

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



David Fincher's film of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* should please fans of Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy. Fincher and his screenwriter, Steven Zaillian, remain faithful to the complicated plot of the trilogy's first book, and they reproduce most of its many characters. In truth they improve vastly on their source material.

Larsson's story chronicles the alliance of a disgraced Stockholm editor named Mikael Blomkvist and an antisocial young hacker named Lisbeth Salander, who set out to solve the decades-old disappearance of a young heiress and to track down a misogynistic serial killer. The book is ingeniously plotted, but it has the chilly purposefulness of a certain brand of modern detective fiction, and it lingers distastefully on the particulars of murder and rape. (The second and third installments provide the narrative cleverness and the escalating suspense without the clinical violence.)

The glum 2009 Swedish movie version doesn't correct the book's excesses, and its acting is mediocre. But Fincher's high-gloss remake, beautifully designed by Donald Graham Burt and lit by Jeff Cronenweth, manages to be breathlessly exciting without sacrificing empathy. The rape scene is horrifying, but that's because Fincher's focus

is on the emotions of the victim, not on the gruesome details.

Unexpectedly, the filmmakers use romantic-comedy conventions to set up the movie. Blomkvist (Daniel Craig) is hired by Henrik Vanger (Christopher Plummer) to find out what happened to Vanger's niece, and he discovers that the trail leads to a sociopathic killer. Having learned that Lisbeth (Rooney Mara in a marvelously intuitive performance) hacked into his own files during a libel suit he lost, Blomkvist hires her to apply her wizardly skills to the investigation—an ironic twist that she hardly anticipates.

Lisbeth is reclusive and suspicious, especially of men: when Blomkvist shows up at her apartment one morning, she threatens him with a taser. He disarms her by humanizing the encounter—he brings bagels—and his sense of humor cuts through her armored stance. When he explains that he wants her to help him catch a killer of women, he garners her interest and presents himself as strikingly unlike most men of her acquaintance.

The contrast between Mikael's journalistic instincts and Lisbeth's computer genius creates something like the match of opposites on which classic romantic comedies are premised. As her problem-solving builds on his gift for reading personalities—precisely the area she can't navigate—she learns to appreciate a world she's always felt distant from and terrified by. Their romance, enhanced by the remote island setting where Blomkvist visits Vanger and his creepy family, is inevitable.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo has a gold-standard cast, led by Craig, whose acting seems to get better every year, and the uncanny Mara. (This is Mara's first major role; she played the girlfriend that Mark Zuckerberg breaks up with in the opening scene of Fincher's previous film, *The Social Network*.) In addition to Plummer, the film also features Robin Wright, Stellan Skarsgård, Geraldine James, Goran Visnjic and, in an outstanding cameo, Joely Richardson. Everyone does admirable work. It seems, on the evidence of his last several movies, that Fincher brings out the finest in his collaborators.