

## Author Functions in Lars Kepler's *The Hypnotist*: An Analysis

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### Introduction

When the best-selling Swedish crime thriller *The Hypnotist* was published in 2009, readers who became enamoured by the book were determined to find its pseudonymous author, Lars Kepler. Kepler had never published before and seemed to value his privacy, having retreated from the spotlight after *The Hypnotist*'s publication. Readers' determination to reveal Kepler's identity turned into a nationwide "manhunt" (Skurnick, 2011, para. 1) that resulted in a surprising discovery. Lars Kepler was not one person at all, but two—the husband-and-wife writing team Alexander Ahndoril and Alexandra Coelho Ahndoril. If they had been asked Foucault's (2002) question, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (p. 291), readers of *The Hypnotist* who participated in the search for Lars Kepler would certainly have responded that it matters very much who is speaking. The ability to discern the precise identity of the creator of this text was clearly important to the readers because many of them had questions for Kepler about his writing process, his technique, his characters—questions that they believed only Kepler was capable of answering.

That the identity of the author was such a pressing concern to the readers of *The Hypnotist* demonstrates a persistent phenomenological paradigm: the idea that authors alone hold privileged knowledge about the text they have created, and that, in writing a text to be read to others, they are encoding a message to be sent to an imagined reader. However, Barthes (2002) challenges this paradigm, and asks us to question traditional assumptions about communication transmission in books. If textual communication is an interaction involving one receiver, one channel, and one sender, who is the sender in *The Hypnotist*? Lars Kepler? Or the Ahndorils? Or perhaps the hero of *The Hypnotist*, detective Joonas Linna? Is it the crime thriller genre itself that speaks to an audience via the author? Or perhaps pre-existing themes and wisdom that exist in themselves and are communicated via the text? For *The Hypnotist*, Lars Kepler becomes the proverbial "I"; he is a performance, a space to be occupied. There are many dynamics at play that influence Kepler's author function; for example, the fact that the writers of the text are two people rather than one, and that both consider Kepler to be an entity separate from themselves, and the fact that the text was originally written in Swedish and was later translated into dozens of other languages. The Lars Kepler phenomenon demonstrates that textual communication in books is much more complex than most people think, and that what we commonly conceive of as the "author" of a text is more of a subjective, linguistic position to be held by the identity who is in the act of writing rather than by a continuously existing individual. Ultimately, Lars Kepler demonstrates that "the author" is an elusive identity that one can only occupy while in the act of writing; that the reader constructs the text anew with each reading; and that each new construction is heavily influenced by a myriad of tiny perceptions and assumptions, including knowledge (or presumed knowledge) about the author's identity.

## Discussion

That Lars Kepler, and not Alexander Ahndoril or Alexandra Coelho Ahndoril, is the true author of this text is undisputed even by the Ahndorils themselves. In interviews, the husband-wife duo invariably draw a firm distinction between the Ahndorils as writers and Lars Kepler as a writer: they explain that when they had attempted to write as a team in the past, they were hopelessly at odds with one another due to their disparate literary styles. But when they came together as Lars Kepler, says Alexander, “the pieces finally fit together” (Bookwitch, 2011). Alexandra adds that they became an effective writing team only “when we [were] not Alexandra or Alexander, but Lars Kepler” (Bookwitch, 2011). Imagining Lars Kepler as a person separate from themselves had even altered the couple’s behaviour when occupying the writer role: the Ahndorils, who are normally coffee-drinkers, drink only tea when writing as Kepler because “we had the idea that we had to do what Lars Kepler would do” (Bookwitch, 2011). Alexandra adds, “As soon as we had decided that we had to be someone else, the language and the style followed. Kepler was writing” (Bookwitch, 2011). Throughout the writing process, Lars Kepler became an entity of his own, entirely separate both from the Ahndorils and from the text itself.

The author’s identity—or perceived identity—has a strong influence on the reader’s interpretation of a text. As feminist print culture scholar Claire Kahane (2010) explains, “Only readers [give] meaning to what they read, and readers [exist] in their particularity constructing the meaning of a text according to the demands of their individual psychologies” (p. 122). Knowledge or presumed knowledge about the author’s identity inevitably affects interpretations of the text. Readers who devoured *The Hypnotist* before the Ahndorils were exposed as the creators of Lars Kepler may have interpreted the text quite differently from those who read the text with the knowledge that the writers were a married couple. The knowledge that Kepler is two people necessarily changes the way readers interact with a text; they may be distracted, for instance, about which author was responsible for which parts of the text. Readers may also interpret particular sections in different ways depending on whether the writer is presumed male or female, or for which works of fiction the author is already known (the Ahndorils had each published separate popular literary fiction prior to writing *The Hypnotist*).

The author function is influenced by other factors as well. For example, although the original text was published in Swedish, it has since been translated into dozens of languages. When the novel was first picked up by British publisher house Blue Door Press, in addition to translation to English it was also subjected to “some restructuring, additions, more explanation for a foreign audience etc.,” changes which the publisher boasts “has resulted...in an altogether better, more roundly satisfying book than the Swedish original” (Forshaw, 2012, p. 57). The differences in meaning are minute but significant: as D. F. Mackenzie (2002) writes, even small variations in typography, spelling, and word choice can drastically influence the interpretation of a text. He writes that “the most obvious [concern] of textual criticism” is “getting the right words in the right order” (p. 41). He asserts that “the transmission of texts” is “the creation of the new versions which form, in turn, the new books, the products of pater printers, and the stuff of subsequent bibliographical control” (p. 41). Mackenzie would say that the small variations in meaning and typography that inevitably result from any translation render the English version of *The Hypnotist* an entirely different book from its Swedish counterpart. The small changes rendered by Blue Door’s translators and editors produced a work entirely separate from the

original Swedish version, and result in an entirely different construction process by the reader, resulting in the discovery of wildly disparate author functions depending on which version of the novel one happens to read. These small changes inevitably influence the reader's construction of the text and the author by extension, as textual and authorial construction go hand in hand.

## Conclusion

*The Hypnotist* is just one example of Foucault's and Barthes's notion of the author function in action. Close analysis of the author function of this text demonstrates that an author is an author only when in the act of writing. After the Ahndorils had completed the writing of the book, they ceased to be Lars Kepler and had become themselves again. Although pseudonymous works like *The Hypnotist* are particularly suited to demonstrating the idea that authors are more abstract concepts than they are individual people, this idea is applicable to all works of fiction. The act of writing necessarily involves occupying a particular position—the position of the author. In this sense, Sweden's "manhunt" for Lars Kepler and for answers about *The Hypnotist* had always been doomed to failure: the Ahndorils may have written the text, but they no longer filled the author function, and Lars Kepler had evaporated into non-existence the moment they lifted the pen from the page.

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