

Book Review. Fall of man in Wilmslow--The Death and life of Alan Turing.

by David Lagercrantz

Many creative writers and artists have been inspired by the life of Alan Turing. This has resulted in a number of plays, films, novels etc. of varying quality especially since the centenary year of 2012.

Perhaps the best is the play/TV drama “Breaking the code” by Hugh Whitemore (1985) and starring Derek Jacobi as Turing. This is worth mentioning here as it is available for all to see on youtube.

However, one of the best is this novel under review. It is a work of fiction although some of the characters other than Turing are real-life people. The main character is a fictitious policeman Detective Constable Leonard Corell, He works in Wilmslow Cheshire. He is called to a house where Alan Turing has just committed suicide. It soon became apparent to Corell that the authorities were taking a lot of interest in this case. Also, he had found a medal in the house, (Turing’s OBE) and Corell became very interested in the victim. He found out that he had been prosecuted for committing homosexual acts and that he had done some important war work. A turning point of the novel is the inquest. The coroner makes some rather fatuous comments about Turing’s death talking about “that type of man”. Corell then implies that the coroner does not know what he is talking about and thus getting into trouble with his superiors. After the inquest, Corell is approached by a stranger who says he is a logician, an ex-colleague of Turing’s at Cambridge. The logician tells Corell about Turing’s mathematics and there is a chapter which mentions the work of Gödel, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Hilbert’s *Entscheidung*’s problem and Turing’s paper on *Computable numbers*. Also, his work on Turing machines. We are a long way from your standard police novel!

The novel takes place in the early 1950s. Two aspects of life then were the intolerant attitude to homosexuality and cold war nervousness, both of which play a role in this novel. Being in the police force, Corel found that most of his fellow officers were very

insulting about homosexuality. At first Corell himself felt the usual prejudice, especially as his aunt was a lesbian, but as the novel progressed he became more tolerant. As for the cold war, this was the time of Burgess and Maclane and there was a feeling that Turing's homosexuality might have been a security risk, as he had done some secret work during the war. After his talk with the logician Corell guessed that Turing might have built a machine to decipher the German codes and mentions this to a member of the security forces; not a good idea!

A few words about the author. He is from Sweden and this book has been translated from Swedish. This is quite remarkable because there is a very convincing picture of 1950s Britain. Lagercrantz is most famous for continuing Steig Larssen's Millennium series featuring the computer hacker Lisbeth Salander. Larssen wrote three books in this series which were phenomenal bestsellers. He then died at the age of 50. The publishers wanted the series continued and hired Lagercrantz to write a fourth novel in the series. He wrote "The girl in the spider's web", this book actually has some maths, dealing with elliptic curve cryptography.

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