

Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

The Snowman
A Novel
by
Jo Nesbø

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2011

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Another serial murder mystery by a Scandinavian author, this time a Norwegian, and Detective Harry Hole takes us through a labyrinth of Norse names and Oslo places before this 454 page novel winds to a climactic end. Actually **I** counted about four climaxes before the final one. There's no *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* in this one, no journalist Mikael Blomkvist, and no Stieg Larsson stringing out the plot and fleshing out the characters, but there is a detective Harry Hole known for being the only Norwegian who worked on a serial murder case, and there is the most unlikely object of horror, the eponymous Snowman, whose appearance after a snowfall presages the downfall of another innocent victim. If you've read or seen any of Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* and enjoyed them, you will be delighted to find Jo Nesbø, unlike Larsson, is still alive and kicking out marvelous mystery novels, like *The Snowman*, the one Sara saw when she looked out the window of her bedroom.

[page 6] Sara pulled herself up onto her knees. Got up and looked into the garden. And there, there was the face.

She laughed out loud with relief. The face was white, with eyes and a mouth made with black pebbles, probably from the drive. And arms made from twigs off the apple trees.

"Heavens," she gasped. "It's only a snowman."

"Only a snowman" — those words will never be repeated again in the course of and the curses of this novel. Luckily no children will read this novel because the ubiquitous snowman who appears after the first snowfall would soon become only a distant memory as no kid would want to build one. Besides that, did you perhaps notice that the snowman in the passage above was looking towards the house? Snowmen, respectful snowmen, never do that, like people at the beach who always face the ocean, snowmen always face the street. Ten-year-old Jonas asked his mother why the snowman didn't face the street after insisting that he didn't make it.

[page 24, 25] The snow in the garden reflected enough light for him to make out the snowman down below. It looked alone. Someone should have given it a cap and scarf. And maybe a broomstick to hold. At that moment the moon slid from behind a cloud. The black row of teeth came into view. And the eyes. Jonas automatically sucked in his breath and recoiled two steps.



The pebble-eyes were gleaming. And they were not staring into the house. They were looking up. Up here. Jonas drew the curtains and crept back into bed.

Enough about the snowman, let's take a look at one of the candidates for the snowman maker as Hole prompts Arve Støp to explain how Norway views the USA and President Bush.

[page 15] "Why do you think Norwegians are so skeptical about George Bush, Arve Støp?"

"Because we're an overprotected nation which has never fought in any wars. We've been happy to let others do it for us: England, the Soviet Union and America. Yes, ever since the Napoleonic Wars we've hidden behind the backs of our elder brothers. Norway has based its security on others taking the responsibility when things get tough. That's been going on for so long that we've lost our sense of reality and we believe that the earth is basically populated by people who wish us the world's richest country — well. Norway, a gibbering, pea-brained blonde who gets lost in a back street in the Bronx and is now indignant that her bodyguard is so brutal with muggers!

Do girls make snowmen? This novel will tease you about this possibility before you reach the end of this book. One candidate is a detective, Katrine Bratt, *sans* tattoo, but with many of the other qualities of dragon-draped Lisbet Salander(1), including carefully assisting as Hole works. The names of many of the characters are insightful as they reach us in English: Harry Hole is an *asshole* — as are most detectives, Arve Støp can *stop* his presses, Magnus Skarre may be a *big scary*, Filip Becker a *trifle flip*, Katrine a *brat*, Gert "Iron" Rafto as stiff as a steel roof girder. And so on. Don't let the Norse names stop you from enjoying this novel, just have fun with them, try discovering hidden meanings, there are some.

Hole drives up to Hoff to where Birte Becker has disappeared and the pink scarf Jonah had given his mother was decorating the snowman looking at the house. There he meets the husband, Filip Becker.

**[page 40] Harry nodded slowly. "Would you mind if I had a look around the house?"
"Why's that?"**

There was a brusqueness to Filip Becker's question that made Harry think he was a man who was used to being in control. To being kept informed. And that argued against his wife having left without a word. Which, for that matter, Harry had already excluded in his mind. Well-adjusted, healthy mothers do not abandon ten-year-old sons in the middle of the night. And then there was all the rest. Usually they used minimal resources at such an early stage of a missing persons case, unless there were indications which suggested something criminal or dramatic. It was "all the rest" that had made him drive up to Hoff himself.

"Sometimes you don't know what you're looking for until you find it; Harry answered. "It's a methodology."

He caught Becker's eyes behind the glasses now. They were, unlike his son's, light blue and shone with an intense, clear gleam.

"By all means," Becker said. "Go ahead."

Harry Hole has made a methodology of the insight I had when I wrote my second [Matherne's Rule](#) some thirty years ago, "You never know until you find out." Importunate people who usually do not have a clue as to how the mind of an innovative thinker works expect one to explain how and why one is approaching a difficult task in a certain way, but often the only way one can discover the answer to some puzzle is go outside the nine dots of the un-creative person's mind. So the un-creative interrupts the creative to ask how and why something is being done, instead using their own God-given mind to help solve the problem themselves. As Mikael Blomkvist showed, detecting is not the exclusive domain of Detectives. But Hole is of another order of detective, a combination of the best detecting qualities of the genre from Sherlock to Colombo, and thus he punched in the head of the snowman in Jonah's yard and pulled out his mother's

cell phone. The snowman maker had left behind her scarf and her cell phone. But Hole knew finding Birte's Nokia was not a triumph, only a short scene in a puppet show where the snowman maker was pulling the strings. Apparently the snowman maker was also writing the script, as this cryptic message had appeared in Hole's pigeonhole.

If there were any doubts that the eponymous Snowman was playing with Hole, this letter seems to have removed them.

[page 72] "There's one more thing," Harry said, reaching out to switch on the overhead projector between the piles of paper on his desk. Magnus Skarre cursed and shielded his eyes as blurred writing suddenly appeared on his face. He moved, and Harry's voice came from behind the projector.

"This letter landed in my mailbox exactly two months ago. No address, postmarked Oslo. Produced on a standard inkjet printer."

Before Harry could ask, Katrine Bratt had pressed the light switch by the door, plunging the room into darkness. A square of light loomed up on the white wall. They read in silence.

*Soon the first snow will come.
And then he will appear again.
The snowman.*

*And when the snow has gone,
he will have taken someone else.*

*What you should ask yourself is this:
Who made the snowman?
Who makes snowmen?
Who gave birth to the Murri?*

For the snowman doesn't know."

How do we now know that the Snowman is after Harry Hole? Because the Murri was a serial killer that Harry tracked down.

[page 72] "The Murri was the nickname of a person who is now dead," Harry said from out of the darkness. "A murri is an Aborigine from Queensland in Australia. While this murri was alive he killed women all over Australia. No one knows for certain how many. His real name was Robin Toowoomba."

The fan whirred and buzzed.

"Serial killer," said Bjørn Holm. "The one you killed."

Harry nodded.

As Sherlock liked to say at this point in his detecting, "The game is afoot!" Later when Harry calls a clinic to ask about a disease the doctor specializes in, the woman who answers the phone has never heard of the disease. That makes Idar Vetlesen the prime suspect as the Snowman. His hobby? Curling. Played on ice, pushing an object which might resemble the head of a snowman around. By this time, several heads of snowmen have rolled, including one with a cell phone inside and another with the skull of a dead woman inside.

Harry gets another clue when the specialty *kono* paper on which the above letter was printed is traced to Rafto who stole items from victims whose deaths he investigated. One day he swapped a silver penholder he had pilfered for the rest of the *kono* paper that a store had in stock. Iron Rafto would have become a suspect if he had not been already found, stiff as a you know what.

Below Harry reveals his methodology of detective work in another application of "you never know until you find out":

[page 179] "There's a cellar, too," Katrine said, pointing to a trapdoor in the floor. "This is your area. What do we do now?"

"We search," Harry said.

"What for?"

"That's the last of our thoughts."

"Why?"

"Because it's easy to miss something important if you're searching for something else. Clear your mind. You'll know what you're searching for when you see it."

Harry is a vast Hole of information pieces which he delights in sharing, such as when he tells Katrine that boxers have been monitored during a match and they have found that they are often knocked unconscious for a short period of time and their body remains standing as if it knew what to do while waiting for consciousness to return. My favorite piece was about the origin of the word "deadline" — as deadlines are something any writer is familiar with — the essence of motivation. Turns out it is a metaphor which had its origin in reality during a deadly war, one he calls a "Civil War".

[page 193] Harry had read the word deadline originated from the battlefields of the American Civil War when, for lack of anything material to lock prisoners behind, they were gathered together and a line was drawn around them in the dirt. Which became known as the dead line, and anyone who strayed beyond it was shot. And that was precisely what they were, the news warriors down there in the foyer: prisoners of war restrained by a deadline.

Humorous, also, was Harry, but often his humorous commands were so funny that he had to repeat the command directly to get action. "We haven't got much to work on. We can sit here and drink coffee and scratch our stupid heads. Or we can go home and return tomorrow with the same stupid, but not quite so exhausted, heads tomorrow." When his team just stared at Harry, he had to tell them, "I'm not joking. Get the hell home." (Page 195)

Harry was also industrious and daring. When one of the Snowman suspects apparently commits suicide, Harry injects himself with a saline solution to find out how long it took the suicide to do it and found that it took longer to inject it than the deadly solution took to incapacitate the victim. Therefore, no suicide. Don't recall Colombo ever using himself as a laboratory animal for an experiment. Sherlock with his cocaine, perhaps.

Clearly printing presses got their name from the ink they press into paper, but Arve Støp has another idea in mind, a characteristic of modern day presses, the ones where the reporter never sees his words pressed into paper, but where his metier is extracting useful data from oft times reluctant informers. Harry asks Arve a question and gets no answer.

[page 227] "I can easily register that you refused to answer the questions, Støp." Støp raised his glass in toast. "A familiar countermove, Hole. One which we press people use every single day. Hence the name. Press. People."

A migration of metaphor: referring to machines which press words into paper is morphed into people pressing other people for the words to be printed on paper. And now, the printing is no longer in paper form so much as in pixel form, and when on paper, sprayed as toner or ink instead of pressed into the paper. So Arve Støp may have it right for this new millennium, the only printing press left is the pressing for information.

As the plot turns into the home stretch, Harry Hole has knocked down several strawmen, er, snowmen, potential Snowman candidates, when he recalls what the guy in a blue jumpsuit who had arrived in the

first of the book to tear away his walls told him. He had cut himself during work on them and had to turn one board around because blood can't be removed from an untreated piece of wood and the only alternate would have been to paint the entire wall red. Once more the game was afoot and a visit to a certain barn reveals an important clue. "Blood? She was trying to hide blood with blood?" (Page 370) Layer by layer the intricate plot begins to unravel itself before our eyes and reveal the true Snowman as Harry rushes to save his best girl's life before she melts the last snowman. No one wants to Be Negative as the rush to complete this novel ensues. Harry admits, when asked, "What's going on?" that there are two answers to that question, "One is that we're closing in on the Snowman." and Two, "I don't know." And you, Dear Reader, will likely not know until the Snowman begins the tale of his relationship with a snowman which began him on this lifelong path of vengeance.

This novel is a book gripper, so if you're reading on a Kindle, be careful not to break the delicate screen. Don't start it unless you have a day or two ahead with nothing planned. I would not want an air traffic controller to start this book one night before going to work on the graveyard shift and not be able to think of anything but whether the latest strawman is the Snowman. Or whether Harry is going down the hole as a scapegoat on this escapade. Or whether Rakel, his main squeeze, will survive her turn on the E-Ticket Snowman Ride. It's all in here. Don't do as I did with Stieg Larsson's book and wait for the movie. This book is by far more interesting and more fun than any movie. And its movie, when it inevitably arrives, will be more interesting if you have first suffered through the enjoyment of the book.

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"The Snowman" (2017) Wanted to see him before he melted. Got there too late, he arrived melted: Lousy screen play, No gaunt Harry Hole, No scary snowmen, and very little resemblance to Jo Nesbo's great novel.

[Return to Top of Book Review.](#)

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----- Footnotes -----

Footnote 1.

1. Eponymous heroine of *The Girl* series: *With the Dragon Tattoo*, *Who Played with Fire*, [Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest](#). I only watched the movies in Swedish of the first two novels, but read the third one before watching its movie. If you prefer a watered-down Hollywood version, the Millennium Trilogy will be coming to a theater near you soon in English.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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