent, aggressive character. In both books this relationship is central to the dramatic structure. This is important because both authors have the ambition to do more than merely tell the story; they want to understand their characters on a psychological level, which is more revealing when a weaker, more sensitive character is juxtaposed against a stronger more aggressive character. It is also evident that both authors sympathize with the weaker character. Part of Larsen's reason for writing the book was that he suspected that the younger boy Gustav was used as a tool by the older Ekstrøm. In the foreword to the Swedish translation Larsen writes that even if the boy had shot his gun, it was likely, according to the forensic investigations, that it was Ekstrøm who had fired the fatal shots.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Capote also shows affection for the more sensitive Perry,<sup>55</sup> with whom we may assume he can identify more readily than with the tougher and less sensitive Dick.

But Larsen's biographer emphasizes that redeeming Gustav as an innocent was not Larsen's only purpose for writing the book: "The author had a literary program."<sup>56</sup> Størmer does not specify what this program was about. One could speculate that he tried to experiment with a new literary form, like Capote claimed to do thirty-three years later.

Both authors use numerous quotations from newspapers that covered the murder cases, which, as a literary technique, helps to emphasize the documentary basis for the stories. Capote and Larsen create tension by having the murderers read about themselves; in what they read they are reminded—much as readers of the accounts are as if they were in the murderer's shoes—of how desperate their plight is: They are wanted for murder. In Larsen's book, even the title is taken from the news coverage: "The chase for *two suspicious characters* observed at Krøderen train station, was without result. . . ."<sup>57</sup>

There are also explicit differences between the books. *Two Suspicious Characters* has a rather simple composition. It tells the story of the two murderers seeking escape. The criminal acts and the murders are reproduced in flashbacks through the mind and memory of the young man Gustav. There are really only two characters in the book, Gustav and Ekstrøm. Other characters only play subordinate roles. *In Cold Blood* has a much more complex

composition and more characters. Perry and Dick are the main characters, but there are others, too: the members of the Clutter family; the police investigator, Alvin Dewey; and several others. Capote tells the whole story of the planning of the murders, the murders, the escape, the murderers' capture, the investigation, the stay in jail, the court process, and, finally, the hanging. He also provides parts of the characters' socio-cultural backgrounds to explain their actions. Larsen combines psychological portraits of his characters in an intensely action-driven story, but has modest ambitions in providing a broader sociological explanation..

Both books were made into feature films, but ultimately had different futures. *In Cold Blood* was released in 1967. While *Two Suspicious Characters* was filmed in 1950, the surviving convicted murderer, still in jail, turned to court to stop it, and the Norwegian Supreme Court ruled it could not be shown in public. It would not be fully released until 2007, when it was shown for the first time on Norwegian Public Service TV (NRK). The Norwegian response demonstrates how extremely sensitive the identification of a murderer was, and this was probably why Larsen chose not to use the murderers' real names in his book. It also demonstrates that the Norwegian Supreme Court considered the book, upon which the film was based, to be more fact than fiction.

#### RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FLIGHT FROM JUSTICE

The murderers' flight follows quite similar dramatic patterns in the two books. In *Two Suspicious Characters*, Ekstrøm and Gustav are, in the beginning, confident that they will not be recognized and caught, but eventually, after reading newspapers, they understand that the police know who they are and are pursuing them. The young Gustav is the first to get nervous and suspicious:

Scared stiff, searching, the boy pulls the newspaper nearer; he finds it:

"The Chief of the Identifications Bureau drove yesterday morning up to the cabin which belongs to the brother of one of the murdered policemen. It is established that the murderers have been in the cabin. There are numerous fingerprints which will be investigated further. Some of them are very clear. . . ."

Fingerprints . . . Now Gustav understands. That dark wave envelopes him once again. That's why Ekstrøm has been moping. Those old fingerprints that they have of him . . . .

Maybe they even know who Ekstrøm is! <sup>58</sup>

In *In Cold Blood* Dick and Perry do not know that the police suspect them, but the more sensitive of the two, Perry, is suspicious from time to time, such as just before they are caught, when Dick is still talking about robbing and stealing big money:

But Perry chewed his gum and shivered and sulked. Dick said, "What is it, honey? That other deal? Why the hell can't you forget it? They never made any connection. They never will."

Perry said, "You could be wrong. And if you are, it means The Corner." Neither one had ever before referred to the ultimate penalty in the State of Kansas—the gallows, or death in The Corner.<sup>59</sup>

Both couples share the same destiny—they get increasingly more miserable as time—weeks and months—pass. They are hungry and cold. Gustav and Ekstrøm are often starving:<sup>60</sup>

They walk over a shaded mound, find three eggs under a pair of sloping roofing tiles behind a barn. One of them is warm, Gustav picks them up through the nettle.

Gustav crushes his egg with his fingers. With trembling hands he slurps it down.

Afterwards he feels even hungrier, famished. He craves more food.

He stumbles along, unsteadily, takes small steps, listens dully.<sup>61</sup>

There is a similar scene in *In Cold Blood* when Dick and Perry hide from the rain in a barn in Iowa<sup>62</sup>:

Perry, drenched and shaking, dropped beside him. "I'm so cold," he said, burrowing in the hay, "I'm so cold I wouldn't give a damn if this caught fire and burned me alive." He was hungry, too. Starved. Last night they had dined on bowls of Salvation Army soup, and today the only nourishment they'd had was some chocolate bars and chewing-gum that Dick had stolen from a drugstore candy counter. "Any more Hershey?" Perry asked.

No, but there was still a pack of chewing-gum. They divided it, then settled down to chewing it. . . .<sup>63</sup>

In both books the killings are described indirectly. Whether this solution is a matter of ethics, research method, or dramatic suspense is unclear—it may be a combination. I find it likely, though, that dramatic suspense provides at least one important explanation for the authors' choices. Part of the suspense in Larsen's story is the uncertainty of Gustav's guilt, which is reflected in several flashbacks where Gustav recalls the fatal event in different ways. If Larsen had depicted the killings directly in the beginning of the novel, one of the most suspenseful parts of the plot would have been lost. Likewise, suspense would have been lost in Capote's work if the author had described the killings immediately for readers; more suspense is created when he presents the result of the brutality through the eyes of some neighbors and the sheriff.

In *Two Suspicious Characters*, Gustav, while in flight, thinks back in flashbacks:

No! He knew nothing. Not until everything was over, and the last smoke from the gun rose towards the evening sun. There were two lying there. . . .

Unpleasant images which he tried to block out, overwhelmed him. What happened? Why? In the dim haze, through salty sweat, he saw dark shapes swaying violently. Boots that kicked. And police batons. It all went so lightning fast. He just stood there, panic-stricken and fumbled with his revolver so that it would be too late.

He never intended to take anyone's life. They just sat there, eating peacefully. How could he help it if those damned . . .

Ugh, they were dead. Yes, was the big one . . . ?

Images crash together, become just a black interference in his eyes. An upright shape storms towards him at violent speed . . . Throws hands in the air. At once. Falls backwards to the ground . . . Oh silence!

It wasn't him! It wasn't him! He wouldn't shoot!

When they took him, he would swear that it couldn't have been him. They would have to believe him. It wasn't him!

A new image burns, lurking behind, coming forward, not to be denied, relentlessly:

Ekstrøm with his knee over the youngest. Lifts the knife, forcefully, quickly, stabs!

Gustav had said he believed the younger policeman knew him from Hokksund. He had been in the police force there.

It was then that Ekstrøm ran off . . . No, Gustav hadn't meant it. Didn't want anything to do with it . . . Didn't he turn himself away from it all, and then packed his bag?

It *was* Ekstrøm! <sup>64</sup>

In the next flashback, fourteen pages later, Gustav seems to have collected his thoughts:

. . . They were seated and were almost finished eating, when the policemen suddenly appeared. Gustav immediately recognized the youngest one who had been the Sheriff at Hokksund. But he didn't say anything that indicated that he recognized Gustav.

Then the old policeman asked: Are you berry-pickers?

There aren't many berries in the forest, Ekstrøm replied. Gustav remembers every word; it was so seldom they spoke to anyone.

And I see you have a tent, the older officer said, and then he went behind a spruce tree and whistled. It was then that the younger one—the one that Gustav recognized—said that they were police, and asked what kind of guys [Ekstrøm and Gustav] were.

We are what we are, said Ekstrøm.

After that the young policeman, once again, said that they were policemen, and that they had gotten their questions answered.

Then Ekstrøm said: And you come here, into the forest, to ask your questions?

Yes, said the young one.

It was as if Ekstrøm grew wings. He sprang up: No way, you, he screamed, and in a second he was behind the spruce. At the same moment, gunfire, two-three shots, and Ekstrøm screamed to Gustav: Shoot, shoot, God dammit!

At this point he can think no longer.<sup>65</sup>

The uncertainty of who the killer was continues throughout the book. Gustav is unsure and changes his opinion: Did he kill? Or did he not? Ekstrøm exploits Gustav's uncertainty to convince him that he is the killer. This was a main concern for Larsen, who deliberately wished to create the uncertainty of Gustav's guilt.<sup>66</sup> In this way the book has a touch of investigative journalism.

Like Larsen, Capote does not reconstruct the murders by describing them. He leaves Dick and Perry when they enter the house of the Clutter family. We see the killings through the eyes of witnesses who come to the murder scene—first some neighbors, and then the sheriff. Finally, Perry fills in the details in his confession.

#### RECONSTRUCTION WITHOUT OBSERVATION OR INTERVIEWS

I have already mentioned that it appears Capote uses reconstruction without observation and interviews to a larger extent than Larsen. In *Two Suspicious Characters* this technique is mainly used in the last fourteen pages of the book.<sup>67</sup> At that point Larsen changes the point of view from Gustav to Ekstrøm (who fatally shoots himself when he is eventually surrounded by the police). But Larsen does not only write in the third person; he is also an omniscient narrator, and more so in this last controversial part than in the main part written from Gustav's point of view. It is as if Larsen knew he was on thin ice, since he had never met Ekstrøm. Most of this part is action-driven and told by the omniscient narrator.

Larsen had in fact been on the spot of the suicide just after it happened in 1926. He observed Anton Emanuel Oskar Svensson (Ekstrøm) being carried on a ladder just after the shot. Larsen had come to the place where the two murderers were surrounded just before Svensson, wounded by a series of shots, managed to escape into the forest. Larsen then followed the chase by police, dogs, and farmers until Svensson committed suicide. On October 23 the headline on the front page of *Dagbladet* reported, "The murderer Svensson shot himself today [at] 11:15 a.m." The subhead read "An eyewitness report." Larsen had interviewed police sources and walked around in the actual terrain with the man who discovered the two murderers.<sup>68</sup> Later he read the police documents that reconstructed the chase of Svensson. In this way, he had both his own observations and documents to base his story on. But, of course, he never had the chance to talk to Svensson. And it is particularly in the last lines of the novel that Larsen uses the interior voice of Svensson/Ekstrøm:



People stomp in through the grove from all directions.  
 An excruciating, unbearable pain cuts through the Swede's (Ekstrøm's)  
 arm. Then paralysis, with flowing ease.  
 It's useless.  
 He knew it.—But he didn't care.  
 He'll fool them! For one last time.  
 Slowly, he turned the revolver towards his own forehead. Uses his left  
 hand for support.  
 As the gun fires, he knows that this time it will not fail.  
 He blows up the world.<sup>69</sup>

**I**n the thirty-five pages about the Clutter family before the killings Capote used reconstruction without observation or interviews with members of the Clutter family. He never met them. His own editor at *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, regretted that he had allowed Capote to use this technique after the story appeared in the magazine.<sup>70</sup> As Weingarten notes, how could Capote know what the four family members said and thought? Weingarten emphasizes the difficulty in “writing about events that [Capote] hadn't witnessed, dialogue that he received secondhand, interior monologues that required a fair amount of creative license on his part.”<sup>71</sup>

There is a decisive difference between Larsen's and Capote's research. Larsen worked as a reporter during the two months the book depicts. He was close to the police and other sources when it all happened, and he was even on the spot when the two murderers were caught. I do not agree with Geir Gulliksen that this is a disadvantage when it comes to the book's credibility and status as a nonfiction novel. In fact, Larsen's detailed research as a journalist guarantees a high degree of accuracy. Without it, the story would have been fiction. Gulliksen does not argue convincingly why “the act of rewriting” the story in book form necessarily turns it into fiction. It is just an unsupported claim.

Capote did not follow the events as they were taking place. He started his work on the story long after. One of the problems with Capote's sources has been pointed out by Weingarten: Capote “had to piece together a story that had only two living witnesses, as it turned out—the murderers themselves.”<sup>72</sup> This also applies to the eighteen pages about Dick and Perry on their way to the home of the Clutter family. Capote does not only describe what they are doing, but he also quotes their direct dialogue in long passages. He writes as if he had been on the spot and overheard their conversation. But he did not. He only had his interviews with them to base it on. Larsen does some of the same, but, in my view, not to the same extent. There is not much dialogue in *Two Suspicious Characters*. It is likely he felt he had to be careful since he was not on the spot. As a trained journalist he had respect for the difference

between what you could tell from observation, interviews, and documents—and what you could not tell. One more difference is striking. Whereas Larsen “stenographically recorded” the witnesses’ statements and took detailed notes of everything he observed, Capote trusted his memory; he never took notes during interviews.<sup>73</sup> He wrote down from memory shortly after what he had heard, and used the notes of his secretary.<sup>74</sup>

#### DIFFERENT TRADITIONS

Thore Roksvold chose the wrong argument in excluding *Two Suspicious Characters* from being nonfiction and journalism. Even if Larsen had interviewed both murderers, his book, in my opinion, when judged today, would still not be journalism. This is simply because the use of interior voice and monologue is not consistent with the methodological and ethical demands of professional journalism as practiced in Norway. I am not aware of any journalistic method that gives access to a person’s thoughts and inner feelings in the past. In my view literary reconstruction of such thoughts and feelings based solely on interviews crosses the border into fiction.<sup>75</sup> So far this has been the most common opinion among Norwegian reporters and literary reportage scholars, even if many American scholars of literary journalism may think that it is an acceptable practice. The reason for this might be our two different traditions; in Norway literary journalism and literary reportage are not the same thing. The reportage tradition goes back to the 1860s, and professional standards were established in the early twentieth century. Scandinavian reportage theory and practice is strict when it comes to the demands of actuality, firsthand observation, and participant experience.<sup>76</sup> There is no room for literary reconstruction of events in the past, solely based on interviews, like in American literary journalism and nonfiction. In this respect our traditions seem to be quite different.

There are signs, however, that these boundaries are being pushed against even in the Scandinavian countries. It started in Denmark in the early 2000s. Inspired by Mark Kramer and what has come to be called the Narrative Journalism movement in the United States, Danish reporters turned to literary reconstruction built on interviews when writing series for the daily press. Three textbooks, two Danish and one Norwegian, presented this kind of journalism to Scandinavian journalists.<sup>77</sup> But so far Norwegian reporters tend to stick to the old ideals, in my view, even if a few younger reporters experiment with reconstruction in a very modest way and within the frame of full openness with their readers about the use of such literary techniques.

Another indication of change is that the most recent Norwegian textbook on reportage, written by the scholar and literary reporter Steen Steens-

en, leaves an opening for use of reconstruction based on interviews. “But it obviously is connected with several challenges,” he writes, and particularly mentions source criticism, inner monologue, intimacy, and false impression of the reporter’s presence.<sup>78</sup>

I have been asked by American scholars if *Two Suspicious Characters* is as good as *In Cold Blood*. To me it is better. But I know this may be highly subjective since I can read it in Norwegian. It might also be a cultural phenomenon. To me the story is less clear cut and more uncertain because there is doubt about Gustav’s guilt. As the only survivor at the conclusion we are haunted by not knowing the answer. For that reason I find it more exciting and thrilling than *In Cold Blood*. But it might well be that many American readers would judge it differently.

My modest contribution in this essay is to introduce Gunnar Larsen to an international audience of scholars, and in particular to showcase his early and original “documentary novel.” I find that Larsen is largely forgotten today in Norway, while Capote is still of current interest. Norwegian journalism teachers and students know Capote, but few know Larsen.<sup>79</sup> *Two Suspicious Characters* was last published in 2000 and is long out of print. *In Cold Blood* was last published in Norwegian in 2006 and is still available. I find this unfair. I hope I have shown that *Two Suspicious Characters* is a better example of the nonfiction novel than *In Cold Blood*, and it was written thirty-three years earlier. That is why I would suggest that *Two Suspicious Characters* should be translated into other languages so it can be accessible to a growing family of scholars with an interest in this field. Only then can it obtain the prominent position it deserves in international discussions of literary journalism.

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## NOTES

1. This is my translation of the title of Larsen’s book *To mistenkelige personer*. Gunnar Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer* (Oslo: Den Norske Bokklubben, 1983).
2. Thore Roksvold, ed., *Avisjangerer over tid* (Fredrikstad: IJ-forlaget, 1997), 79.
3. Clarke, Gerald, *Capote: A Biography*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 357.
4. Ralph L. Voss, *Truman Capote and the Legacy of In Cold Blood* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011), 16.
5. Martin Eide, *Hva er journalistikk?* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 69.
6. Randi Bård Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2001), 10. All translations from this book are mine.

7. From the presentation of the book on the Internet: <http://www.gyldendal.no/layout/set/print/Skjoennlitteratur/Romaner-og.noveller/To-mistenkelige-personer>.
8. Roksvold, *Avisjangrer*, 80. My translation.
9. Roksvold, *Avisjangrer*, 80.
10. Weingarten, *The Gang*, 32.
11. Ellen Rees, "Border Crossings in Gunnar Larsens To mistenkelige personer," *Edda* Nr. 03 (2007), 263.
12. Rees, "Border Crossings," 263.
13. Rees, "Border Crossings," 263.
14. Geir Gulliksen, *Virkelighet og andre essays* (Oslo: Oktober, Oslo), 72. Ellen Rees's translation.
15. Sigurd Hoel, *Tanker om norsk diktning* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1955), 265.
16. Philip Houm, *Helter og hjertesaker* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1981), 159.
17. Hoel, *Tanker om norsk diktning*, 265.
18. Hoel, *Tanker om norsk diktning*, 268.
19. Per Petterson, *Månen over porten* (Oslo: Oktober, 2004), 74.
20. Jo Bech-Karlsen, *Åpen eller skjult. Råd og uråd i fortellende journalistikk* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007), 197–201.
21. Jo Bech-Karlsen, "Rapportbøker og dokumentarisk reportasje." In Egil Børre Johnsen og Trond Berg Eriksen (red.) *Norsk litteraturhistorie. Sakprosa fra 1750 til 1995*, vol. II (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998), 238–251.
22. Capote, Truman, *Med kaldt blod* (Oslo: Arneberg Forlag, 2006), 10, from the foreword by Rune Larssstuvold.
23. Capote, *Med kaldt blod*, from the cover text.
24. Poul Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten* (København: Gyldendal, 2006), 19–32.
25. Jo Bech-Karlsen. "Når reportere flytter trær," *Samtiden* No 4 (2010), 50–62.
26. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 24.
27. Sims, *True Stories*, 24.
28. *Tidens Tegn*, 18 November 1933.
29. My translation.
30. Steen Steensen. *Stedets sjanger. Om moderne reportasjelijournalistikk*. (Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget, 2009), 130.
31. Some useful history: The professional journal *Journalisten* was established in 1917. By the 1920s, there were a lot of local journalist associations, and in 1931 Norwegian journalists were organized nationally. During this time and through these processes journalism was debated heavily, and as news editor in a large newspaper, Larsen knew the content of these debates well. Rune Ottosen, *Fra fjærpenn til Internett. Journalister I organisasjon og samfunn* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1996), 45–109.
32. Jo Bech-Karlsen, "Rapportbøker og dokumentarisk reportasje." In Egil Børre Johnsen and Trond Berg Eriksen, ed., *Norsk litteraturhistorie: Sakprosa fra 1750 til 1995*, vol. II (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998), 238–251.
33. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 208.
34. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 208.

35. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 209.
36. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 209.
37. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 208.
38. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 215.
39. Marc Weingarten, *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight* (New York: Crown Publishers. New York, 2006), 33.
40. Weingarten, *The Gang*, 34.
41. Clarke, *Capote*, 358.
42. Clarke, *Capote*, 358–59.
43. *Tidens Tegn*, 18 November 1933
44. Reidar Anthonsen: chronicle in *Dagbladet*, 16 September 1983. My translation.
45. Theodor Kittelsen (1857–1914) was Norway's most celebrated painter and illustrator in national folklore, famous for his trolls and other mystical creatures of nature lurking in deep, dark forests.
46. Bech-Karlsen, *Åpen eller skjult*, 68. Translated by scholar Derek Matthews, BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo.
47. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 15. All translations from Larsen's book have been done by scholar Derek Matthews.
48. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 18.
49. Bech-Karlsen, *Åpen eller skjult*, 68.
50. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 222.
51. *Tidens Tegn*, 18 November 1933.
52. Weingarten, *The gang*, 32.
53. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 224.
54. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 224.
55. Voss, *Truman Capote*, 17.
56. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 22.
57. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 64. My translation.
58. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 56.
59. Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (London: Penguin Classics, 200), 182.
60. Scenes like this seem to build on police documents and Madsen's (Gustav's) responses recounted during the examination in court. Interviewing Madsen might also have been helpful.
61. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 60.
62. This scene is probably based on interviews with Dick and Perry.
63. Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 181.
64. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 11–12.
65. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 25–26.
66. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 223.
67. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 141–55.
68. Størmer, *Gunnar Larsen*, 131–33.
69. Larsen, *To mistenkelige personer*, 155
70. Weingarten, *The gang*, 33–34.

71. Weingarten, *The gang*, 33.

72. Weingarten, *The gang*, 30.

73. Weingarten, *The gang*, 31.

74. Weingarten, *The gang*, 31.

75. Bech-Karlsen, "Når reportere flytter træer," 50–62.

76. The most authoritative and influential reportage definition in Scandinavia, made by the respected Swedish scholar Gunnar Elveson, is quite strict: "A representation that reveals a contemporary actuality and is *based upon the observer's own direct experiences* registered within relatively short time *in the form of self-experience* and with the precise time and place stated." Gunnar Elveson. *Reportaget som genre*. (Uppsala: Avdelningen för litteratursociologi, Litteraturvetenskaplige institutionen, Universitetet i Uppsala, 1979).

77. Ole Sønnichsen and Mark Kramer. *Virkelighetens fortællere. Ny amerikansk journalistikk*. (Århus: Ajour 2002). Mikkel Hvid. *Fascinerende fortælling*. (Århus: CFJE, 2004). Linda Dalviken, *Fortællende journalistikk i Norden*. (Fredrikstad: IJ-forlaget, 2005). Even published in Danish.

78. Steen Steensen, *Stedets sjanger. Om moderne reportasjelijournalistikk* (Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget, 2009), 132–133.

79. An exception is Steen Steensen's textbook *Stedets sjanger: Om moderne reportasjelijournalistikk* from 2009, where he briefly mentions Larsen and *Two Suspicious Characters* in comparison with *In Cold Blood*. Beyond that Larsen is mainly of interest to scholars, not to practitioners.

