Norway and Nesbø

Those fortunate enough to have encountered the Scandinavian crime writer Jo Nesbø on his visits to Albion have observed his understated, rather British humour and laser-like awareness of everything happening around him – the defining traits, in fact, of his tenacious policeman DI Harry Hole (pronounced ‘Hurler’). Novels such as *The Devil’s Star* (2005 [2003]), *The Redbreast* (2006 [2000]) and (notably) his imposing 2007 novel *The Snowman* (2010) have propelled Nesbø to stratospheric heights – and have made him the most likely inheritor of the Larsson crown in Nordic crime fiction – but apart from the sheer narrative nous, his work also provides a coolly objective guide to fluctuations in Norwegian society. There is also a universal feeling that his work is more strikingly individual than that of most of his Scandinavian colleagues. But that’s perhaps inevitable, given the author’s very varied background. At 17, he made his debut in the premier league football team Molde, and dreamt of a glorious future at Tottenham. But when he tore ligaments in both knees, Nesbø realised that his future lay elsewhere. He decided to try music, and succeeded – massively: his band’s second album was Norway’s best-selling album for several years. Finally, though, on a thirty-hour flight to Sydney, he began to write about detective Harry Hole. Aware that this might be seen as ‘another crap book by a pop star’, he sent it to a publisher pseudonymously. The novel, *The Bat Man* (1997) was, in fact, published under Nesbø’s real name and won a variety of prestigious prizes – and is, finally, to appear in Great Britain (2012). *The Devil’s Star* built on this success, and became the novel that introduced Harry to English-speaking readers. Those readers are now keen for more outings by a detective the pronunciation of whose name they are slowly catching up with.
The Devil’s Star, Nesbø’s first book to be published in Britain, was a marker that a unique talent had arrived. A heat wave is making Oslo swelter, and Vibeke Knutsen (one half of an uneasily co-existing couple) makes a grisly discovery among her boiled potatoes: small black lumps in the water, later identified as congealed blood from a body in the attic flat above. Harry Hole, ‘the best detective on the sixth floor’, would customarily be police chief Møller’s first choice for the case. But Hole is also a lone wolf, a chronic alcoholic separated from his wife and child (admittedly, over-familiar territory for literary coppers) and haunted by the recent murder of a close colleague. So Hole finds himself working alongside Tom Waaler, Møller’s other ‘best detective’, but one who, Hole increasingly believes, may have something to do with the murder of his friend and colleague. Nesbø confronts and explodes the clichés here, quickly establishing his protagonist as one of the most credible police officers of recent times. The body in the attic flat is that of a young woman, naked and with a finger severed from her left hand. A tiny pentagram shaped red diamond is discovered, hidden behind an eyelid. Nesbø manages to keep a complex, baroque plot continually on the boil, the tension between the confident Waaler and the slowly healing Hole (as he scrabbles after salvation) strikingly well conveyed. The dialogue has flinty verisimilitude, and Nesbø also takes the time to fully establish all of his characters, even minor ones. What emerges in Don Bartlett’s highly adroit translation is not only an atmospheric portrait of a major city caught in a heat wave, but a sharp picture of a tense Nordic society in flux, crammed with relevant detail as you might expect from an ex-freelance journalist, particularly where the role of the media is described.

The Redeemer (2009 [2005]) is a key Jo Nesbø novel. A cold Christmas in Oslo. A group of shoppers have gathered to listen to a Salvation Army band street concert. But then an explosion cuts through the music and one of the uniformed men drops to the ground dead, shot at point blank range. This murder is new territory for canny Norwegian policeman Harry Hole; he and his colleagues have nothing to work with: no weapon, no suspect and no motive. But it becomes apparent that the victim was, in fact, the wrong man – and dogged detective work soon has the team in a state of grim anticipation with the suspected killer in their sights. They have details of his credit cards, his passport – even an inkling as to who is paying him to commit his murderous work. But breathing down the neck of the assassin has a lethal corollary effect that Harry Hole hasn’t foreseen – the contract hit man is driven to desperation, and becomes even more dangerous. He has nowhere to stay in a freezing Oslo, and only six bullets left. The clock is ticking...