

Obsession, Reignited by CHARLES McGRATH

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IN anticipation of the movie version of [Stieg Larsson](#)'s "Girl With the Dragon Tattoo," which stars Daniel Craig and [Rooney Mara](#) and opens

Dec. 21, Knopf has printed two different tie-in editions of the original novel, more than a million copies all told.



Over supper in New York recently [David Fincher](#), the director of the film, said that he'd be happy if it sent new readers back to the book, but that he was more concerned about the people — in America, eight and a half million so far — who have already read the novel. While remaining generally faithful, his movie ventures to alter what is for many a text practically as sacred as the [Harry Potter](#) novels. Among other things, it changes the book's ending, renders one of the two chief villains more creepy and seductive, and makes Mikael Blomkvist, a journalist who is one of the story's two main characters, less of a male bimbo.

That the movie also enlarges and deepens the role of the book's other main character, Lisbeth Salander — an androgynous, punkish computer hacker with a photographic memory and a shortage of social skills — will probably come as welcome news to most fans of the Millennium trilogy, of which "Dragon Tattoo" is the first volume. But Mr. Fincher said that he still fretted over how viewers will react to his "reimaginings, compressions and reductions."

"My balsamic reductions," he amended, laughing.

How protective Larsson fans felt about the books became apparent to him only while he was trying to cast the part of Salander, the key figure in the Millennium trilogy and the one on whom the whole franchise depends. Among the actresses considered, or endlessly blogged about, for the part were Natalie Portman, Scarlett Johansson, Carey Mulligan and Noomi Rapace, who played Salander very effectively in a 2009 Swedish adaptation of the trilogy.

"She's one of those characters, like Jesus Christ, Dracula and Batman, that everyone has his own ideas about who should play them," Mr. Fincher said, treating himself to a single martini and a meal that consisted mostly of salad. "All of a sudden I'm getting phone calls from people I respect saying, 'You can't possibly cast X, Y or Z.'"

"I wanted to say, 'Are you really calling me to influence the casting of a movie?' I was naïve about it, to be honest. It wasn't like there were 5,000 girls in black leggings and goth skull

makeup lining up outside on the street. But a lot of the press and the bloggers made it seem like the search for the next Scarlett O'Hara."

In the end Mr. Fincher picked 26-year-old Rooney Mara. As her name suggests, Ms. Mara is a descendant of two great N.F.L. dynasties, the families that own the Steelers and the Giants, but except to fans of the ["Nightmare on Elm Street"](#) franchise (she was Nancy in the 2010 remake) and to viewers who paid attention at the very beginning of Mr. Fincher's "Social Network," in which she appeared briefly but memorably as Mark Zuckerberg's girlfriend, she is an unknown to most moviegoers. To Mr. Fincher that was part of her appeal.

The Salander character, he explained, never answers questions about herself, and at the beginning no one knows anything about her. "Lisbeth is not a Hot Topic goth," he said. "She's not Joan Jett. She's somebody with a safety pin in her cheek. It's original punk. She has created a way to be seen as trash. Part of that is a stay-away thing, and part of it is a self-conscious agreement with what everyone thinks of her. She thinks, 'I'll live with that if it means no one ever takes advantage of me.'"

So what he kept holding out for, Mr. Fincher went on, was someone who didn't come trailing a lot of movie history and who could convey a sense of Lisbeth as a damaged child. He said, "I kept feeling that I was looking for someone who was in some ways still 13 years old, holding a jar of kerosene in one hand and a lighter in the other."

Ms. Mara said: "I knew David was fighting for me. The character is such an enigma, he felt that someone with a big name couldn't have played her." She added, recalling what it was like to work with Mr. Fincher: "He's in control of every single thing you see in the movie, and yet somehow I never felt controlled. I can't imagine anyone else like him."

Mr. Fincher these days is best known for his last two movies, ["The Social Network"](#) and ["The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,"](#) which between them won six Oscars (though not for best director). But he made his reputation with films like "Seven" and "Fight Club": smart, noirish, visually arresting thrillers set in a world of glamorous grunge, so murky that the sets seem to be illuminated by candles and so rain-drenched ("Seven" especially) that they appear to have been filmed during a deluge.

So in person you half-expect Mr. Fincher, 49, to be some sort of nocturnal, amphibious creature, the kind of man who wears sunglasses indoors and mumbles a lot. In fact he is tall and professorial looking. He's also so affable, funny and enthusiastic about movies that he sometimes fails to finish a sentence before shooting off in another direction, and politely, relentlessly contrarian. He's like a very cool film studies prof who gently considers your most cherished notions about moviemaking and explains that actually the opposite is true.

Scott Rudin, the producer of “Dragon Tattoo,” said he hired Mr. Fincher because he “understands outsiders, alienation, isolation, marginalization — those are his themes.” He added, “Those are subjects he owns, and there’s no better living filmmaker.”

The story’s thriller element, he said — a series of related murders — seemed to him much less interesting than the relationship between Blomkvist and Salander. Mr. Fincher had already made two movies about serial killers, “Seven” and “Zodiac,” and that for him was reason enough not to make the movie, and after reading the book he had even more reservations. “I was appalled, for all the right reasons,” he said, referring to the story’s darkness and especially to a brutal scene of anal rape that he wasn’t sure was filmable in today’s climate.

What tipped the balance was the opportunity to overturn the conventional Hollywood wisdom that says franchise movies, like the Harry Potter films and the James Bond series, have to be rated PG-13. Mr. Rudin; Amy Pascal, the co-chairwoman of Sony Pictures; and Michael Lynton, Sony’s chairman and chief executive, all urged him to “go deep,” Mr. Fincher said — to make an unflinching, R-rated movie. “I don’t need another serial-killer movie,” he said, “but I liked the chance to make a franchise movie for adults.”

(He is open to making the next two installments, he added, but that discussion hasn’t happened yet. The two remaining novels, “The Girl Who Played With Fire” and “The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest,” will be shot starting in the next year or year and a half, and if a messy dispute over the estate of [Larsson](#), who died in 2004, can ever be resolved, there is even the possibility of a fourth novel and film.)

Mr. Fincher’s relationship with Hollywood is a curious one. He is famously stubborn and hates movie executives who are governed by what he calls the “checklist.” “Part of my testiness is that I feel I make 50 compromises a day,” he said. “When people come to me and say, ‘Why can’t you compromise?’ I’m like: ‘What are you talking about? The fact that we’re having this conversation means that we’ve compromised.’ ”

He is also famous for shooting as many as 90 takes of a single scene, and then for reshooting the scenes sometimes. And by Hollywood standards his movies are long, seldom coming in at less than two hours. Every now and then, he said, he sees one of his films on HBO and thinks with chagrin that he could have cut it by maybe a minute and a half — not exactly the kind of trim that gladdens an executive’s heart.

Mr. Fincher behaves, in short, like an indie filmmaker, turning out movies that are original and idiosyncratic, and yet he works for studios and with big budgets. He said he believes in what he calls “the herd” — the wisdom of the audience — but he also likes to say that if 11 people can agree about something, then it’s probably not worth doing. Mr. Rudin said: “I’ve

made two movies with David, and he's been a fantastic collaborator. But even if he weren't, who cares when the work is that good? I couldn't care less if he swung from the treetops."

Mr. Fincher's singleness of purpose probably comes from the fact that he has been making movies since he was 8 and never wanted to do anything else. He grew up in Marin County, Calif., where his father worked for Life magazine. George Lucas lived two doors down, and the filmmaker John Korty (["The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman"](#)), for whom Mr. Fincher went to work right after high school, was a short bus ride away.

"All of my friends wanted to be directors," he said. "I'm not talking about just two or three of my closest confidants. Everyone did."

What animated them all were the great movies of the '70s: "Jaws," "All the President's Men," "All That Jazz," "Star Wars," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and, above all, "American Graffiti," which was set in their world. Even now Mr. Fincher gets excited talking about those movies. "When that kid who was in 'American Graffiti' became the star of 'Happy Days,' it was as if someone had pilfered one of our favorite things," he said.

After being a cameraman for Mr. Korty, Mr. Fincher did special effects for George Lucas — a period he likes to call his film school — and then began making music videos (for Madonna, among others) and commercials. One of his most famous, for the American Cancer Society, showed a fetus calmly smoking a cigarette in the womb. He made his first feature, ["Alien3,"](#) when he was just 25 and got into a famous wrangle with the studio over the final cut. "In those days I was unwilling to own my own mistakes," he said.

A common thread in all Mr. Fincher's movies, "Benjamin Button" excepted, is people who are obsessed with something — solving a crime, tricking an uptight older brother into loosening up, creating a culture of bare-knuckled fighting, starting a social media Web site — and Mr. Fincher agreed that the description probably applies to himself as well. He said that he preferred to make a distinction between obsession and professionalism, but added, "My idea of professionalism is probably a lot of people's idea of obsessive."

Yet he also resisted the notion that he is a perfectionist. "Movies are living things," he said. "They evolve. They're never finished, just abandoned."