

# MYSTERY READERS JOURNAL

The Journal of Mystery Readers International®

Volume 42, Number 2 • Spring 2026

## Mysteries Set in France



# MYSTERY READERS JOURNAL

The Journal of Mystery Readers International®

## Mysteries Set in France

Vol. 42, No. 2 • Summer 2026

|                                                                                                                |    |                                                                                                                         |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ARTICLES                                                                                                       | 2  | Liberty and Death in the French Maritime Alps<br>by <i>Larry Mild</i>                                                   | 29 |
| Joseph Rouletabille: Reporter-Detective by<br><i>Ashley Bowden</i>                                             | 2  | My France by <i>Sharan Newman</i>                                                                                       | 31 |
| AUTHOR! AUTHOR!                                                                                                | 4  | The Reality Behind the Fantasy of 'French<br>Country Murders' by <i>Katie Penryn</i>                                    | 33 |
| Vive la différence! by <i>Cathy Ace</i>                                                                        | 4  | Corsica: Where Landscape Creates Secrets by<br><i>Neil S. Plakcy</i>                                                    | 35 |
| From Marseille to Edisto Island by <i>Paul A.<br/>Barra</i>                                                    | 5  | Mysterious (and Delicious) Paris by <i>Danielle<br/>Postel-Vinay</i>                                                    | 36 |
| We'll Always Have Paris by <i>Janet Dawson</i>                                                                 | 7  | Paris Didn't Let Me Leave, So I Wrote a Murder<br>Instead by <i>Ileana Muñoz Renfro</i>                                 | 37 |
| From Somewhere in France by <i>Michele Drier</i>                                                               | 7  | Why Not France? by <i>Susan C. Shea</i>                                                                                 | 39 |
| A Historian and Novelist in France by <i>Ann<br/>Elwood</i>                                                    | 9  | Mysterious Paris by <i>Rob Swigart</i>                                                                                  | 41 |
| Delicious Chapters by <i>Yves Fey</i>                                                                          | 10 | So Softly Threads the Night by <i>Bob Van<br/>Laerhoven</i>                                                             | 42 |
| What Foolish Dreams May Come by <i>Alan<br/>Gordon</i>                                                         | 12 | The Mystery of Paris by <i>Charles Todd</i>                                                                             | 44 |
| The Eat, Drink, and Be Merry Research Tour:<br>Setting a Book in France by <i>Wendy Hornsby</i>                | 14 | I Was a Free Man in Paris by <i>C.J. Verburg</i>                                                                        | 45 |
| It's Never Too Late to Be a Midlife Badass by<br><i>Lauren Johnson</i>                                         | 16 | We'll Always Have Paris by <i>Nancy Warren</i>                                                                          | 47 |
| I'd Kill to Live in Paris by <i>Eva Jurczyk</i>                                                                | 17 | Dreaming of Paris by <i>Victoria Zackheim</i>                                                                           | 48 |
| The Mystery of the Misplaced Mona Lisa by<br><i>Ron Katz</i>                                                   | 18 | Saint-Paul-de-Vence: Toujours Cool, Just Add<br>Murder by <i>Elizabeth Zelvin</i>                                       | 50 |
| Victor & Me in Paris by <i>Janice MacDonald</i>                                                                | 20 | On Monaco and Mystery by <i>Ally Zetterberg</i>                                                                         | 51 |
| It's All About the Setting by <i>Adrian Magson</i>                                                             | 21 | COLUMNS                                                                                                                 | 53 |
| Magdalene Duchateau: A Frenchwoman<br>Abroad in the English Mystery by <i>G.M.<br/>Malliet</i>                 | 22 | Mystery in Retrospect: Reviews                                                                                          | 53 |
| Murder at Villa Légère: A Pho of Murder,<br>Diamonds, and a Secret Worth Killing For by<br><i>C. L. Malone</i> | 24 | Children's Hour: Mysteries Set in France by <i>Gay<br/>Tolft Kinman</i>                                                 | 79 |
| Why France? by <i>Peter May</i>                                                                                | 25 | Meurtres en ... France by <i>Kate Derie</i>                                                                             | 83 |
| France Is a Drug—The Bennett Sisters Can't Be<br>Wrong by <i>Lise McClendon</i>                                | 27 | Spiral (Engrenages): France's Compulsive<br>Masterpiece of Crime, Corruption, and<br>Character by <i>Pattie Tierney</i> | 85 |
|                                                                                                                |    | Jean Gabin—the Greatest Maigret by <i>Jim<br/>Doherty</i>                                                               | 87 |
|                                                                                                                |    | True Crime France by <i>Cathy Pickens</i>                                                                               | 90 |
|                                                                                                                |    | From the Editor's Desk by <i>Janet Rudolph</i>                                                                          | 95 |

## ARTICLES

### Joseph Rouletabille: Reporter-Detective *by Ashley Bowden*

In 1907 the novel **The Mystery of the Yellow Room** introduced the French reading public to the young reporter-detective, Joseph Rouletabille. The story initially appeared as a serial in a weekly paper but was published the following year in book form in France, and as an English translation in both the UK and the US. The author, Gaston Leroux (1868–1927), is well-known to aficionados of early crime fiction although his name may not be familiar to the world at large. However, his most famous work, a novel of gothic horror rather than a detective story, has gained international acclaim, particularly in its film and stage versions. Gaston Leroux was the author of **The Phantom of the Opera**.

Rouletabille is a young man with a precocious talent. When he starts his investigation into the crime which has taken place in the Yellow Room of the Château du Glandier, just outside Paris, he is only eighteen years old and already an investigative journalist with “a reputation as an unraveller of intricate and obscure affairs.” His work often takes him to the courts and the offices of examining magistrates and on these fact-finding missions he makes the acquaintance of a lawyer, Sainclair, who becomes a close friend and is the first-person narrator of the story. There are echoes here of the relationship between Watson and Holmes with the dependable professional man chronicling the adventures of the brilliant, flamboyant detective.

The novel is set in 1892 and so tells of events that took place fifteen years earlier. Before his

account gets underway Sainclair, with perhaps understandable hyperbole, states: “It was this case which was to rank him as the leading newspaper reporter, and to obtain for him the reputation of being the greatest detective in the world.” The story is an early example of a locked room mystery: a woman is attacked in her bedroom and, upon hearing revolver shots and the sound of a struggle, two men rush to her assistance only to find the door locked on the inside, all the windows shut and no trace of the assailant. Rouletabille relishes the prospect of tackling an “impossible” crime and he and Sainclair hasten to the scene of the attempted murder.

The detective who grapples with a locked room mystery needs ingenuity in abundance: firstly to determine exactly how the crime was committed and then to establish the identity of the criminal. This tale is no exception. There is a difficult and intricate puzzle to unravel and consequently the plot is at times complicated but Rouletabille has the necessary qualities as his friend, the narrator, explains: “His intelligence was so keen, and so original—and he had a quality of thought such as I have never found in any other person.” The young journalist solves the mystery in dramatic style and everything seems to be resolved satisfactorily. However, this was not the end of the story.

In 1908 a sequel, **The Perfume of the Lady in Black**, first appeared. This was not simply a new novel with a handful of returning characters but rather a continuation of **The Mystery of the Yellow Room**. The title of the first chap-

ter leaves the reader in no doubt about this: “Which Begins where other Novels End.”

Once more Sainclair is the first-person narrator with his account featuring all the principals from the earlier work and it would not be an easy task to read this novel before its predecessor. Furthermore, many of the certainties previously established are questioned and plot elements tied up neatly in the former story begin to unravel.

Most of the action is set in the town of Menton on the French Riviera, close to the Italian border. The cast of characters gather at the fictional Hercules Castle and the young reporter, who has taken charge of the situation, persuades them to adopt a siege mentality, convinced that a murderer is about to strike. The author clearly had a penchant for impossible crime as this novel too features a locked room mystery. However Rouletabille’s history and personal circumstances are the main themes of the story and these tend to overshadow his efforts as a detective.

From the outset it is clear that there is something unusual about his antecedents. He neither knows who his parents are, nor whether they are still alive. He has some fond recollections from his childhood of a lady dressed in black and her distinctive perfume and his second adventure is as much about discovering her significance in his life as catching the criminal who is plaguing the castle at Menton. As part of his quest to understand his past he takes Sainclair to the town where he was at boarding-school and tells him the story of his early life.

There is a wonderful metafictional passage when the author appears as a character in this narrative. Rouletabille runs away from school and is scraping a living in Marseilles when he

makes the acquaintance of the “Parisian journalist, Monsieur Gaston Leroux,” a meeting which was destined to have a great influence on the young boy’s life. At the age of sixteen he decides that he too wants to be a reporter and seeks the help and advice of Monsieur Leroux, who has become his mentor. Initially the older man tries to dissuade him “from entering upon a journalistic career” but after setting him a test in which he achieves remarkable success Rouletabille enters the ranks of his chosen profession.

**The Perfume of the Lady in Black** concludes with no unfinished business. The criminal is caught, the locked room puzzle is solved, and Rouletabille reconciles himself to the eponymous lady in black. The narrative strands from the two novels are gathered together leaving Rouletabille free to move on to pastures new. The denouement in the final chapter anticipates a trope much used in the decades that followed: the entire cast of characters is assembled whilst the intricacies of the mystery are explained and the identity of the culprit is revealed.

Joseph Rouletabille appeared in a total of seven novels although his third appearance was not until 1913, some five years later. This book marks a distinct change in style. It is a third person narrative and does not feature his friend and erstwhile chronicler, Sainclair. Also, since it is set in Russia, it is not relevant here. Besides, before returning to his young reporter-detective, Gaston Leroux needed to devote his energies to an exciting new project. In September 1909 the first installment of his most enduring legacy, **The Phantom of the Opera**, appeared in a French newspaper.

Ashley Bowden is interested in Victorian and Edwardian detective stories. He recently com-

pleted **Some Reflections of Sherlock Holmes**, a book of previously uncollected parodies of the Great Detective from the years 1892–1929.

## AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

### Vive la différence! *by Cathy Ace*

On my first visit to France, I slept through my initial few hours there; I'd endured crossing the English Channel on a stormy April night, so sleeping on the coach was essential. Thus, my first real experience of the country was groggily taking in a rain-soaked Paris around five in the morning, the streetlamps glittering on the dark, wet, deserted squares, with iconic brasserie chairs tilted against tables. The coach driver delivered us to a café with the promise of strong coffee, warm croissants, and washrooms. My main desire was to get to the latter of these, but I had to pause: on a banquette just inside the door, a young couple was embracing; she wore a long red evening gown, he a dinner jacket, his bowtie hanging loose within his collar. It was a completely unexpected scene... unless you happen to be watching a Rom-Com.

That first trip in 1979 has been followed by many more: then living in London, ferry trips to Calais were a doddle during the early 1980s, and I visited Nice, on the Côte d'Azur, for the first time in the mid-1980s, where the unique light stole my heart. When the "Chunnel" opened, I would pop to Paris for lunch, followed by afternoons and evenings doing whatever I fancied (no massive queues for the Louvre in the early 1990s) then, in 1994, I started spending three to four months each year in Nice, where I indulged my love of all things French, increased my circle of French chums,

and both learned about, and lived, the real French life.

It might come as no surprise, therefore, that my first novel, **The Corpse with the Silver Tongue**, is set in Nice. Friends graciously allowed me to "use" their apartment as the setting for a dinner where a man drops dead into his escargot, and Cait Morgan becomes a suspect in a classic, closed-circle whodunit... which she has to solve to clear her name, of course. I chose Nice because I knew it well, and loved it, but also because it allowed me to do what I've done with every Cait Morgan Mystery since—have her peel back not only the layers of deceit held close by murder suspects, and even victims, but also to do the same with the layers of history of the place where the book is set.

Thus, the Roman ruins in Cimiez, the Belle Époque buildings created to receive well-heeled visitors to the area surrounding the Baie des Anges during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the terrors of the Vichy years, all played into my story, which is set in contemporary Nice, where tourists and expats stroll along the Promenade des Anglais, then stop for a glass of chilled rosé at the enchanting Marché aux Fleurs.

After that debut novel, I sent Cait to many other parts of the world to solve Christie-inspired mysteries, before I finally delivered her to Tahiti (French Polynesia is still a part of

France) in **The Corpse with the Pearly Smile**, which I was delighted won the CrimeFiction-Lover Editor's Award for Best Indie Crime Novel of 2024. On that occasion, she sleuthed to solve the murder of a pearl diver found drowned in a crystalline lagoon on the seemingly idyllic island, though, once again, both Cait and I burrowed beneath the surface to reveal something darker. Colonialism, the much-lauded Gauguin years, and the use of many South Sea islands as testing grounds for weapons of mass destruction all played their role in the story set at an exclusive luxury resort, where there's only a small circle of suspects—with French-Fusion cuisine thrown in for good measure, of course.

I enjoyed writing that book a great deal, as it gave me a chance to relive the times I'd spent in Tahiti, so decided to send Cait to Paris; I realized I was missing the place enormously, so grabbed my opportunity to return—both in person, and then on the page. I was inspired to write **The Corpse with the Amber Neck** (shortlisted for a Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence for Best Traditional Mystery in 2025) when I was sitting on the top deck of one of those hop-on-hop-off buses: we'd just passed the Palais Garnier, heading toward the Louvre, when I looked across into a now eye-level window of one of the magnificent Haussmann buildings along the Avenue de l'Opéra and saw someone reading a book. It was a simple, domestic scene, which—in my fevered author's brain—raised the question: what if Cait saw a murder taking place through

one of those windows?

And ... I was off! Making what Cait witnessed take place in an *haute couture* salon allowed me to add layers of French fashion and art-related history, and I was also able to bring back a character from my very first novel, though Cait finds that the man she'd met as a humble police officer in Nice has worked his way up to become a junior detective in Paris. Cait seizes the opportunity to work alongside the police, within the hotbed of high fashion, to investigate not only the existing relationships between the quirky characters staffing the salon, but also their backgrounds—which emerge, of course, as being awash with intrigue.

I aim to write my Cait Morgan mysteries in such a way that they could only possibly have taken place exactly where they did, so the setting is not only “a character” but often supplies the genesis for the story. France has allowed me three opportunities to do that; I'm not sure if Cait will return to the country, but, if she does, you can be sure she'll revel in her visit as much as I do; even my official author photo was taken in Paris, at the hotel where I sent Cait and her husband as guests!

---

Author of the traditional, globetrotting Cait Morgan Mysteries, and the cozy WISE Enquiries Agency Mysteries set in Wales, Cathy was born and raised in Wales, and emigrated to Canada. She's a past Chair of Crime Writers of Canada, and is a Bony Blithe, IPPY, IBA and Editor's Choice CrimeFictionLover Award winner.

<https://www.cathyace.com/>

## From Marseille to Edisto Island by Paul A. Barra

For my work in progress, I wanted a protagonist who spoke a foreign language fluently

enough to stand out in a small Gullah-Geechee community on a sea island and also to be able

to gain an insight into one of the mysterious figures who figured greatly in the crime that drives the novel's plotline. I thought about Spanish but decided it has become too commonly understood in the American South these days. Other characters could reasonably be expected to have some understanding of Español from working with Mexican craftsmen or Ecuadorian cooks or the like.

Then I thought of French. A French-speaking Cajun bride on the run from Louisiana could easily enough migrate to an island hanging off the southern tip of South Carolina. That would solve one of my problems; now I needed a backstory for my protagonist that would give him literacy in the language. If France was a good enough setting for Hemingway and Stein, it would surely be good enough for my hero. The trouble is, Paris in the Roaring Twenties is not France today. The country is no longer the romantic draw it was for the Lost Generation of creative writers, and, frankly, it is not as popular a place in many ways as it once was. One of the main causes of France's fall from grace is the effect of mass immigration on her Gallic culture.

But immigrants from Africa brought their own cultural flavor to France, one my protagonist could put to good use. He was going to have to be accepted by the Gullah community where most of the action takes place; since the Gullah culture is based on that of west and central Africa, why not have my guy be a descendant of a Somalian? The horn of Africa, where Somalia is situated on the Indian Ocean is more or less across the center of the continent. That's a sort of connection with the Gullah descendants of slaves from the dark continent, at least. If his mother was a one-time rebellious aristocratic French gal who bred with

an immigrant boy from Mogadishu, my main man would have all the genes he needed—plus he would have grown up with classic French coming out of his mouth. And he would have learned some immigrant dialects and such slang as *verlan*. To add more color to the backstory, I made his mom a native of Marseille.

My protagonist, Jean-Luc Boutet, is an American citizen because his father's family is from a Somalian enclave in Minnesota, so he goes to college in the USA and joins the US Navy. His ship is damaged in the Mediterranean and puts into Marseille for emergency repairs. Naval officers are always popular at *em-assy soirées* and the like because of their uniforms and because they are supposed to be gentlemen, so he escorts his mother to one and she is an instant favorite of the diplomatic class. Boutet ends up working for the American consulate as a fixer (it's a long story, involving the accident at sea he was responsible for but not guilty of legally) and eventually retires in Georgetown on the coast of South Carolina. That's where most of the novel's story takes place.

The French nation and her language impact the main story all the way through it, mostly because people who speak French in the southern United States are rare. It gives my protag instant gravitas; it also gives me the opportunity to write about *bouillabaisse*, the single best soup I have ever eaten, and to set some scenes on the waterfront of southern France, where dark bars, strong wine, and shady trawlermen guarantee exciting action. Jean-Luc Boutet learns to fix political and criminal problems during his twenty years as a military attaché on the ground in the hotbed environment of Marseille.

France is the land that produced both Lafa-

yette and Napoleon Bonaparte, Marie Curie and Louis Pasteur, Jeanne d'Arc and René Descartes, Edith Piaf and Brigitte Bardot. It's a place of great diversity, physical beauty, charm and history. Where could a writer find better backstory fuel than in France?

Paul A. Barra's tenth novel **Quo Vadis, Deputy?** will come out this summer from Level Best Books. NPR called his last one (**Sgt. Ford's Widow**), "A compelling, suspenseful and moving novel that links the Mekong delta and Casper, Wyoming—each place evoked with rhythmic and sensual detail."

## We'll Always Have Paris by Janet Dawson

I was planning a trip to Paris at the same time I was working on the Jeri Howard novel **Witness to Evil**. Well, if I was going to Paris, so was Jeri.

Why would an Oakland private investigator take a trip to Paris and wind up investigating a case? I could think of two reasons for Jeri's trip to La Belle France: because she is paid to do so, to retrieve something—or someone. Turns out the someone is the catalyst. Seventeen-year-old Darcy, a problem child if ever there was one, swiped Mom's credit card and flew to Paris. Darcy's parents hire Jeri to find her and bring her back.

Jeri thinks that these two people have more money than sense, but hey, a job's a job. She flies to the City of Lights and searches for Darcy, interested in the teenager's why as well as her whereabouts. I figured once I got to Paris I would figure out what I needed for my plot.

I kept bumping up against the Holocaust.

On the Île de la Cité, tucked behind Notre Dame, is the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation. It's a sobering place to visit, resembling a bunker, containing 200,000 glass rods

to honor the 200,000 French citizens deported to Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Later during that visit, I wandered through the Marais, the historic district of Paris that includes portions of the 3rd and 4th Arrondissements. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this district had a thriving Jewish community. I was looking for a museum. I didn't find that particular museum. But I found something else—an exhibit about the deportation of the French Jews. What stays with me all these years later are the posters that family members put up after the liberation, searching for news of family members who disappeared during the war.

How does that figure into the plot of **Witness to Evil**? Read the book and find out.

Janet Dawson's life of crime began with her long-running series featuring Oakland PI Jeri Howard, whose latest case is **The Things We Keep**. She also writes a historical series set in the 1950s featuring her sleuthing Zephyrette Jill McLeod. She's written numerous short stories, including Macavity winner "Voice Mail."

## From Somewhere in France by Michele Drier

Like a lot of teens, I had a poster on my bedroom wall.

Although mine wasn't a rock musician or movie star... it was a poster of Mont-Saint-

Michel.

I spent time with my grandmother in San Francisco as a kid. She lived with her sister-in-law in an apartment down the block from the unfinished Grace Cathedral and half a block from a cable car stop.

She never went to France, but she used to take me to the City of Paris' Normandie Lane for lunch. Always on the cable car.

I took three years of French in high school and another year in college, but I didn't get a chance to use my now-almost-forgotten second language until I was almost forty years old, on my first trip to France. By the time I got there, the language was a dim memory, lending itself to sing-alongs with Edith Piaf records and a love of Coquilles St. Jacques. And when I read Henry Adams travel journal **Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres**, I had an itinerary.

That trip included Austria, Germany and ended with Mont-Saint-Michel!

Now, after ten trips, my love of France has only been whetted so I'm visiting in another way—setting some scenes and whole books there.

The 'Stained Glass Mysteries' is the series that relies most heavily on my visits, with **Tapstry of Tears** taking place in Normandy, primarily Bayeux, and **Resurrection of the Roses** extensively in France. In **Resurrection of the Roses**, the protagonist, Roz, is learning medieval French glass blowing techniques and sets out to replicate a stained glass rose window for Guédelon castle, a re-creation being built with only medieval tools and techniques in rural France.

Roz and her partner, Liam, spend the summer in France, she learning glassmaking and he covering French viticulture for a travel

magazine. The setting moves from Paris to the Normandy coast to small vineyards (*crus*) in Burgundy and finally to Guédelon, outside of Treigny.

One reader said, "This is like a love travelogue it's so real."

Outside of the 'Newspaper Mysteries'—a three-book series featuring Amy Hobbes, a managing editor of a small daily in the San Joaquin Valley—and a stand-alone, **Ashes of Memories**, a psychological thriller set in San Francisco, all my books are set in other places. But they are places I've visited.

I close my eyes and I'm on a street in the Marais in Paris, headed for a corner café. Or I get a whiff of salt air and see a seagull and I'm on the coast of Oregon, where the sandy beaches stretch for miles, or I'm on the cliff above the Normandy beaches, looking down at the rip-rap in the Channel installed by the Germans and kept by the Allies as a monument against Fascism, or I'm walking the narrow streets of Mont-Saint-Michel, listening to the ghosts.

Beyond my mysteries, I also write a twelve-book series of paranormal romance, **The Kandeskey Vampire Chronicles**. These are primarily set in Hungary and Kyiv, but the action stretches across Europe and France figures here as well.

Two of the protagonists, Maxie Gwenoch and Jean-Louis Kandeskey, have getaways in Paris and Maxie is kidnapped by the Kandeskey rivals, the Huzars, while walking through the flower and garden stalls on the Île de la Cité. In another book, Maxie's friend Jazz is kidnapped at a Paris fashion show and a chase ensues down the Rhône Valley.

The garden stalls are one of my must-stops in Paris and I've driven over much of northern

and central France, including along the Rhône and Loire valleys.

I'm also somewhat of a medievalist and traced parts of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine's reign. I've been to the ruins of Cluny, the pilgrimage cathedral of Vézelay, seen the effigies at Fontevraud and walked the broken ramparts of Chinon.

One of my fondest memories though, is still of my first trip to Mont-Saint-Michel. I was traveling with my husband and we'd taken an overnight trip to the Mont, leaving most of our luggage in Paris. It was magical; we spent the night and watched the tides surge in, washing over the causeway and crashing against the island's stone foundations.

I looked out at the rolling farmland and orchards and remembered a letter from my father to my mother during the war. He wasn't in the Invasion but arrived two days later to help construct infrastructure for the Allies' push across France. One letter starts "From an apple orchard somewhere in France..."

What my husband and I hadn't done was to check the train schedules. They didn't run

from the small village on Saturdays. In the days before cell phones, GPS and instant knowledge, he suggested we hitchhike to a larger station outside Caen. We did and were picked up by four young Frenchmen in a Citroën who drove 120 km an hour down the barely two-lane road. I figured if I were going to die, at least it was near Mont-Saint-Michel.

Instead, we sat in a tiny bar-station, drinking Calvados, the strong apple brandy, and watching French farmers play a complicated card game.

I'm not a fan of Calvados, but to this day, the smell and taste sends me there.

---

Michele Drier is a fifth-generation Californian. During her career in journalism at daily newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury-News*, she won awards for investigative series. She's the past president of Capitol Crimes, (Sacramento Sisters in Crime chapter); the Guppies SinC chapter; immediate past president of NorCal SinC, co-chaired Bouchercon 2020 and Left Coast Crime, 2026. Not quite a cat lady, (only one) she lives in Sacramento, CA. [www.MicheleDrier.me](http://www.MicheleDrier.me)

## A Historian and Novelist in France by Ann Elwood

Back in 1986, I worked in Avignon's departmental archives doing research for my dissertation on 17th-century French nuns. The archives are in the center of the city in a papal palace. The reading room is spacious, but much of the rest of the building consists of a tower in which are old prison cells stuffed with boxes of records. In 1791, the palace was the scene of a mass execution of revolutionaries, whose bodies, still alive, were thrown down the open inside of the building's tower, at least according to some sources.

I lived in a motel on the other side of the Rhône River (to save money), and every weekday, I walked across the river on a long bridge to get to the archives. One day, in the spring, a fellow archivist and I drove through flowering orchards to Châteauneuf-du-Pape in order to buy wine and see another papal palace, and on the way we talked about having a romantic affair. How could we not? France in the spring! (We didn't follow through, and to this day I regret it.)

Those experiences in Avignon (including

the ride to Châteauneuf-du-Pape) later inspired my first novel, **A Provençal Mystery**, in which a historian, Pandora (Dory) Ryan, loosely based on me, solves a murder that takes place in a bathroom of Avignon's provincial archives.

Four years later, after graduating from University of California, San Diego, with a Ph.D. in history, I was awarded a three-month fellowship at the Camargo Foundation, in Cassis, on the Mediterranean coast. There I lived in a little apartment with a gecko on the ceiling and the sea outside. On weekends, with my fellow fellows, I walked the *calanques*, bought seafood right off the boats in the harbor, and ate bouillabaisse in a waterfront cafe. My ostensible reason for being at Camargo? To do historical research in the Marseille archives. I didn't take the 30-mile bus ride into Marseille every day, even though I liked the driver's choice of French popular music. Some days I stayed in the apartment, and during those days I decided to write the murder mystery set in Avignon and succeeded in coming up with a very bad rough draft.

Back home, I began teaching history and joined a writers' group associated with Sisters in Crime that helped me finish the novel, then found an agent for it, but, before he could find a publisher, the agent died of AIDS. I abandoned the book for a while, then revised it again and self-published it on Amazon in 2012, where it enjoyed a very modest success.

After that, I self-published two other mysteries set in France: **The Witches of Villeneuve** (Villeneuve is a fictional Provençal town) in 2017 and **Millpond**, set in a town that greatly resembles Cucuron, in 2020.

My detective, Dory Ryan, is and isn't me. Her love affairs sadly are all fictional, but she knows what I know about French history and, like me, she loves France.

---

Ann Elwood has always been a writer. In the last several years, she has written a biography of Rin-Tin-Tin, three mysteries set in France, and several novels. At present, when she isn't hanging out with friends, she works on a murder mystery set in a mobile home park that suspiciously resembles the place she now lives in with her cat and dog.

## Delicious Chapters by Yves Fey

Spaghetti thrown against the wall during the family quarrel. Crying while eating the birthday cupcake alone. Toasting marshmallows in the wilderness—was that a werewolf howl? Poisoned tea, crumpets, and lace-edged napkins. One can whisper secrets flavored with whipped cream, plot the murder of one's greatest enemy with the entrée, or arrange the downfall of a nation over an after-dinner brandy. Whether it's the breakfast nook, the food truck, or the five-star restaurant, a scene

with edibles and potables is one of the writer's greatest friends and often a joy to research (one can have the Earl Grey without the arsenic).

And, yes, researching *belle-époque* restaurants in Paris and environs was a joy. In my research, I edited slightly by which places had the most beautiful Art Nouveau décor, which served the tastiest food (within my budget—I've yet to visit Maxim's) and, of course, by which ones my characters were most likely to have visited.

Environs: My novels are primarily set in Paris, but finding interesting corpses in surrounding areas was always possible. My American heroine, Theo Faraday, could visit Monet in Giverny, though no famous café lingered by the lily pond. She could visit Auvers-sur-Oise, where Van Gogh died. She might, as I did, eat a lovely lunch on a rainy afternoon. But she would not have seen the placard on the wall quoting Van Gogh saying that he hoped, one day, to have a small show of his own in such a café. Theo never rented the room where he died, so she probably wouldn't have ascended the stairs and felt the desolate, sad imprint of his death descending on her. But she still would have mourned his passing.

Sad in a different way, she would often visit her adored and adorable Ladurée, one of the first tea shops in Paris, where ladies could visit unattended during the day, promising a cozy atmosphere and a charming ceiling mural by Jules Chéret. Ladurée was built after the original bakery burned during the commune and remained a perfect Belle Époque setting until someone decided that the 19th-century aura was passé, and redecorated the last time I visited.

Theo does attend the theatre to see *Cyrano de Bergerac* the month it opened to adulation in Paris, and walks to the nearby Brasserie Julien, with its carved woodwork and painted glass panels of peacocks and damsels in the style of Alphonse Mucha. Well, actually, she couldn't have visited it in 1898, as it wasn't decorated in that fashion yet, but that's what author's notes are for, explaining we're in a slightly different alternate universe and we're decorating in the Art Nouveau mode because the Paris Exposition will bring millions to the city.

She once had an argument with her father in the fabled Le Grand Véfour, nestled within the

pale limestone arches of the Palais-Royal. Suitably impressed, Theo sat on a velvet banquette, amid mirrored walls, slim, elegant murals, and restrained touches of gilt. The argument never made it into the novels, but Theo remembers the meal quite well and appreciates that she dined on magnificent food (who can eat that many courses?) beside the memory of Hugo and Balzac, and the soon-to-be famous presence of Colette.

When he was still a detective with the Sûreté, Michel might have eaten at La Taverne du Pont-Rouge (currently La Brasserie de l'Isle Saint-Louis) enjoying the bohemian atmosphere more than he'd have been willing to admit at the time. As a private detective, he still visits humble eating establishments to earn trust and gather information. He visits as many different places as he can but knows full well who serves the freshest bread and the richest coffee.

Has Averill returned to l'Enfer, with its exquisite plaster sculptures of damned souls cavorting on the ceiling and down the walls? Probably not. One can certainly get better red wine elsewhere, but not have the amusement of ordering Lust, or a Bumper of Sin with Brimstone for coffee and brandy. He certainly never went back to the Cabaret du Néant's celebration of Nothingness, with its beverages named for assorted lethal ailments, or stages of advanced bodily decay. He does miss the transforming paintings arrayed on the walls, just as he still reads Poe, though he prefers Baudelaire's translations to the original.

And Blaise? Well, as soon as the latest murders are solved and everyone's broken hearts are mended, he's planning a celebration at Maxim's, which is, of course, the best place for a celebration in Paris. He may even own it by

then. If not, he can certainly arrange for the best chef, the best champagne, and the best table—not too obvious, but not too discreet either.

Yves Fey's award-winning Paris trilogy (**Floats the Dark Shadow**, **Bitter Draughts**, and **A Har-**

**mony of Hells**), set amid the decadence of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, is turning into a quartet. She lives in Albany, California, with her husband, Richard Anderson, and their rescue cats, Charlotte and Knightley.

## What Foolish Dreams May Come *by Alan Gordon*

When we last left Theophilos the Fool at the end of **The Parisian Prodigal**, Book 8 of the Fools' Guild mysteries, he, along with his foolish wife, Claudia; their Apprentice Fool, Claudia; and their toddler daughter, Portia, were in Toulouse in 1204. Theophilos was now the Chief Fool of the city, had gained the ear and trust of Count Raimon after he and Claudia had solved a few murders that implicated various plots against the Count or people close to him, and had succeeded in their principal mission from the Fools' Guild: Installing Folquet de Marselha of the Cistercian Abbey at Gémenos as the new Bishop of Toulouse.

Which was a terrible mistake, in retrospect, but little did they know at the time of the horrors that lay in store as a result.

Which they have yet to encounter ...

When we last left Alan Gordon, intrepid author of the Fools' Guild mysteries, he was proudly contemplating the gorgeous cover of **The Parisian Prodigal**, thankful for having yet another book published, mourning the end of the series, and wondering what he was going to write next.

While a mathematical series is theoretically infinite, a mystery series is usually finite, the exception being one continued by multiple authors (but those never feel quite right, do they?) There are three reasons series come to an end. The author tires of writing them, and

sends their detective plummeting in a death-struggle with his arch-nemesis over a deadly waterfall (Doyle, of course), or kills him mid-investigation and has his wife take over (Nicholas Freeling), or simply decides they're done, possibly with a final episode recovered from a vault to bring closure to their loyal readers (Agatha Christie, John D. MacDonald).

Or the author could pass away. Sue Grafton didn't make it to Z is for—what, Zealot? Zirconium? Which admittedly saved her the problem of what to do when she had to go on beyond Zebra.

But more commonly comes the economics of publishing in a crowded market. Not every series catches the wave it needs to surf to infinity and beyond. That happened with the Fools' Guild books and me, alas. I was quite happy writing them. Each was an education and a writing lesson in itself, and it even allowed me a completely deductible trip to southern France to trace the journey of Folquet, a troubadour turned monk turned abbot turned bishop turned persecutor of heretics.

The three books that came out of that trip (**The Lark's Lament**, **The Moneylender of Toulouse**, and **The Parisian Prodigal**) formed a loose trilogy while each acting as a stand-alone mystery. The Fools' Guild, forever on a mission to bring stability to troubled and turbulent times, had hoped to bring a former

member into a position of influence, thinking Folquet would be sympathetic to their cause.

This massive error in judgment was in place at the end of the series. I also had an instinct that my publisher was not going to renew it, so I took the precaution of resolving some of the ongoing storylines with my Foolish Family to leave them in at least a temporary moment of happiness. I felt I owed that to my readers and, more importantly, to the characters who had been living inside my head for some seventeen years. I had Theo and Claudia adopt Helga, who was twelve and had come into her own as a character under their tutelage. Claudia, the former widowed Viola from *Twelfth Night* whose older children's custody had been given to a regent, had run off with Theophilus to become his wife and a Guild-trained fool in her own right. Now, however, she was missing her older children, so Theophilus had written the Guild for permission for them to visit once again. And Portia was learning how to speak. Multiple languages.

So what would have been next?

The Albigensian Crusades, which the Guild was hoping to prevent, or at least stave off. These would wrack the Occitane for years and lead to the massacres of countless innocent people, not all of whom were heretics. Toulouse itself would come under siege. Somewhere in a file, I have the beginning of a story where Helga, now a full-fledged fool in her late teens, escapes through battle with Portia, now a very smart girl, riding the aging horse Zeus to seek refuge with another fool in Montpellier, leaving Theo and Claudia behind to fend for themselves and help who they can.

I was also alerted by a fan to the assassination of the Bishop of Béziers, the Papal Legate, prior to beginning of the Crusade. I made him

a minor character in *The Moneylender of Toulouse*, and thought he would make for an interesting source of stories for the fools to jump into.

And when they had survived this, they would have gone to the court of Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor. And Portia, having taken full advantage of the Emperor's library, would have studied law at the University of Bologna, because they accepted women then, *and because I named her Portia in the third book of this Shakespearean-derived series for a reason!*

But it came to an end in 2010.

Or did it?

In my world, the Guild continues on to the present day. In my story, "The Case of the Missing Case," in the anthology *For the Sake of the Game*, a young Sherlock Holmes takes lessons in the art of disguise from a London music-hall quick-change artist who is a Guildmember. I also have an unpublished Y/A mystery involving a Fools' Guild chapter at modern NYU (it's available!) And a bookcase full of medieval reference books and notebooks filled with research and ideas.

I have been writing another series, but my fools still lurk in my brain, waiting, occasionally surfacing and saying, "Well?"

Well. Maybe?

---

Alan Gordon is the author of the Fools' Guild Mysteries under his own name, the Sparks and Bainbridge mysteries under the pseudonym Allison Montclair, and a damn good but hard to find werewolf book. He has also written short stories and is an award-winning librettist/lyricist for several musicals. He used to be a lawyer.

[www.alan-gordon.com](http://www.alan-gordon.com)

## The Eat, Drink, and Be Merry Research Tour: Setting a Book in France by Wendy Hornsby

The agent from the car rental company met us at the Cherbourg ferry terminal. He wore a well-tailored red blazer, pressed black slacks, and a certain panache. During the short walk to the company's shuttle van, we chatted. I could keep up my end of the conversation in French without shame until he asked where we would be staying. I named the village, Cr  ances, using my best back of the throat roll for the R.

"Crrr  ances," the agent corrected, with a hard, deep spitty roll that sounded more like he was clearing his throat than instructing me on the proper pronunciation of the letter R. I gave the name of the village another try and he gave me a gallant nod for the effort.

And thus began the research for **The Paramour's Daughter**, the first Maggie MacGowen Mystery I set in France. If I was taking my American character to France, she should expect that her attempts to speak *la belle langue* would be corrected from time to time. The intentions are, it seems to me, kind. And I'm happy to be corrected. Maggie would be, too. Up to a point.

I have loved France, or maybe my idea of France, for as long as I can remember. Out of that love, I studied French all through high school and college. I'm not bragging when I say that I can read French proficiently. And I can speak in decently correct textbook Parisian French. But no one, other than a French teacher in front of a class maybe, speaks like a textbook. No one actually says, *Comment-allez vous?* Try *  a va?* or, if it's a friend, *Cou cou* in-

stead. I was more than ready to work on everyday usage as I dropped Maggie MacGowen into the middle of her newly discovered French family that is the at the heart of the book. How would they speak to each other, and to Maggie? Generally, I just needed to find out everything I could about the life in *la belle France*.

For the first outing of what my husband and I have come to call our eat, drink, and be merry research trips to France, I chose to return to the Cotentin Peninsula, the southern horn of the Normandy coast, because we love the area and because we had been invited into the home of a family we had come to know and love during previous visits. Our friends were more than happy to help with my research, whatever that entailed. They excelled at helping with the eat, drink, and be merry aspects of my work.

To write about France, you need to know about the food because it is so central to the culture. There are strict laws and long traditions about food, the way it's produced, marketed, and, of course, prepared and eaten. Many foods are regional and the use of their names is restricted by law. The map of France reads like a feast. A beautiful drive tour might take you from Calvados to Camembert, east to Champagne, south to Dijon and Burgundy, west to Roquefort and on to Bordeaux for an after-dinner drink. And so on. You can make stinky cheese anywhere, but unless you make it in Roquefort using the traditional process you damn well better not call it Roquefort.

We were more than happy to shop with the

locals at the Saturday covered markets. I was shown how to make the perfect Sauce Normande to serve with the sole we bought from the fishermen when they came in on the afternoon tide. The big meal of the day was served at midday, which makes a lot of sense. The entire family gathers. Children come home from school, parents come home from work. Grandparents, if they live nearby, may be there as well. On Sunday, everybody: aunts, uncles, cousins, almost-cousins, and visiting Americans dine together. This is, sadly, less true in Paris or other big cities, though the tradition of lingering at the table to savor well-prepared food and deep conversation seems to me to be *de rigueur* everywhere in France. And it is delightful. Food for the soul as well as the tummy.

A *Publisher's Weekly* review of one of my books set in France, after they called it “enthralling,” said “Readers will almost be able to taste the food and drink the author so vividly describes.” Whetting the reader’s appetite was not my goal. Maggie MacGowen was meeting her family in France for the first time. Where better for her to get to know people than around the family table?

Last words before I go make dinner. In Normandy, we learned that you could expect to find cream in all its forms—butter, cheese, sauces—and seafood on offer at nearly every meal. So I’m leaving you with a simple Sauce Normande for the fish you buy when the fishermen come in on the tide.

### Sauce Normande for Seafood

- 2 Tbs. unsalted butter
- 2 Tbs. all-purpose flour
- 1 cup good fish stock, or chicken broth if

that’s the best you can do.

¼ cup Calvados or other good, dry apple brandy. Dry white wine will do in a pinch. Save some for the cook.

- ½ cup heavy cream
- 1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
- Salt and white pepper to taste
- 1 pat of unsalted butter

In a heavy-bottom saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for about 1–2 minutes. You don’t want it to brown!

Slowly whisk in the stock (it helps to heat the stock a bit first), stirring, taking a break only for sips of Calvados or the white wine, until the sauce is thickened a bit (like a creamy salad dressing).

Stir in the Calvados or wine and simmer for about 5 minutes to cook off the alcohol.

Turn the heat down and add the cream. Simmer gently for 3–5 minutes but do *not* let it boil.

Remove the pan from the heat, add lemon juice and salt and pepper. Just before serving, swirl in a pat of butter.

Pour over the day’s fresh catch from the waters off Normandy, or wherever you acquire your seafood.

Bon Appetit!

---

Wendy Hornsby is the author of fifteen mystery novels and a collection of short stories, *Nine Sons*, that includes the Edgar Award-winning story of the same title. Four of her Maggie MacGowen mysteries are deliciously set in France. Wendy is a retired Professor of History, and lives with her husband in California’s Gold Rush country.

## It's Never Too Late to Be a Midlife Badass by *Lauren Johnson*

*Contrary to popular belief, life begins at menopause.*—Lauren Johnson

As a writer, I've always wanted to come up with some clever social or cultural observation—something in the vein of, say, the late great Nora Ephron—that would one day find its way to the top of *someone else's* article or epigraph page instead of *me* having to prop up my own.

Then again, I think the real measure would be a chance encounter at a cocktail party where I meet a delightful stranger who, somewhere between the shrimp platter and her second glass of chardonnay, quotes *me* back to me. I mean, how cool would that be?

In any event, I decided to use my own quote as my epigraph here *and* in my book because, when it came down to it, it just worked. *And* it's an actual quote, pulled straight from my journal—which, like any Dear Diary with half a brain, lives in a folder on my laptop called “Church Potluck Recipes”.

I had just finished writing my first draft of **The Soufflé Also Rises** and was marinating in self-doubt, convinced no sane person in this youth-obsessed culture would want to read about a fifty-four-year-old, albeit cute, post-menopausal protagonist trying to outrun the Serbian mafia in Paris.

Thank goodness I didn't listen to myself.

I always wanted to write a lighthearted crime thriller set in Paris. I spent a semester there at the American University and knew I was exactly where I belonged the moment I

stepped foot onto my first cobblestone in Montmartre and was nearly mowed down by a couple of *flics* chasing a hot French bad guy down the winding rue de l'Abreuvoir, the rhythmic two-tone siren bouncing off the stone walls in a way that felt vaguely like *The Bourne Identity*. The whole thing felt absurdly cinematic.

Years later, I would return to my favorite city twice a year for a solid week of café crème, croissant, and inspiration. Then one night in early 2009, I was having dinner at La Terrasse, one of my favorite cafés in the Seventh, just steps from rue Cler, when I thought I spotted Bernie Madoff standing under a streetlamp in the rain.

Like most writers, I immediately filled in the gaps and convinced myself that the geriatric con man had escaped house arrest from his multi-million-dollar penthouse apartment in NYC (with an assist from Ruth) and fled the country to avoid prosecution.

Of course it wasn't Bernie Madoff, nor would it inspire me to write a book about Bernie Madoff. But it planted a seed. I knew in that moment that my overactive imagination—usually a liability—was finally going to work to my advantage.

---

Lauren Johnson is an American author who firmly believes life begins at menopause and loves writing about women who discover that their best adventures aren't behind them—they're just getting started. **The Soufflé Also Rises** is the first of her Lizi Cleverly Midlife Badass Detective Series.

## I'd Kill to Live in Paris by *Eva Jurczyk*

The summer of 2017 wasn't my first time in Paris, but it was the stay that changed my life, and my writing. After a red-eye flight from Toronto, I arrived at a building in the 11th arrondissement with my husband and my five month old baby, to find the elevator up to our fourth-floor flat wasn't working. We dragged a month's worth of baby clothes, our stroller, and our exhausted bodies up the building's elegant curving staircase. Panting, sweating, we threw open the door to flat 4A. Our adventure had begun.

By the end of the month we had built up our stamina and could run up and down that staircase, the baby tucked under one arm like a football. I started to let myself fantasize about owning my own Parisian flat. I'd peer at real estate listings but the only ones that were affordable were for sale under an odd French scheme. You could buy a deeply discounted home but had to wait for its current occupant to die before you could take possession. Some of these apartments were so gorgeous I found myself wondering—would I kill for a prime piece of French real estate?

I was tempted. But this isn't where I confess to murder.

The cords pulling me towards Paris weren't severed after we flew home. I went back to Paris when my son was two; took him to watch the puppet show in the Luxembourg Gardens, looked at more property listings, planned another trip for the following summer. I jotted delicious details about life in the city in a notebook. When a vendor at the Bastille market scolded me about morels, when I saw lovesick tourists kissing on the Pont des Arts. I was

desperate to hold on to all those morsels.

Sadly, I didn't go back to Paris when my son was three like I'd planned to do. There was no travel, no leaving the house, only an anxious wait for vaccines and a longing for normal life. That was the summer I started writing my Paris book. I took all those nuggets about the city I'd been collecting and started to write my own Paris, one with the curving staircases and perfect morels that I so longed for. Two years later when I was finally back at Du Pain et Des Idées eating a croissant, I had the first draft of a book about Paris on my hard drive.

You might be worried here. Thinking that a neighborhood does not a mystery story make. Luckily there were other inspirations in my life. A close friend had a new lover, and there was reason to be suspicious of him. Like the Pont des Arts and the Bastille market, he found his way into the book and the story that emerged was about couple who fall in love in Paris, until one day the protagonist wakes to find the man of her dreams has disappeared.

Was the new man in my friend's life as deceitful as the character in my book? Fact began to blur with fiction.

When I couldn't be in Paris myself, I immersed myself in fiction about the place. I could wallpaper a mansion with the love stories that have been written about Paris but I wanted the grime, the underbelly. Alan Furst writing about the desperate survival of Parisians during World War II in **Mission to Paris**, Lucy Foley writing about her own dreamy real estate turned deadly in **The Paris Apartment**, and most chilling of all, the shocking family tragedy in Leila Slimani's **The Perfect Nanny**.

I rewrote **The Paris Files** over and over to get it just right, heading back to Paris once or twice a year to collect more details for my pages. In the book the protagonist comes under the scrutiny of French police, and her neighbors in the 11th arrondissement tell their own versions of her story. In life I sat at the café at the Petit Palais museum, imagining my protagonist in the exact same place, wondering why the man of her dreams hasn't come to join her.

In the summer of 2022, I was back in Paris, this time with some girlfriends. We took a boat tour down the Seine, popped a bottle of Bollinger champagne and poured it into plastic cups. It was a bachelorette party for that friend I mentioned earlier. The man I'd found so suspicious? She was marrying him. His evil traits were all figments of my imagination. I've left them in the story for my readers.

In October of 2026, I'll finally release **The**

**Paris Files** into the world. It's told as a series of police interviews, and each new perspective makes the reader question the one that came before. Nearly ten years ago now I hauled a suitcase and a stroller up a spiral staircase, past a broken elevator to get up to my flat. That staircase, that broken elevator, you'll see them on the cover of my book. I hope the Paris of my dreams takes you on a thrilling reading journey.

---

Eva Jurczyk was born in Katowice, Poland and wound up halfway around the world in a Canadian city that often masquerades as New York in the movies. As her day job, she buys books, building library collections for the University of Toronto Libraries, and by night she writes mystery novels including the bestselling **6:40 to Montreal**. She lives in Toronto with her husband and son.

## The Mystery of the Misplaced Mona Lisa *by Ron Katz*

Xenophobia—the fear or dislike of people who are perceived as being foreign or strange—is perhaps too strong a word for the feelings that Americans and the French have for one another, but there is a certain distrust and discomfort in Franco-American relationships. This is particularly true in cultural matters, in which the French feel superior to Americans (and let them know it), and the Americans sense that this is true (and overcompensate for it). For example, probably many Americans felt a bit of *schadenfreude* when, in October, 2025, the Louvre Museum was robbed of some valuable jewels, a scenario in which the French looked a little bit like the Keystone Kops.

As spectacular as that theft was, it was nothing compared to the theft of the world's most famous painting, the Mona Lisa, in 1911. Through an unusual series of events, the baby boomer detective couple Barb and Bernie Silver, aka the Sleuthing Silvers, was asked to investigate that 115-year-old mystery. That investigation, "The Mystery of the Misplaced Mona Lisa," appears in a collection of Sleuthing Silvers short stories entitled **Baby Boomer Detectives in a Millennial World**. Its denouement, as it were, occurs at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

The story itself is complex, but its point is simple: sisterhood trumps cultural differences.

The story involves a collaboration between

the Silvers and their sometime partner in art investigations, the chairman of the Stanford art history department, Vladimir Osofsky. He has been asked for help from a friend and colleague, Simone Rousseau, the current director of the Pompidou Centre, who has been offered the directorship of the Louvre. She wants him to look into the Mona Lisa theft because she has lingering suspicions about its strangeness, and she wants to make sure that nothing untoward comes out about it during her Louvre directorship, if she accepts the job.

The 1911 theft was nothing if not strange. It was supposedly pulled off by a Louvre workman from Italy, Vincent Peruggia, who slipped the canvas out of the museum under his smock on a Monday, when the museum was closed, during August, when many French people are on vacation. As a mocking French popular song at the time stated, “It couldn’t be stolen, we guard her all the time, except on Mondays.”

Peruggia reportedly just wanted to return the painting to its Italian homeland, and he did just that, presenting it to one of Italy’s greatest museums, the Uffizi Gallery. Then the strangeness continued, as the Uffizi gallery supposedly returned it to the Louvre.

But did it? The Mona Lisa is one of the most copied paintings in history, and many of the copies look quite authentic. As Professor Osofsky observed, he could not imagine why Italy would give back “the most famous Italian painting to the French in 1913.”

The investigation leads to the Uffizi in Florence and then to Leonardo’s nearby hometown, Vinci. It turns on a set of four magnetic keys, the only way to access a chamber in Vinci where, as it turns out, the original

Mona Lisa hangs.

Once the secret is discovered, the Silvers and Osofsky have a dilemma: should they return the painting to the Louvre or leave it where it seems to rightfully belong, in Vinci. They dispatch Barb to Paris to discuss this with their client, Simone Rousseau.

Ironically, Rousseau is less interested in the original painting than in the four keys that can access it. With those in her possession, she can now guarantee that the truth will never come out, and no one—because of the artistry of the fake—will ever know the difference.

A bond of sisterhood between her and Barb begins to emerge as Rousseau reveals her strategy that obtained the desired result: “When I gave Vladimir the assignment to find the Mona Lisa, I didn’t tell him what I really wanted: the keys. If I had asked him to find them, his male ego would have told him that that was not an important enough assignment for a professor of his stature.”

She goes on to discuss an even more common problem with males, saying that Osofsky and Bernie “have not solved the mystery of the misplaced Mona Lisa ... but they have solved the mystery of the missing keys.”

Barb readily agrees: “If your husband is like mine, he has attempted to solve that mystery many times.”

---

Ron Katz is the author of the Sleuthing Silvers mystery series ([www.thesleuthingsilvers.com](http://www.thesleuthingsilvers.com)). He also co-authored a pilot screenplay from one of those stories, “The Mystery of the Missing Reading Glasses,” which won first place in its category at the Stockholm Short Festival in April, 2026.

## Victor & Me in Paris by Janice MacDonald

I didn't set out to start another mystery series. I went to Paris to grab hold of some intentional solitude, after an abrupt and unexpected divorce occurred just prior to the start of the pandemic and the lockdowns that ensued. My intention was to write a "woman of a certain age" novel. The trouble is, having written an M.A. thesis on the creation of detective fiction as a genre, and then a successful mystery series set in my home town of Edmonton, it was just a matter of time before my protagonist stumbled over a body, or at least body parts.

Imogene Durant, a retired Comparative Literature professor, is in Paris to recreate the magic that was her surprise bestseller, **Fyodor & Me in Russia**, a book about reading literature *in situ*, and how that adds to the allure and interpretation of a work. Now that she is retired, her editor has urged her to "go somewhere else and read something!" While she has been to conferences in the past, she hasn't travelled as much as she always wanted to, and decides that now is her chance. She rents an apartment in Paris and although she intends to read Simenon, related as he is to her focus on popular culture studies, she is drawn to Victor Hugo after seeing his scribbled first drafts of work in the lovely museum in the Place des Vosges. She buys a new translation of **Les Misérables** and is soon immersed in Hugo's Paris while discovering her own.

She also makes friends with a young police officer living in the apartment below her, and with a retired journalism lecturer, who woos her over chocolate and Roquefort. Both of them allow her to discover elements of Paris that are more day to day, such as exercise clas-

ses, lectures, concerts and shopping expeditions. Imogene doesn't stint on visiting galleries and museums, but it is her more homely pursuits that bring Paris to life for readers—buying peonies at the flower market, looking at vintage postcards in one of the *bouquiniste* booths, sitting in a park with lunching Parisiennes, reading and munching on sandwiches.

Imogene's talent to read carefully and interpret work in translation helps her to assist Toni, her police friend, with her puzzling case involving body parts in hotel ice machines, proving that reading fiction is a useful endeavour (a vindication for all of us who were told to put down a book and go outside to play one too many times). Scenes from Hugo's work highlight things for Imogene in **Victor & Me in Paris** (Ravenstone/Turnstone, 2024), who shares them with her friend over bottles of decent wine after their ballet barre classes.

Although she certainly presents as a woman of a certain age, there is no place better than Paris in which to be one, and Imogene herself is not of a mind to be folded up and put away. She is just getting started, it seems. Her next adventure, **Wexford Carole** set in Ireland, was published in the fall of 2025, and a mystery set in Florence, **My Heart Belongs to Dante**, is slated to come out in 2026.

Imogene's passport is up to date. I hope you plan to join her.

---

Janice MacDonald is the author of the Imogene Durant Mysteries and the Randy Craig Mysteries, both published by Ravenstone Books, an imprint of Turnstone Press. She lives in Edmonton. [www.janicemacdonald.ca](http://www.janicemacdonald.ca)

## It's All About the Setting *by Adrian Magson*

An engineer friend of mine once remarked, not unkindly, that I had the mind of a child. This, ironically, coming from a man entirely fascinated by wheels, cogs and pistons—and machine parts I couldn't even begin to name—moving in sequence.

His comment referred to the fact that I spent my days making stuff up.

Well, he wasn't far wrong. It's part of the job.

Most writers rely on imagination, make-believe, odd facts and having the memory of a deep-bottom trawl net to fashion what we want into something exciting, interesting or memorable.

Take the word 'asylum', for instance. By that I mean the building.

I first came across this term when I was about 10. We lived in northern France, where my father worked as a gardener for the War Graves Commission.

The house we lived in was on top of a hill next door to a large Australian WWI war memorial and military cemetery, including some Canadian and UK graves. We could see for miles, in a part of the world where so much history had taken place, where at the time, although I hadn't started writing, imagination and make-believe were already taking place in my brain.

The asylum in question was a square-looking pale building about 3 km away, situated among a belt of trees. All I could see from my bedroom window was what looked like an oblong block of a structure with two rows of dark—even forbidding—windows, on the ground and first floors.

This intrigued me because of (a) what it looked like—its shape and the twin rows of dark glass—and (b) the isolation from any other houses.

Over time, once I found out from local school friends of my age what it was, it remained a place of intrigue and mystery.

Why? Was it like a prison or a hospital?

My father, who had been through the war in Italy and N. Africa, and knew about the trauma of war, explained that yes, it was a kind of hospital.

My local friends, eager to pass on knowledge that I did not have, did so with colourful suggestions that I should never go there alone because... well, because.

So I never did. Well, it was a distance away and along a narrow back road we never used, so I never saw it close-to.

And anyway, after a while I found other interests like friends and swimming and relic-hunting.

Fast-forward a few years, a lot in fact, to my later days as a writer of spy and crime fiction. I was busy penning the Inspector Lucas Rocco crime series set in the 1960s based in, you might guess, that part of France.

Rocco was here on transfer from a precinct in Paris, where he had been successfully fighting crime gangs. The government had decided in their wisdom to spread this expertise to the greater countryside, and Rocco's posting was, bizarrely he thought, to Picardie in the Hauts de France *département*. Surely nothing ever happened out here?

He was wrong, of course, because it did happen, frequently. Certainly enough to keep

Rocco on his toes, as the series shows.

After a variety of locations around the area, I needed a new setting, a place with character and meaning. With atmosphere. Hmm. What to do?

In the first book, **Death on the Marais**—lakes and marshlands, not the Marais in Paris—the setting included a small military cemetery. Others are mostly set in small towns and villages, with Paris, London and Marseille on the criminal-chasing list.

I needed something different.

For some reason my rubbish-bin mind recalled the view all those years ago as a 10-year old: the asylum building among the trees.

I don't know why it came back to me, but there it was, vivid and clear.

Now, I'd never seen this place up close. It had been largely forgotten until suddenly it wasn't. I immediately called my brother, Barry, who still lives in the area and asked about it, as I wasn't able to get to it in person.

He sent me a photo taken on a drive past. Elegant, as these places are, it was extensive, nothing like I'd imagined.

Seen from my bedroom window, all I'd been able to determine was the front façade, which was pale stone, with its twin rows of windows.

No longer an asylum, it was now a private residence. Large, built in the 1800s, with an ornate slate roof, it had presence and character leaking out of every stone and window. It was owned, Barry informed me, by a rich industri-

alist from Paris.

He was a bit of a mystery character to the locals who had, as happens in remote rural areas where firm knowledge often ignores hard fact, some scurrilous things to say about a person they'd never met. And from *Paris* of all places, that den of iniquity on the Seine!

It was still unwelcoming, Barry told me, gated and fenced, no doubt helped by rumours over the years of bodies of former patients buried among the trees, and questionable parties in summer with all manner of gaiety and laughter. Heavens!

And a bunker.

Say no more. My imagination took off like a Saturn rocket. Here was the setting: a mystery house, an clearly despicable owner, a wartime concrete bunker to boot—what more could I ask? I didn't even need to get in for a look, even if I'd been able to; I've seen similar places to it in various parts of France.

This is an example of a writerly dustbin mind where nothing is wasted. All it needs is a time and a place. Adaptable, colourful and loaded with questions.

Add characters and events, season and stir until ready.

**Death at the Old Asylum**, the 8th title in the Lucas Rocco series, was the perfect setting.

---

Adrian Magson is the author of 32 crime and spy novels and hundreds of short stories. He has worked all over Europe and now lives in a forest in Gloucestershire.

## Magdalene Duchateau: A Frenchwoman Abroad in the English Mystery by G.M. Malliet

Mystery fiction has always favored the outsider: the person who stands outside the circle,

sees what others miss, and asks the questions others forget to ask. My sleuth Magdalene

Duchateau belongs to this tradition. (I simply say sleuth because I don't dare call her an amateur sleuth—she bristles at being called an amateur anything.)

She is French by birth and English by marriage. Between the two world wars, in a London still picking up the pieces, Magdalene moves through drawing rooms, chambers, cottages, pubs, and crime scenes with the assurance of a woman of the world who knows how often appearances are deceiving.

Readers first met Magdalene in “Yuletide,” published in *The Strand Magazine* in 2012. That story established her as already famous: in the winter of an unspecified 1930s year, on Christmas Eve, villagers recognize her not merely as a visitor but as a celebrated detective. Though she lives in London, she has a “gem-like little cottage” in St. Justus, a former mining town tucked on the edge of the Southwest Coast. The setting is cozily English, with Mrs. Bunt's pastry shop and the Rose pub, yet Magdalene remains unmistakably foreign in appetite and attitude: She abhors English cooking. All of it.

Thus, Magdalene is not a sentimental village spinster dispensing advice with cakes and tea. She is a Frenchwoman abroad, observant, stylish, skeptical, and exacting. Her Frenchness, her foreignness, gives her the distance required for objectivity.

Magdalene is vain, particularly about her stylish hats, and either lies about her age or refuses to discuss it. In a world where older women are often expected to fade into the flowery wallpaper, Magdalene refuses to do anything of the kind.

Her command of English, which she learned by solving crossword puzzles, is likewise distinctive. She can describe a morally base per-

son as having a “soul of mud,” while the innocent or bewildered may be a “baby in the woods.”

Traditional mystery lovers—those who revere Magdalene's fellow detectives like Hercule Poirot—know that murder destroys order, and Magdalene exists to restore order by following clues: a footprint, a missing jewel, a late train, or a misplaced object. But for her the most important clue is always character.

In “Yuletide” we are told that Magdalene paints portraits from memory—only portraits. One observer suspects they may be a rogue's gallery of criminals she has brought down, though she will not say. For Magdalene it is not enough merely to paint a face; she explains that one must know what to keep and what to omit. Detection works the same way.

Magdalene's later appearances broaden her world. “A Murder at Morehead Mews,” published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 2019, features Inspector Bean of Scotland Yard, a recurring figure described as bearlike and outsized. Bean provides a classic counterweight to Magdalene: official, procedural, and institutional, where she is intuitive and socially adept. Their pairing places her securely within the beloved tradition of the brilliant outsider and the official detective who must grudgingly be won over by her gifts.

“The White Star,” published in *EQMM* in 2020, and “The Pact,” published in *EQMM* in the May/June 2023 issue, give special prominence to Major Hewitt, Magdalene's son-in-law. Hewitt is a barrister with chambers in the Middle Temple and is about fifty years of age in 1932. Through him, Magdalene gains knowledge of the English legal establishment: chambers, briefs, clerks, trials, and the mostly civilized warfare of justice.

Hewitt also deepens Magdalene emotionally. He is her son-in-law, and his wife, Adele—Magdalene’s daughter—is deceased. That fact gives their relationship an undertone of grief and unbreakable loyalty.

Magdalene says Hewitt likes everyone, “his strength and his failing,” a description that distinguishes him from her. Hewitt may be inclined toward neutrality; Magdalene insists on accuracy. Between them they embody a balance of law and intuition, English decency and French skepticism, affection and exasperation.

Magdalene’s French origins are essential to every story. Paris and Provence—an old house shaded by chestnut trees—comprise her origins. Her Provençal memories are central to a future Magdalene story.

In “Yuletide,” *The Strand Magazine* introduced the celebrated sleuth in a wintry village; in “A Murder at Morehead Mews” and “The White Star,” *EQMM* continued her career; and

in “The Pact” and “The Get-Well Gift,” *EQMM* brought her further into Hewitt’s legal world. Across these stories—several nominated for *EQMM* Readers Choice, Derringer, or Macavity awards—Magdalene brings her elegance, worldly experience, and caustic wit to bear on exposing the guilty.

France may not be her address, but it is her angle of vision—and through that angle, the most hidden English secrets are revealed.

---

Award-winning author G.M. Malliet has created three mystery series—DCI St. Just, the Rev. Max Tudor, and PI Augusta Hawke—and many short stories featuring London-based, between-the-wars amateur sleuth Magdalene Duchateau. Her first novel was named one of the ten best novels of the year by *Kirkus Reviews*. Her upcoming novel is #8 in the St. Just series, **Death Comes as a Footnote**.

## Murder at Villa Légère: A Pho of Murder, Diamonds, and a Secret Worth Killing For by C. L. Malone

The idea to write a murder mystery set in Paris first occurred to me while I was traveling in Vietnam. My husband and I had the incredibly good sense to spend a month in Southeast Asia on a bucket trip—a combination retirement, anniversary, and milestone birthday present. We journeyed with dear college friends who are always up for an adventure. From Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Thailand, over to Hanoi, down to Saigon, then to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, in Cambodia, and Luang Prabang, Laos. The geography was knock-your-socks-off stunning. The people, welcoming. The religion, diverse/inspiring. And the

food, beyond amazing.

Two things hit me in particular. One was the sheer size of the cities. Nineteen million call Bangkok home—more than double NYC. Seventeen million in Saigon. The other was the role SE Asia has *always* played in geopolitics. Not just the Vietnam War, or the American War as it is referred to locally, but starting with the Khmer Empire in 800 BCE. The region’s ability to grow rice and therefore, feed others, was not lost on hungry competing powers.

France was the last European state to exert her influence. Beloved in Cambodia for rescu-

ing the history, relics, and ancient temples, French missionaries introduced butter and cream to an entire population of vegetarians in the 16th century. France was not so well-liked in Vietnam where 20th-century Buddhists reacted to Roman Catholic discrimination by burning themselves alive. Pivotal to world history (and also, humbly, my murder mystery) is the fact that French rule ended in 1954 following the massacre of 2300 French troops at Diên Biên Phu, and the battle's horrific aftermath—11,000 more died in Viet Minh prisons.

The idea of so many young men dying so far from home touched my heart. I began to imagine a letter from a French conscript legionnaire, 17-years-old, on the eve of the battle that would take his life, and after which the French would leave the region forever and the Americans would arrive (with precisely the same naïve and inaccurate expectations). As the letter took shape, so did the characters. Then the story itself.

**Murder at Villa Légère** takes place in contemporary Paris and Normandy. The letter writer's name is Claude. He is indeed 17, poor, from the *îlots insalubres*, unsanitary blocks, in 1953's 19th arrondissement. Claude writes four letters home to Marguerite, who is carrying his child and who he secretly married in a Romeo-and-Juliet type ceremony. The only daughter of a wealthy Parisian diamond merchant, Marguerite later becomes a world-class gemologist in her own right after Claude dies

in the massacre and is posthumously (and falsely) accused of stealing a priceless artifact, a large pink diamond that belonged to the famous Khmer King, Jayavarman VII, circa 1100 BCE. Fast forward seventy years. Marguerite finally discovers the true thief's identity, calls her FBI/American granddaughter to Paris, but dies in what is meant to look like a heart attack.

Enter Chloé Broccard, recently suspended from the FBI art crime investigation unit for allowing an international jewel thief to escape. She arrives at the Broccard family home in the exclusive cobbled cul-de-sac near Montmartre, the Villa Légère, (fictionally similar to the Villa Léandre), and immediately realizes Marguerite was murdered. However, it will take more than her grandfather's letters to find the killer. Because a secret that stretches back that far is worth killing for. Not once. Not twice. But trois.

---

C.L. Malone is the pen name of Cheryl Malone, a short story writer, novelist, and creative consultant whose first short story was published in Crime Spell's **Snakeberry: Best New England Crime Stories 2025**. Her second and third will appear in the **Calgary 2026 Bouchercon Anthology** and Level Short's **Time Before Our Crime Anthology**, respectively. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University, Boston, MA and writes children's fiction under the name Cheryl Lawton Malone. <https://clmalone.com>

## Why France? by Peter May

Born and raised in Scotland, I've written seven books set in France and it has been my home for more than a quarter of century.

So, why France?

Was it reading about the life of Hemingway? Expat writers and intellectuals living the high life in Paris on limited means; self-destruction and creative genius fuelled by house wine,

Gitanes and absinthe.

Was it family vacations? French camping holidays every year, touring rural France and walking the cobbled streets of medieval villages where characters, history, and stories fill every step.

Was it the wonderful rustic cuisine to be found in country restaurants? Or the chance to visit legendary vineyards and meet the wine-makers behind iconic labels? What's better than lunching in a little bistro in the square of the tiny village of Puligny-Montrachet and being served its world-celebrated wine in an earthenware jug?

Or was it the fact that no matter what you are looking for, France has it? You can laze on a beach on the Côte d'Azur; rent a fisherman's cottage on a Breton island; ski in the Alps; climb volcanic peaks; take boat trips through spectacular gorges; stroll through thousand-year-old castles and know that for ten centuries, generations of men and women warmed themselves by these fireplaces and walked on these flagstones.

Maybe it was the combination of all of these things. By the time I was in my mid-thirties, I had swapped the annual campsites for a 15th-century bell-ringer's house in a village in southwest France. A vacation retreat, to take me away from the high-stress world of writing television drama. Over a period of fifteen years I escaped there whenever I could with my wife, writer Janice Hally. We worked together on more than a thousand episodes of television serials as creators, scriptwriters, storyliners, script editors and latterly for me, as a producer. Rural France was our quiet place, away from deadlines and viewing figures and ratings wars.

Then, in the midst of loss and grief, France became a refuge where we would rebuild our

lives.

In the mid-1990s, we quit television so that I could fulfil my lifelong ambition of writing books. During the four years leading up to the new millennium, I embarked on researching and writing my China thrillers. But some greater force decided I needed other challenges—my father's dementia, my wife's miscarriage, and the deaths of all four of our parents in a traumatic five year period. It was a bleak and difficult time. We found ourselves retreating to France. We bought a bigger house, not just for vacations, but to live in. Time to begin a new chapter.

After six China thrillers, I turned my thoughts to a new setting. Location had always been important to me, but it was time for a change.

Looking back on Scotland from afar, gave me the perspective to write **The Blackhouse**. I poured my heart and soul into it, only to have it turned down by every UK publisher. I was devastated, until I let my French publisher read it. She "adored" it. She bought world rights and published it first in France, and in French. It was declared "a masterpiece" by the newspaper *L'Humanité* and won multiple literary awards in France. It was eventually published around the world and ended up winning the US Barry Award. That breakthrough changed my life.

After writing about Scotland, I turned my sights to my adopted homeland.

Living in a country is different from visiting it. You absorb its rhythms, its habits, its ways of thinking, and yet a small part of you always remains detached, observing. Living in France has given me an insider's understanding, but I still retain an outsider's curiosity. I notice things that might escape someone born and

raised in the country. The quirks, the contradictions, the small details that bring a place to life on the page.

France is a country layered with stories. Every village square, every crumbling château, every stretch of vineyard holds secrets. And I began to wonder what might happen if those secrets no longer stayed buried, but were instead dug up by some curious investigator. Someone who, like me, is a bit of an outsider.

Enzo Macleod is half-Scottish, half-Italian, with a French daughter, and entirely at home in France—though perhaps never fully belonging. Someone with more than a little pain in his past, but a survivor, dogged and determined. Formerly a top forensic scientist, he is now a professor at a university in Toulouse. France has been his home for twenty years.

The series begins with Enzo foolishly accepting a bet that he could use modern technology to solve seven of France's most notorious cold cases. Each investigation takes Enzo to a different corner of France, from the intellectual elite of the *École Nationale d'Administration* in Paris to the vineyards of the southwest, from the European Parliament in Stras-

bourg to the headquarters of the Foreign Legion in Provence.

To travel through France with Enzo is to immerse yourself not only in the investigation of a crime, but in an exploration of French life—the history, the landscape, the culture and the cuisine.

Having taken French nationality, I now hold a French passport (that's a whole story for another time). I have gone from what one interviewer described as the “most French of all Scotsmen” to being the “most Scottish of all Frenchmen”. And last year, I was awarded the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière, France's top prize for crime writing.

My adopted country has adopted me and I couldn't be more proud.

---

Peter May is a Glasgow-born Scottish crime novelist, screenwriter and former journalist who now lives in France. He is best known for the internationally successful Lewis Trilogy, set in the Outer Hebrides, as well as the China Thrillers and the France-based Enzo Files. His books have won major crime-fiction awards in France, Scotland, the UK and the US, including recognition for *The Blackhouse* and *Entry Island*.

## France Is a Drug—The Bennett Sisters Can't Be Wrong by Lise McClendon

Fourteen years ago, the last time I wrote about France and mysteries for this magazine, I had only one mystery that qualified, **Blackbird Fly**. Set in a fictional *bastide* village in the Dordogne, that novel was intended to be the start of a series but it didn't turn out that way—at first. It took five years and a walking tour of Burgundy by the author—*moi*—to finally jumpstart the adventures of the five law-

yers in the Bennett Sisters Mystery series.

Walking through vineyards, cycling along country lanes, picking poppies and inhaling lavender, experiencing the French countryside up close and slowly, was more than enough to get me back into the series mode. And the French mode. It also inspired the plot of the second book, *The Girl in the Empty Dress*, where one of the trekkers, a mysterious col-

league on a Bennett Sisters tour, finds an injured truffle dog by the trail and all well-laid plans go out the window.

Southwest France, where many of the books are set, is a magical place, less explored by Americans but very popular with Brits. What do I love about the region? The history (the Hundred Years War still visible), the truffles, the foie gras, the wine, the remote hilltop villages. Since 2003 when I went on my first research trip I have been to the region many times, exploring new backwaters, having my own adventures. (Do not ask why I rented that stick shift and couldn't figure out reverse!) But the whole *esprit de France* is something I can't explain. You have to experience it and when you do, your life will be so much richer. Promise.

Take the food. French cuisine is luckily something we can create anywhere. However it is said by some that food tastes better in France. That is possibly due to the fact we are in France and on vacation! But also keep in mind the care taken to provide the highest quality ingredients, fresh and organic, prepared with expertise and finesse, whether by home chefs or in bistros. I have incorporated many meals into my novels about the Bennett Sisters and some years ago published a small cookbook featuring recipes for many of the mentioned dishes. I give it away (you too can get one by subscribing to my newsletter at [lisemccclendon.com](http://lisemccclendon.com)) but it is also a meditation on delicious meals that the French savor and we Americans seem to hurry through. I am working now on an expanded edition, out later in 2026.

Although I do have a couple of books set in Paris (**Blame it on Paris** [2018] and **A Bolt from the Blue** [2019]), most of my French settings are in the Aquitaine, the region of south-

west France. While the main character, Merle, the middle sister, inherits a cottage in the Dordogne, things move forward over the 22 books so that she and her wine fraud detective partner now own a vineyard in Sainte-Foy, a wine-making region just west of the Dordogne in the Bordeaux AOC. *Where* you grow your grapes and make your wine is a very big deal in France.

So, yes, wine too makes a big, juicy splash in the stories. The French take wine very seriously, protecting regions against fraud with a government agency that does nothing but investigate crimes against the label. Pascal d'Onscon, the detective, moved on from **Blackbird Fly** as a summer fling for Merle Bennett to being a well-loved character who stars in his own books, **Dead Flat**, **Monsieur Moonlight**, and **Château des Corbeaux** the latter being the name of the vineyard he buys.

One might think that wine fraud is a narrow topic for crime novels, even in France. But crimes of fraud against the wine consumer, because of the difficulty of identifying exactly what type of wine is in a bottle, are legion. Tales of billionaire connoisseurs being duped run rampant. The industry is large, prized, and highly regulated in France. The French have their own wine laboratory at Cité du Vin, an impressive modern facility in Bordeaux that is definitely worth a visit.

When I started **Château des Corbeaux** (2021), (**Castle of Ravens** in English) I decided I needed to know more about running a winery. I took a short online course and learned quite a bit, but not enough to actually grow grapes and make wine. That, like my dream of living in France, is just a dream. So many Americans are moving to France now. Why? Is it the lifestyle, the long meals, the leisurely

walks, the lavender, the wine, the lemons, the sunshine? Oh, the healthcare. It's not the crime, unless it's the crime they leave behind. France is not a paradise. There is, of course, crime in France and in many of the mysteries you are reading about here.

The first book in the series kicks off Merle's journey. **Blackbird Fly** contains a mystery but reads more like women's fiction, where a mid-life woman reinvents herself, learns to live with grief and her own failures, and rediscovers a love of living that her work ethic denied her. That to me is the essence of the French lesson. Don't deny yourself the beauty and wonder of life by grinding away at work 52 weeks a year.

In this excerpt from **The Frenchman**, Merle contemplates France:

At dinner that night she confessed to Pascal that she considered France a drug. That it cured people of their illnesses, erased the worst of the modern age, the crass commercialism, the puritanical outrage, the hyper-religiosity, the need to constantly judge other people. Pascal was drinking a soft Côtes du Rhône. He stared at her for a second when she stopped then burst out laughing.

"You are so earnest? But you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. There is a definite therapeutic benefit from just being in France."

"It cures you? You are changed? Through

the air? ... France is not a drug, ma chérie. The people who think France is a gastro-nomic Disneyland full of sunflowers, they are the ones who will take us back to the past, to an age that never happened except in their own minds."

"Back to Madame Guillotine?"

"And worse..."

She knew she was being silly about France being a drug ... of course France didn't cure what ailed you unless what ailed you was a pasty complexion and a hankering for goose liver.

And yet. Don't we wish? I love working out the American-in-France angle. The series continues. I am publishing a short novel this year (**The Thing About Amanda** follows the events of **Give Him the Ooh-la-la**), and possibly a long one set in Sainte-Foy. And that cookbook.

Too much? I try to take that French philosophy to heart, and enjoy life. If it means I write fewer books, so be it. Because France is always calling and I can't say no.

---

Lise McClendon has written 22 mysteries in the Bennett Sisters Mystery series, with more to come. She also has series set in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and World War II Kansas City. She has been the editor of many anthologies including the 2025 mystery collection, **Deadly Yellowstone**, based on the national park near her home in Montana. Read more at [lisemcclendon.com](http://lisemcclendon.com)

## Liberty and Death in the French Maritime Alps by *Larry Mild*

September 1953. In France during the Korean War. The eight ships of our amphibious squadron anchored out in the Mediterranean port of Golfe-Juan, midway between Cannes

and Nice—the heart of the French Riviera. I was a 2nd Class Petty Officer aboard one of those US Navy ships. On our way to that anchorage, we passed a large smooth-faced rock

with the message “U.S. Go Home” in two-foot-high lettering. I was shocked. We soon learned the reason behind it. The local merchants had raised prices to gouge the American tourists and the US military fleet, who had money to spend. The average local was pinched to compete in the same economy.

Because it was to be a seven-day stay, our galley bulletin board crawled with tempting tour brochures. One of them offered a five-day tour in the French Maritime Alps. Breil-sur-Roya (Breil on the river Roya) was billed as a quiet countryside village with great fishing and hiking. Bus transportation and recreational equipment would be furnished. My friends in the Communications Division and I all signed up.

The next morning five of us uniformed US sailors took the first liberty boat into the Golfe-Juan fleet landing and waited with our gear at the designated street corner for the tour bus to pick us up. We had visions of a modern luxury bus like the ones we’d seen about town. But what finally came for us was a decades-old, half-bus with three US Marine strangers already aboard.

We endured every bump and pothole during the six-hour penetration into the Maritime Alps. The scenery from the heights proved thrilling. The many switchbacks took extra back and forth maneuvers that a full-sized bus could never make. At noon the bus pulled into a little no-name valley, and off to a clearing, a tiny green park with picnic tables. The driver opened one of the luggage compartments and withdrew two large coolers full of sandwiches and soda pops. An hour later we were on our way once more. The narrow road roller-coasted at altitudes between 5,000 and 6,000 feet. An occasional grassy meadow revealed grazing

goats, sheep, and a cow or two. The bright sun, with nary a cloud in sight, was scorching hot, and the aged bus was not air-conditioned.

When the bus dropped to about 2,200 feet we began to follow alongside a hearty flowing river. Our French driver, Jacques, described it as the *Rivière Roya*. It was a forceful rush of clear, shallow mountain water rolling over smooth rocks. The confluence of other mountain streams created a narrower yet deeper riverbed as we drove well into the Maritime Alps. A low rock wall hugged our road. As the little bus approached our destination, we saw an old stone bridge and a winding crossroad spearing into a hidden gap in the mountains. One final double twist in both the river and our adjacent road, and the tiny village of Breil-sur-Roya revealed itself. A four-story inn of tan and pink stone and red roof dominated. About a hundred pastel-colored homes with red-clay chimneys huddled nearby.

The foregoing six paragraphs were excerpted from a remembrance I neglected to include in my autobiography **No Place To Be But Here: My Life and Times**. Some years after its publication, Rosemary, my wife, came across my original draft and said, “The Maritime Alps—what an excellent setting for a mystery.” Taking her suggestion, I rolled out a plot. A wild poker game with a big winner. The winner’s death by knife in the middle of the night. Two major suspects with strong monetary motives. A beautiful alpine hike. A day of river fishing. And, finally, the arrival of the *gendarmerie*—an inspector and his two uniformed officers apprehending the fleeing murderer on the road to Nice.

But I didn’t let the story end there. I added more of my actual remembrance. At our first

inn, an army of bedbugs invaded two of our rooms. Early the next morning we abandoned that inn, convincing our bus driver to undertake a two-hour ride to the slightly larger town of Saorge—and a classier inn, meaning no bedbugs.

Out walking, we soon discovered a joyous atmosphere: banners, ribbons, posters, and blocked-off streets. The town's new dam and hydroelectric plant had just been constructed, and the villagers were celebrating its completion. The original dam was destroyed by the Nazis during WWII, and the restoration project was fully funded by the US government as a gift. We returned to the inn and changed into our dress uniforms to join their celebration. What we didn't realize was the uniforms gave us instant recognition as American military. Suddenly every villager, male and female, wanted to hug us, feed us, and buy us tankards of beer. Far from the stigma of splurging Americans, the good people of Saorge well-remembered the fact that the Americans had liberated their special piece of real estate at the end of WWII.

Toward dusk, a dozen musicians took their place on the bandstand. Just when the music got liveliest, two of our sailors cut in on two twentyish ladies who were more than willing to dance with them. The rest of us singled out the attractive girls standing in the crowds of locals. Soon all the villagers were either dancing or clapping in time to the music.

I recently learned that Saorge is a member of the association of *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* (The Most Beautiful Villages of France). My Maritime Alps mystery will appear next year in our fifth book of short stories.

---

Larry Mild, a digital design engineer turned writer, and his wife, Rosemary, coauthor the Paco and Molly Mysteries, the Dan and Rivka Sherman Mysteries, the Kent and Katcha spy novels, and the Copper and Goldie Private Eye short stories. The writing team is the recipient of the 2024 Elliot Cades Award for literature, Hawaii's most prestigious literary honor. Visit them at [www.magicile.com](http://www.magicile.com).

## My France by Sharan Newman

A friend of mine once asked to come to Paris with me on my annual research trip. "We can walk along the Seine and you can tell me what your characters are doing."

I blinked. I thought of modern Paris. My characters lived in the 12th century. The only building near the Seine that they would have known is the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. There was no Louvre, no Eiffel Tower, no wide boulevards. Notre Dame was 500 years old and in ruins. Dozens of small streams crossed the city, bringing fresh water to the Seine. Streets were narrow, houses packed together. The air

was full of the sounds of tradespeople hawking milk, bread, beer, fish, meat, and anything else local people might need or want. Added to these were shouts as cargo was unloaded at the river and the loud lectures of philosophers competing for students. My characters would be lost in the modern city. Added to this, that's not the way writers work. I wish it were.

So, there aren't many landmarks in Paris for me to point out to readers or tourists. My time there consists of taking the Metro to the Bibliothèque Nationale, going down through a series of security gates to where the books or

manuscripts I ordered are waiting for me. I stay there all day, stopping to have lunch at the secure café. I then take the Métro to the studio apartment I rent, get food for dinner (and wine) and crash. Sometimes I meet up with friends for dinner, but mostly it's studying and taking notes.

Also, many French friends have told me, "Paris is not France." It's like assuming that Los Angeles is a typical American city.

My first mystery, **Death Comes as Epiphany**, does take place in Paris, mostly. But for research I used other towns that were small and hadn't been renovated. Auxerre, Flavigny, Autun, Alise-Sainte-Reine in Burgundy are all full of buildings that were standing in the 12th century. The layout of the villages is also similar.

In Flavigny I stayed in a roughly converted stable, with lanterns for heat as well as light. Water was from a pump over a stone sink. Dinner was melted cheese over apples, cooked over sterno. OK, not completely medieval, but the atmosphere was perfect.

The next evening, I ate at a local pub/restaurant. Walking home in the dark through the narrow streets, I heard a quiet shuffling behind me. When the chanting started, I looked around. In the evening fog I saw a group of hooded monks who seemed to be singing Compline. This was more medieval verisimilitude that I was prepared for and I walked very quickly back to my stable.

The next day I learned that there was a small monastery on the edge of Flavigny and the monks often processed through the town before bed.

Ghostly scare aside, I felt that I was closer to life in the Middle Ages than I ever could be in Paris.

If I were to take friends through medieval

France, we would go to these towns and more like them. For **Strong as Death**, which follows the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, in Spain, my guidebook was one written in the 12th century. I went to Conques, with its church of Sainte-Foy, a Roman martyr. It's a fabulous example of medieval images of hell, mixing terror and humor as rabbits carry a damned hunter to his just reward. As we crossed the Pyrenees, my guidebook warned me about the Basques, who were violent barbarians who dressed in short robes that bared their knees! It also warned me about the greedy landowners who charged poor pilgrims outrageous prices to cross rivers. Some things never change.

In my books, I try to give readers a sense of life in medieval France. There was such a variety of customs and beliefs. It was not the monolithic world the so many people presume. I focus on a merchant family because not many people lived like royalty.

While a mystery can weave aspects of daily life into the story, there is so much that can't be fit into the plot. One of the threads I use is the Jewish/Christian relations at the time. Many communities had small Jewish populations but some, like Troyes, were centers of scholarship. Jews in Lunel, in Languedoc, formulated the beginnings of the Kabbala.

I could ramble on forever. It would be wonderful to show visitors my France. For those who prefer modern Paris, Cara Black writes a wonderful, gritty, series set in various areas of the city.

For my part, I'll keep wandering the backroads, seeking the sites that remain from 800 years ago, trying to get as close as possible to the people from that time.

Also, the food and wine are incredible eve-

rywhere. Paris is not France.

Sharan Newman is a medievalist who thinks Western Civilization ended in 1214. She writes the Catherine Levendeur mysteries, set in the 1100s, which are intriguing enough for a lifetime.

She also wrote a trilogy about Guinevere and, in an aberration, **The Shanghai Tunnel**, about her hometown of Portland, OR. All of these are still in print. She lives in the West of Ireland now and loves it.

## The Reality Behind the Fantasy of ‘French Country Murders’ by Katie Penryn

The French Country Murders series is a chance for me to express my love for France and its colorful history. France has been my home now for over forty years. I live not far from the [fictional] seaside town which is the center of the stories, Beaucoup-sur-Mer on the Atlantic coast, north of the Gironde estuary and Bordeaux.

The twenty-something protagonist, Mpenzi Munro, is an English barrister. Her unusual name was given to her by her father, the famous anthropologist, Sir Archibald Munro, who worked in the Middle Congo. Mpenzi is the Swahili for “darling”, similar to Chérie, but her friends call her Penzi. When her father disappeared and was pronounced dead, Penzi had to move her two younger siblings, Sam and Jimbo, to their father’s house, Les Dragons, in Beaucoup-sur-Mer.

Things start off poorly when a body is found in the garden. Penzi finds herself hunting down the murderer. Unexpectedly, she has help from a shapeshifting cat who arrived in the post from her father. Felix, the Savannah cat, is an astonishing creature who can shift from cat to leopard to man. When her father’s will had first arrived in England, his accompanying letter had told Penzi she was a white witch. Penzi’s lawyer mind scoffed at such a notion, but as the series progresses, she comes

to terms with the idea. As her creator, I enjoyed writing the animals in the series because, being supernaturals, Penzi and Felix can talk to the animals and that is such fun.

Each mystery has for its background a specific aspect of French life and history, whilst the series arc, centered on the contents of the secondhand shop (the *brocante*) next door to Les Dragons, is solved in the last book. Here is a quick rundown of the next nine books. **The Witch Who Loved Eclairs** involves the explosion of one of the local bakeries. The story came to me when the bakery in the neighboring village blew up at four in the morning. My love for the blues and my previous attendance at the Cognac Blues Festival led to **The Witch Who Got the Blues**. After hurricane Katrina, the French government offered assistance to musicians from Louisiana to come and work here during the summer of July 2006 and thereby hangs a tale. **The Witch Who Found a Pearl** is set in the oyster fields off the coast. One thing leads to another and Penzi finds herself exploring a WWII wreck.

I wrote **The Witch Who Saved Christmas** in one week to catch the Christmas market in 2015. It was quicker for me to use the characters and settings of the series than to set up something new. There is no murder which makes it a good story to read with children. All

royalties for this book for one year went to UNICEF to help the children of Syria after the Russian extension of the conflict there in September of that year.

**The Witch Who Foiled the Plot** is set in the Cognac vineyards and involves the kidnapping of two young children as well as a murder. It points out the change in the French government's handling of kidnapping and abduction. Prior to January 2013, the French would do anything to have the hostages returned but this story takes place after that. **The Witch who Hated Halloween** shows the difference between the festival in France and the United Kingdom. Whilst the English love chrysanthemums, the French keep them for *Toussaint*, All Saint's Day, for placement on the tombs and graves of their departed loved ones.

One of the problems of the French countryside is the explosion of the wild boar population. **The Witch Who Risked the Shot** is set against this background. The meat of the wild boar hosts the *trichinella britovi*, a microscopic parasite that embeds its larvae in human muscle tissue. It also carries *toxoplasma gondii* which is harmful to pregnant women. Eating wild boar is, therefore, not recommended and the selling of the meat in commercial quantities is illegal. You can guess what could happen in this story.

France cultivates roughly 6% of all legally grown opium poppies worldwide. These are the *papaver somniferum*, not the wild poppy of the WWI battlefields, *papaver rhoeas*. The opium poppy varies from white to mauve/lilac-purple as you will see from the cover of the book, **The Witch Who Picked a Poppy**. This story explores a murder committed because of the misuse of these poppies.

The series winds up with **The Witch Who**

**Forged a Monet** and we discover what has been hidden in the *brocante* all these years. In this story, Felix and Penzi travel back in time to see the ERR (*Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*), the WWII German outfit charged with looting French artwork. Many artworks are still missing. Perhaps we know where some of them could be.

All the stories are full of magic, Latin spells and talking animals, set against the backdrop of a loving family who have taken back their mother, Gwinny. She had left Penzi in charge of bringing up her brothers while Sir Archibald was in Africa and Gwinny herself among the druids in Brittany. Oh, not forgetting the danger. You think Penzi with her training in law would learn not to put herself in harm's way, but she doesn't. Time after time she allows the righteous thrill of hunting down the murderer to lead her into peril. She is lucky to survive ten serious crimes, but as she says, "A witch must do what a witch must do to right the wrongs in the world."

If you like reading stories with a French background, you might like to read **Waking the Wolf**, a romantic thriller I wrote under my pen name Amanda Sandton. It involves the resurgence of wolves in France. Previously, the last wolf in France was shot in 1927. Then in the 1990s they began to cross the Alps back into France. Although they are protected, someone is poisoning the wolves in the south of France. It's a sexy book so skip those parts and read about the wolves.

I am currently working on my next set of French murder mysteries, starring The Wymon of Notre Dame and a young woman called Alouette. This series takes place in Paris.

Katie Penryn was born in England during the bombing in WWII but left for Kenya when her father returned from the war in 1946. Katie has lived and worked in seven countries: Kenya, Botswana (when it was Bechuanaland), South Africa, Saudi Arabia, France, England and Wales. She

began writing in her retirement and has written over thirty books with two pen names—so far! As well as mysteries, Katie is plotting a series of historical novels covering the 8th century, which saw the building of France as a nation. <https://karibupublishers.com>.

## Corsica: Where Landscape Creates Secrets *by Neil S. Plakcy*

*If you're going to walk under the waterfall, don't complain if you get wet.*

On the surface, this Corsican proverb sounds like a simple warning about the inevitable. But on this island off the coast of France, with its own customs, heritage, and language, it carries a deeper meaning: if you choose to court danger, you must accept the consequences.

That idea lies at the heart of my novel *Under the Waterfall*, which reimagines Romeo and Juliet as an M/M romance. Two young men, Nic and Cris, fall in love despite knowing their families are on opposite sides of a bitter conflict over the future of the island. Their relationship is not just forbidden—it's dangerous.

From the moment they choose each other, Nic and Cris are, in a sense, stepping under that waterfall.

What makes Corsica such a powerful setting for this story is that the danger is not only emotional or social. It is embedded in the land itself. The island's dramatic geography—its mountains, cliffs, and hidden coves—does more than provide a beautiful backdrop. It shapes behavior, limits movement, and creates spaces where secrets can flourish.

In *Under the Waterfall*, Nic and Cris are students at the University of Corsica Pasquale Paoli, located in Corte, deep in the mountain-

ous interior of the island. Getting there—or returning home—means navigating the narrow, winding roads that carve through Corsica's rugged spine. These are not casual drives along open highways; they are routes of hairpin turns, blind curves, and steep drops, where a moment's inattention can have serious consequences.

In the novel, a secluded cove with a waterfall conceals a cave, a private world hidden behind a curtain of falling water. It's a place of intimacy for Nic and Cris, but also of vulnerability. Anyone who knows how to approach it can remain unseen until the last possible moment.

Along the western coast, the rock formations are riddled with inlets and crevices, some accessible only by boat. And Corsica's landscape doesn't just conceal lovers and secrets; it has also, historically, provided cover for more organized forms of danger. The island has long had a reputation for tightly knit networks that operate in the shadows, from smuggling routes along the rugged coastline to more formalized criminal organizations in the 20th century.

In *Under the Waterfall*, I drew on that history not to dominate the story, but to introduce an external threat that presents a danger that forces the two families into an uneasy alignment.

I've long been drawn to places where identity is contested, and Corsica embodies that

tension. Though part of France for more than two centuries, the island retains a distinct culture and language, and the divide between French and Corsican identity still runs deep. In **Under the Waterfall**, that divide shapes the central conflict: Nic and his family are French outsiders pursuing economic opportunity, while Cris and his family are native Corsicans determined to protect their land and way of life. Their struggle is not just personal—it is rooted in history and place.

Corsica has long produced figures who straddle the line between insider and outsider—most famously Napoleon Bonaparte, born on the island yet destined to define France itself—an echo of the divided loyalties that still shape life there today.

In the end, what makes Corsica so compelling for mystery is not simply its beauty, though that is undeniable. It is the way that beauty coexists with constraint. The cliffs that

offer breathtaking views also limit escape. The hidden coves that invite exploration can conceal danger. The same isolation that preserves tradition can shelter secrets.

*If you're going to walk under the waterfall, don't complain if you get wet.*

To set a mystery in Corsica is to accept that invitation. You step into a landscape that will shape your story in ways you cannot entirely control. And once you're there—once your characters enter those winding roads, those hidden spaces, those tightly bound communities—you can be sure of one thing:

The island will not let them stay dry.

---

Neil S. Plakcy is the award-winning author of over 70 novels. **Under the Waterfall** is the fifth in his globe-trotting Have Body, Will Guard series of adventure romances, but can easily be read as standalone. [www.mahubooks.com](http://www.mahubooks.com).

## Mysterious (and Delicious) Paris by Danielle Postel-Vinay

When the Frenchman who would eventually become my husband took me to his neighborhood, I knew I'd found someplace special. A tiny sliver of the 7th arrondissement tucked under the Eiffel Tower, it was filled with sidewalk cafés, flower shops spilling blossoms onto Rue Saint-Dominique, and quaint bistros perfumed with *soupe à l'oignon* and *crème brûlée*.

To me, it was the most wonderful, most romantic place on earth. First, I fell in love with a Parisian. Then, I fell in love with Paris. And since then, I've wanted to write a mystery that evokes all the seductive charms of Paris—food, wine, beauty, lazy days filled with conversation, friendship. What could be a better backdrop for a mystery novel than this?

The result is **Murder Most Delicious**. It takes place in the corner of the 7th arrondissement that so captured my heart. It follows Olivia Beech, an American Master Sommelier who loses her sense of taste—and her career—after Covid. She arrives in Paris hoping for a new beginning, but when her would-be employer, Jacques de Bizet, a beloved neighborhood chef, collapses poisoned, Olivia becomes the prime suspect. She didn't kill Jacques, but can she prove it?

It's not going to be easy, that much is clear from the beginning. Olivia was at the scene of the crime. Her fingerprints are all over the glass of Burgundy wine that poisoned Jacques. When the police arrive and she's immediately

the prime suspect. She wants to explain what happened—to tell them that she just arrived in Paris and couldn't have possibly poisoned Jacques. But Olivia doesn't speak French.

With the help of the Neighborhood Watch—a band of eccentric Parisian sleuths including a florist, a pâtissier, a rebellious librarian, and a kind-hearted cop who may be falling for her—Olivia sets out to clear her name.

While there is plenty of sleuthing to be had, the real fun for me was meeting the Neighborhood Watch and getting to experience the distinct pleasure of French culture. As Olivia gathers clues, she finds herself spending time at the neighborhood café, where she eats fresh croissants and drinks café au lait with her new friends. She goes to Gaston's Pâtisserie, a landmark of the quartier with its sublime canelés de Bordeaux, tarts, éclairs and chocolate tarlettes. Her hunt takes her to perfumeries and flower shops and even the American Library of Paris, which is tucked in this neighborhood. As readers follow Olivia and the Neighborhood Watch through their investigation, they are invited into the heart of Parisian daily life.

Olivia's journey allows her to savor small, simple pleasures away from her job, something she has missed in her years as an ambitious Master Sommelier.

For me, this is the point of the novel. In my experience, France is about slowing down and savoring the simple pleasures of daily life. The joy of a patisserie window glistening with éclairs, the ease of lingering conversations on a café terrace, the comfort of familiar faces at the market. It is a world where food and friendship matter almost as much as solving the crime.

---

Danielle Postel-Vinay is the French alter ego of author Danielle Trussoni, whose award-winning fiction has been translated into over thirty languages. A lifelong Francophile, she lived in the South of France from 2009 to 2013, where she developed a serious passion for wine—later studying with a Master Sommelier in New York. She is married to a Frenchman and splits her time between the US and Paris. Her newest novel is **Murder Most Delicious** (Harper Perennial, May 2026). [danielletrussoni.com](http://danielletrussoni.com).

## Paris Didn't Let Me Leave, So I Wrote a Murder Instead by Ileana Muñoz Renfroe

When people ask me why I set book two of the Rosa the Cuban Psychic mysteries in Paris, I usually give them the simple answer.

I was stuck there.

At the onset of COVID, what was meant to be a temporary stay turned into something much longer, and suddenly Paris was no longer a destination. It was where I lived. Flights changed, restrictions tightened, and like so many others, I had to adjust to a ver-

sion of life that none of us had planned for.

And as a writer, you work with what you have.

I had Paris.

While I was there, I began writing the first book in the series, sitting outside whenever I was allowed, notebook in hand, trying to focus while the world shifted around me. The city did not stop, but it changed in a way that made everything feel more deliberate. There were

fewer people, more space, and a kind of stillness that made even the smallest details impossible to ignore.

I wrote at café tables that were never quite level, adjusting my notebook every few minutes as if that would somehow improve the story. I sat on park benches that reminded me very quickly that comfort was not part of the experience. I spent long stretches along the Seine, watching the water move with a rhythm that felt steady even when nothing else did.

That is where Rosa de los Reyes began to take shape.

By the time I finished the first book, **A Fashionable Fate**, I realized I was not done. The setting had already done too much work for me to walk away from it. Rosa is a Cuban psychic and a couture fashion designer, which means placing her in Paris is not just a good decision, it is the only decision that makes sense. Once that thought settled in, the rest came quickly. Of course she would find herself in Paris. Of course she would earn a place presenting her work during Paris Fashion Week. And of course, because this is Rosa, something would go very wrong.

It always does.

The story for the second book began to build as I walked the city. During those early days, we were allowed outside for only an hour at a time, which is a strange way to experience Paris. You learn to pay attention differently when your time is limited. Every street feels more important, every detail more noticeable, and every moment carries weight because you know it will end soon.

I walked those quieter streets and began to imagine Rosa beside me.

I could see her stopping in front of shop windows, studying the cut of a jacket or the fall

of a dress, making minor adjustments in her mind. Raul, her flamboyant spirit guide, had no trouble inserting himself into the scene. He commented on everything, from the fashion to the food to the people who passed by as if they had walked into his personal performance.

I placed them in a building I knew well, one I passed often enough that it felt familiar to me. In the story, that building holds a secret. In real life, it did not. At least I never found one. But writing a mystery changes the way you see things. You begin to look at doorways, windows, and corners and wonder what might be hidden there if you looked a little closer.

One afternoon, I sat at a café near the Seine, trying to write while paying more attention to the people around me. Two men sat nearby, speaking in low voices, their conversation moving quickly enough that I could not follow it. At one point, they removed their masks and exchanged their goodbyes—*bisou*, *bisou*—a kiss on each cheek, practiced and familiar.

There was nothing unusual in the gesture.

But one of them paused before leaving, just long enough to notice.

The other did not question it.

He simply nodded.

The conversation ended without explanation, and both men walked away.

I remained where I was, looking at my notebook, aware that I had just witnessed something incomplete that still felt important. That moment stayed with me because I was imagining a mystery unfolding before my eyes.

That is where the mystery lives, in my every day.

Paris does not offer you answers. It gives you fragments and expects you to decide whether they matter.

Rosa works in that same space. She does not

rely on neat explanations or clear timelines. She pays attention to what feels off, even when everything appears to be in place. That approach creates tension, especially with someone like Prefecture Bonneau, who expects structure, logic, and evidence that can be explained without interpretation.

Rosa does not work that way.

And Paris does not make it easier for her.

The deeper she looks, the more complicated everything becomes. One discovery leads to another, but not in a way that simplifies the story. Instead, each layer adds something new, something unresolved, something that refuses to fit neatly into place.

That is how the second book, **A Parisian Bait**, took shape.

I did not choose Paris because it sounded appealing.

I chose it because I was there, walking those streets, sitting in those cafés, watching those moments unfold in real time. The city shaped the story in ways I could not have planned, and once it did, there was no replacing it.

Paris did not simply serve as the setting.

It became part of the mystery.

And to be honest, I still think it kept a few secrets for itself.

---

Ileana Muñoz Renfroe writes cozy mysteries infused with humor, culture, and Cuban flair. She is the author of the Rosa the Cuban Psychic mysteries, the Hawthorne Corner mysteries, and the Wisterious Bay Cozy mysteries, along with other cozy series and short reads. She began the Rosa series while living in Paris during COVID and connects with readers through her online communities and author events.

## Why Not France? by *Susan C. Shea*

A handful of my favorite writer friends joke that they set their wonderful books in Italy, China, the Bahamas or Hawaii because they can write off their travel on their taxes. Don't believe them. It's their love for the place, or their fascination with the culture, politics, or environment that pull them to the place and inspire them to recreate aspects of that place in their stories. The on-the-ground research is not a perk, it's a prerequisite. There are some novels in which the author hasn't been to the place, not even on Google Earth, and the settings don't become characters, but sit like dioramas behind the action.

But why France, specifically Burgundy, for me? A trifecta of inspiration and pleasure sparked the four-book series:

Dear, decidedly eccentric, friends from here

sold everything and moved to a tiny crossroads in the province, one of the few houses in France they could afford that was near enough to the fast train to Paris.

They had a sort-of spare bedroom and invited me to come and stay for long visits so they could introduce me to their new area.

Alice, whose French is excellent because she had lived in France decades before, told me everything she had learned about the seventy or so farming people who also lived there, and took me around to meet them all (none spoke English).

The setting among neon yellow rapeseed fields, with the gorgeous white Charolais cattle dotting the pastures and the medieval stone buildings giving off massive doses of historical vibes just begged my attention. And the stories

told by and about the locals! The gossip! The generational feuds! The châteaux! The cheese! The eccentric museums that my friends loved to brag about! The heroism and tragedy of the Nazi occupation that no one—no one—has forgotten!

Given all of that, how could I not set contemporary mysteries in this place? **Love & Death in Burgundy** came first, then **Dressed for Death in Burgundy**. I renamed the town even as I fictionalized the people and their real-life situations, even though I doubted any of them would have cause to learn English well enough to read one of my novels, and asked Alice and David not to tell on me. My fictionalized friends became the fulcrum around which the stories grew and the culture revealed itself. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to share, the greater my love and respect for this small, untouristy part of Burgundy expanded.

I was lucky to be invited back to stay often, and then when Alice's husband died and she moved into the town 20 kilometers away that is on the list of France's 100 beautiful towns—Noyers-sur-Serein—I was able to add that location and those characters to my research and inspiration portfolio. Noyers is a famous medieval town that has a ruined 12th-century château that was once a fort, and is still partially surrounded by the wall that defined its safe space for villagers when the dukes and would-be kings and their English foes fought over and over for this fertile land.

I shifted my focus a bit for the second two Burgundy mysteries when Rhys Bowen, whom you all know, suggested over coffee one morning that I should bring a château in as a character. The area is practically littered with them,

some fully or partially restored, some only distant dreams of past glory and some turned into bed and breakfasts. **Murder Visits a French Village** and **Murder and the Missing Dog** were the happy results.

So what grabbed me in all of these?

How about the town thief in the first book who steals tools from people's yards and then sells them back when the farmer can't find his—and everyone knows and puts up with it! (True story.)

What about the charming but slightly peculiar costume museum which contains stunning clothing gathered from all over France and in which I couldn't resist placing a corpse lounging on a Napoleonic settee? (Real place that I praised in the acknowledgements of the second book.)

The fictional château in the third book had plumbing problems that a real plumber explained in endless detail in French to me but that left me looking up hardware and plumbing terminology for days.

The functioning medieval church in Noyers, off on a back street, that was only partially kept up and felt sad and that I used for the crisis scene because I wanted it to be in a place made sacred by the heroes and victims of the Nazis.

Oh, and food. Not just French, but Burgundian. Burgundy is the gastronomic historical home of many of France's most famous dishes, cheeses, wines ... I'll stop here, but I bet you can see why France for me!

---

Susan C. Shea is the author of four Burgundy mysteries and the three-book Dani O'Rourke mysteries set in San Francisco and other US locales she knows and loves.

## Mysterious Paris by Rob Swigart

In 2009 I had a small apartment in the Butte-aux-Cailles neighborhood of Paris. I arrived one time, jet-lagged, and discovered a visitor had left behind a copy of **The Da Vinci Code**.

I started reading. Five hours later I finished, wide awake and irritated enough to throw it across the room. Two reasons: the writing was painfully bad, yet it was a compelling page-turner I am ashamed to admit I enjoyed.

Some time later my irritation urged me to parody the formula, beginning with the bizarre and gruesome assassination of an important old man. I had long been toying with the idea of an organization that went underground after the closing of the Delphic Oracle, yet survived to continue providing strategic advice to those who asked. Naturally, the Church harassed the pagan blasphemy of the Delphi Agenda, as I called it.

Since I was planning this project as a joke, I began by adhering closely to the formula. **The Da Vinci Code** opens with the assassination, so I settled on a deranged nun in a wheelchair as the assassin, and the head of the Delphi Agenda as her target.

But after a few chapters the characters and story became so much fun I abandoned parody altogether and followed the story where it led. Over time the assassination chapter vanished as **Da Vinci** faded, and I grew quite fond of my nun.

Lisa Emmer, a scholar at the Sorbonne studying ancient manuscripts, is arrested as the prime suspect after her mentor's murder. In real life, Lisa is a French friend, a real papyrologist (one who deciphers ancient writing on papyrus or other surfaces). She and her Classicist husband introduced me to the Papyrology

department at the Sorbonne. Although the inspiration for Lisa is French, my character is from Chicago, where I was born.

I was spending a fair amount of time in Paris in those days, and freely rambled around the city following my nose. The first location I wrote about is a charming neighborhood near my apartment called the Cité Florale, a tiny pocket where all the streets are named after flowers. I expanded to other locations in the Paris I love, from antiquarian bookstores, the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, small, obscure museums, and of course the grand landmarks which are a feature of the formula. Most of the locations I choose are personal for me, though. Walking down the Avenue Emile Zola in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement to the Pont Mirabeau made famous in a poem by Apollinaire may well appear one day. Lisa takes the same number 27 bus I would take returning from the Jardin du Luxembourg and the Sorbonne to my neighborhood. She takes everyone to the zoo and an exhibit at the natural history museum in the Jardin des Plantes.

Eventually Lisa and her team settle on the rue du Dragon where a friend had rented an apartment. Despite famous scenes in **The Da Vinci Code**, Lisa's mentor lived on the rue Montpensier in the buildings attached to the Palais-Royal. When I was a student, I believe I saw my first opera at the theater there (*La Belle Hélène*, by Jacques Offenbach).

Her name cleared, Lisa unexpectedly becomes the head of the Delphi Agenda and discovers she and her small team must finish a 1600-year war against the Order of Theodosius. Theodosius the "Great" closed the Del-

phic Oracle in 394 CE.

The thought of doing a series had been with me for some time, but it didn't happen until it was picked up by BooksBNimble, an ebook publisher run by mystery writer Julie Smith. After it appeared in 2013, Julie pushed for a series, and over the years Lisa and her family have grown through **The Tablet of Destinies**, **The Prophecy Gene**, and now **The Rune Harmonic**.

Because the Agenda has been around such a long time, history is a major element for this organization (and the genre, of course). Some surprising figures have appeared as former heads of the organization, called Pythos for men and Pythia for women. Giordano Bruno, a Dominican monk burned alive by the Inquisition in February of 1600, a fascinating curmudgeon and troublemaker, was the first to appear. In subsequent books, Hypatia, 4th-century philosopher from Alexandria, Peter the Venerable, and Eleanor of Aquitaine make appearances.

The second volume, **The Tablet of Destinies**, centers around an ancient Sumerian tablet with a prophecy of the birth of a "Miraculous Child." The Agenda must understand what the tablet means and race to rescue the child before a cult can seize and use him. In

**The Prophecy Gene**, the boy, Félix, is now a six-year-old boy genius with his own YouTube science channel. He and his mother have joined what is now a family. In this book, the dominant language is DNA.

The latest entry, **The Rune Harmonic**, springs from Viking culture. The Agenda must go to Bergen, Norway, and then Jan Mayen, a tiny island lost in the Arctic Sea, to find a 12th-century message carved in runes on bone. Jan Mayen appeared on the moving map on a flight from Rome.

For the Agenda, Paris is always home. Though they visit the Alhambra, where they uncover a 15th-century Arab Pythia, and a remote monastery in the mountains of Cantabria, Spain, where they rescue the Miraculous Child from, they always return to Paris.

As a side note, I also wrote an unpublished mystery in which a mad 19th-century French poet, Gerard de Nerval, inadvertently solves a mystery alongside Eugène-François Vidoc, the former convict who founded the Sûreté Nationale.

---

Rob Swigart has published sixteen novels and in the mid-1980s designed a science fiction computer game called *Portal*. He has written three books on archaeology and worked for several years as a futurist.

## So Softly Threads the Night by Bob Van Laerhoven

*So softly threads the night.  
Standing behind my right shoulder.  
No breath reaches my skin.*

Never before had so few words, scribbled two days before my 15th birthday on a page of my mother's grocery notebook, given birth to a multi-layered 400+ page novel in my oeuvre.

Never before had it taken so long before I started writing **The Shadow of the Mole**. I was sixty-eight.

I was a shy boy from a working-class Flemish family living in the border region between Flanders and the Netherlands, and I fantasized about becoming a poet. I didn't tell my hard-

working parents that I wanted to shine with words. Their highest expectation for me, who suffered from chronic bronchitis, was that I would become a mailman. Once I started working for the government, I could count on a steady salary for the rest of my life, and the daily deliveries on my mail bike would clear my lungs. My parents were nice people and had my best interests at heart. Alas, reading and writing were an exotic waste of time in their eyes.

Therefore, I was reading a Poe short story collection on an autumn day when I was alone in the house, now and then gazing at the dramatic sky with its low, menacing cloud packs behind the kitchen window. I find it odd that I can't remember the book's title, but clear as ice the moment when, behind me, the air seemed to thicken.

What followed was a very hard-to-describe sensation, even for an author like me who currently has more than forty traditionally published books under his belt. Without looking back, I felt that something stood behind my right shoulder. I "saw" the presence clearly, yet I knew I wasn't seeing in a normal way.

The presence was shaped like a waxing crescent moon and had the delicate color of a mirrored soap bell. It reflected nothing.

I knew it had to be a hallucination of some sort, but that conclusion fell flat in the face of the overwhelming certainty that something was there.

I stood up and went to the verandah. The small notebook, in which my mother wrote down the groceries she had to buy, was lying on the table. I ripped out a page, took her pen, and wrote the three lines. Maybe it's literary wishful thinking, but in that moment, staring down at the mysterious message, I vowed to

become a poet.

I never finished the poem, although the lines fueled my desire to write.

And writing I did: I was eighteen when a small Flemish publisher launched my first book.

Not a collection of poems.

A short novel.

The title was **Phobia**.

Tens of novels followed, popular enough for me to become a full-time author in Flanders, of all places.

Yet, the three lines kept on pursuing me like a strange ritual. I developed the habit of writing at night and waited until I felt the tingling in my back.

Coincidence—or was it guidance?—stepped in when, after a thirteen-year stint as a travel writer in conflict zones, aggressive nightmares and panic attacks decorated my nights.

I decided to consult a psychologist. This warm-hearted and broad-minded woman said after three sessions, "I think you have PTSD." I learned that prolonged stress can produce a wide range of unusual mental phenomena. Intrigued, I began researching Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I learned that it was already documented in Roman Times, and that, in WWI, soldiers who showed signs of PTSD were seen as cowardly deserters who pretended to be lunatics. They usually ended in front of a firing squad.

Not long afterward, I stumbled across a text explaining Cotard's Syndrome, also known as the walking corpse syndrome. It was as if a cold finger prodded me in my neck, and I smelled the energy—still far away—of a new novel.

In 1880, the French neurologist and psychiatrist Jules Cotard was the first to describe and

analyze the psychiatric syndrome he called *Le délire des négations* (The delirium of negation). Cotard's patients were convinced they were dead. One of them was a young man who told everyone that he was a corpse and that his 'self' (sometimes, he said 'soul') was standing behind his right shoulder. Further research led me to stories about soldiers in WWI trenches who reported about presences, benevolent or malicious, materializing during intense fighting. New trends in psychiatry and psychoanalysis tried not to limit these symptoms to stress or cowardice but, hesitantly, began to search for malfunctions in the brain and childhood traumas, often according to the sexual theories of a bold psychiatrist named Freud.

Thus, puzzle after puzzle, the hidden entry in my subconscious slowly opened and granted me access to writing **The Shadow of the Mole**, set in the WWI trenches of Bois de Bolante, a woodland area in the French Ar-

gonne region, a fierce battle zone in World War I. The road to completion took me three years, sometimes stumbling over wondrous details, sometimes following dead-end forks. Buffeted by doubt, despair, illumination, wonder, and hope, I wrote like a mole, rooting deeper and deeper into my story.

**The Shadow of the Mole** won multiple awards and holds a special place in my heart. I am almost seventy-three now, and soon I'll be dead. Will my novel live on and give readers the impression that something is standing behind their right shoulder, urging them to better themselves?

---

Bob Van Laerhoven is a 72-year-old multi-award-winning Belgian/Flemish author, translated into twelve languages. Reviewers classify his work as cross-over between literature and the mystery/suspense genre.

## The Mystery of Paris *by Charles Todd*

I always enjoy visiting Paris, especially in the spring. Sadly, a few years ago, I had to visit Paris to continue the research for **The Shattered Tree** (a Bess Crawford mystery). Dianna and I boarded the Eurostar train from St. Pancras Station to the Gare du Nord. A two-hour and approximately twenty-minute ride. I was amazed how fast the train ran and how nice it was to travel first class. The service was outstanding and the food was wonderful! They say you can't travel this way anymore, but you can on the Eurostar!! We arrived in the early afternoon and after checking into our hotel, strolled the streets of Paris. A proud city, it is one of the cleanest in Europe and the people's pride in their city is obvious.

Over the next few days, we found everything we were looking for, and after a dinner of petite steak with a delicate sauce béarnaise and pommes frites we again walked the streets of Paris. The wonder of this city is not the grand sites, but that each and every street holds some sense of fascination. It is so easy to realize how many mysteries are set in Paris. So many inspectors and amateur sleuths walked down this seemingly mundane street that various authors brought to life in their own unique manner. Cara Black's popular Aimée Leduc in **Murder in the Marais** and over there Inspector Margaret stood looking down at a body. Paris at night especially, has dark corners and long shadows, a perfect place for murder. Was it be-

hind these doors and dark windows that author Kirsty Manning's reporter in **The Paris Mystery** lived in the 1930s? It took determination and a sense of purpose to remember why I was there with all of these distractions.

It was in the morning we arrived at the Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris. After a visit to Kansas City, Kansas, and the WWI museum there, I knew what I was looking to find. The women of Paris had incorporated fashion that emulated the military uniforms so common in this city during the war. Yes, coveralls and many other styles were important, but the society set had added braid and epaulettes along with other patriotic flair to their gowns they wore to special affairs. The other styles would come in handy during a later trip researching **A Cruel Deception**, another Bess Crawford mystery.

It is a rough job visiting Paris! After finding the information I needed, my next trip was to the site of the editorial office of what had been *Le Miroir*. I knew it was long gone. I had visited archives from William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, along with the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and those at the University of Leeds. We had read them previously for information regarding the treatment of wounds in WWI. *Le Miroir* was a weekly tabloid that had photos from the western front and the homefront. I wanted to see if I could find a bookstore nearby to see if they had pho-

tos of the damage done by the German Paris Gun. That was an important part of **The Shattered Tree**. Finally, we arrived at 18, rue d'Enghien, the offices of *Le Miroir*. There are no visible signs of the paper that covered the war from 1914 to 1919 in photographs.

Nearby, I found Librairie du Passage. A short walk away in the charming 19th-century Passage Jouffroy, this shop is known for its rare and antique books. At least that was what the signs said. I found a few old photos of the Élysée Gardens showing the destruction inflicted by the Paris Gun. As it was difficult to aim with any precision, the thought was that a spy was letting the Germans know where the shells landed, a spotter. Was he the man Bess knew? That could wait until we came home. The main issue was I had completed my tasks. Paris is a beautiful city, and every visit I get to see something unexpected and intriguing!

---

Charles Todd is the author of the Inspector Ian Rutledge Series and the Bess Crawford series. Coming soon: **A Deadly Cost**, a Bess Crawford mystery, followed with another Ian Rutledge mystery. He has published over forty titles including two stand-alone novels, anthology and twenty short stories appearing in mystery magazines and anthologies worldwide. His works have received the Mary Higgins Clark, Agatha, John Seigenthaler, and Barry awards and nominations other major awards.

## I Was a Free Man in Paris by C.J. Verburg

The most unabashedly American of my six mystery novels is **Another Number for the Road**. Revolving around an unsolved 20-year-old murder, it's a passionate love letter to rock & roll.

So why is it set in France?

Winter 1977. The cornerstones of my life were crumbling. Three years ago I'd left my first publishing job, my first lover, and my battered heart in San Francisco. While fans of The

Beatles still pounced on rumors of a reunion, half the '60s soundtrack was gone: The Allman Brothers, The Band, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, The Doors ... Also gone were the draft, Richard Nixon's presidency, and the Vietnam war.

Boston froze my toes but planted them firmly on the career ladder. By day I edited books for a Beacon Hill publisher; by night I re-re-read Nero Wolfe mysteries and wished Rex Stout weren't dead. On business trips another editor and I talked about moonlighting as mystery authors. He'd already finished a draft and landed an agent. Brilliant, right? Fund your kids' education (him), or travel the world (me), with royalties for income and tax-deductible expenses!

Then our media-conglomerate parent company stretched a tentacle from New York and fired our boss.

My days of paid employment were numbered.

Luckily they included two weeks' vacation.

Let's go to France! a coworker proposed. I have friends we can stay with in Bièvres, outside Paris. Oh-la-la! Café crème and fresh croissants beside the Seine! The question was: Could I find ingredients there for a mystery?

Our red-eye flight to Roissy-Charles de Gaulle spit us out on a strange planet. Where were the Tuileries? Montmartre? The Eiffel Tower? When the airport highway gave way to asphalt roads, and the urban-industrial landscape changed to stucco cottages aproned with Monet gardens of roses, iris, poppies, and lupines, my heart lifted. Bièvres would make an excellent setting for murder.

Next: Who was my sleuth? That was easy. Suppose Lily Rowan married Archie Goodwin and had a daughter—a young woman of curiosity, ingenuity, acumen, and wit. Named (at

her godfather's suggestion) for a Shakespearean daughter, she'd adore her parents but take care not to become them. She'd get out of Manhattan, not too far, but enough to find her own place, follow her own path, and offer a discreet hand if any eccentric friend of the family needed one.

Meet Boston-based investigative journalist Cordelia Goodwin. Here's her first look at the village I renamed Fraises-des-Bois:

The Hôtel des Fraises fronted on a cobbled square. You could tell it had stood here since long before Holiday Inns began, and expected to remain long after they were plowed under. At some point during the past century someone had yielded to modernity enough to hang boxes of geraniums under the windows, and a wagon wheel—also planted with geraniums—beside the front door. The hotel's only identification swung from its red tiled roof: a wooden shield painted with three strawberries.

Why is Cory in France? From my point of view, see above: royalties and tax deductions, friends with a guest room, two weeks' vacation. Her own explanation is more bittersweet. Seven years ago she came to Paris on assignment and fell in love—with *la ville lumière*, and with international playboy Larry Thorne. Now their marriage is crumbling. In a bid to save it, Boston hotelier John Otis offered her a search for lost time: an all-expenses-paid week in Paris as PR consultant to a goodwill exchange program for young professionals.

Hands Across the Sea isn't pure fiction. In 1981 one of my housemates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, traded places for a week with a saxophone player from Hamburg, Germany. Squirring him around Boston, I realized I'd

found my plot and most of my characters. A planeload of American “ambassadors” to Paris, accompanied by ex-members of a ’60s rock-protest band, are greeted by a French bureaucrat with accusations of terrorism and murder.

For Paris had a brand-new terrorist attraction: EuroDisney! Spread over 1,482 acres of beet fields were the Theme Park (29 rides and attractions, 30 restaurants, 36 shops); the Entertainment Center (two dance clubs, a post office, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show); Davy Crockett Campground (414 rental trailers, 181 campsites); six hotels, a golf course, 300 artificial cacti, and three animated coyotes.

Did Hands Across the Sea’s mystery band come to play at EuroDisney or blow it up? That was Cory Goodwin’s problem to solve. Mine was music. **Another Number for the Road** is the first (and maybe still the only) crime-fiction novel with an embedded original soundtrack. I’ve never been able to imagine a song just from

printed lyrics. Not in my book! When I started writing, this was a technological issue. By the time I finished, audio- and e-books, links and QR codes had changed the game. But as multimedia options expanded, the 20th-century publishing industry shrank, and editors’ response defaulted to *no*. Rock-&-roll fans don’t read books, I was told. *Je m’en fiche!* [I don’t care.] I had live recordings of four original songs woven into a knockout story. With the musicians’ blessing, I set up my own nano-press and published it.

---

CJ Verburg writes contemporary and historical novels, stories, and plays. Her Cory Goodwin mystery series follows a Boston-based journalist on sleuthing adventures to Paris, Barcelona, and beyond. Her Edgar Rowdey Cape Cod mysteries, like her recent art biography **The Theatrical Adventures of Edward Gorey** (as Carol Verburg), honor her much-missed friend, neighbor, and longtime collaborator. <https://carolverburg.com>

## We’ll Always Have Paris by Nancy Warren

Do you ever play the game where you imagine yourself living in a different era? Might you be a Regency heroine? A Viking? An Egyptian queen? For me, I’ve always thought I’d have made a great flapper from the 1920s and I’ve often dressed the part for costume parties. I love art deco architecture and jewelry, the literature of the period, but more than anything I love 1920s fashion. And there was nowhere on earth so exciting in those years than Paris.

I’m not sure when I came up with the idea of a mystery set in 1920s Paris, but once I started thinking about it I knew I had to write about a young reporter (which is how I started my own career) finding herself in 1925 Paris. I chose to open the book February 5, 1925, be-

cause that was the day my dad was born. He’s sadly passed away but he’d have got such a kick out of that.

What a remarkable moment in history 1925 was. The city was recovering from the devastation of the First World War. American writers were pouring into Paris. Artists, musicians, aristocrats, social climbers, journalists and dreamers all seemed to be crossing paths in the same cafés and salons. Fashion was changing. Society was changing. Women were changing.

And where there are people reinventing themselves, there are always secrets.

That realization became the seed for **Murder at the Paris Fashion House**.

My heroine, Abigail Dixon, arrives in Paris

determined to become a serious journalist but is assigned to the women's page. Through her eyes I could visit fashion houses, cafés, newspapers, luxury hotels and literary haunts. She could ask the questions I wanted answered.

I decided to mix real historical figures with my fictional ones. Coco Chanel was a brilliant and fascinating woman and I loved reading about her and visiting her atelier in Paris. I tried, wherever possible, to use real quotations or at least give the sense of how she might have spoken to this upstart young journalist who starts out with no interest at all in fashion until she has her Cinderella moment and falls for the magic of couture fashion.

Ernest Hemingway is another great character. He was a reporter for the *Toronto Star* before he became a famous novelist, a fact that tickled me as a Canadian. Naturally, he gives the young journalist some excellent advice when she meets him.

The danger, of course, is that research can become procrastination. I read novels about Ernest Hemingway's wife, watched movies about Coco Chanel, old clips of Josephine Baker and I would tell myself I was working. And lose an entire afternoon. Still, there are certainly worse ways to spend a day.

And, of course, I spent time in Paris. I ate and drank in restaurants and cafes, like Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots where Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald did. I treated myself to a glass of champagne at Bar Hemingway in the Ritz. I walked the fashionable streets and I plotted murder.

I always think the more the author can experience the world of their story the more the reader can enjoy it.

And what a world 1920s Paris was.

It's easy to focus on the glamour—the couture gowns, champagne cocktails and jazz clubs—but underneath was a city still carrying the scars of war. That combination of beauty and sadness gives the era tremendous depth. For a mystery writer, it's irresistible.

Every time I return to 1920s Paris, I discover something new. Another historical figure. Another hidden story. Another mystery waiting to be solved.

Which is probably why I suspect I'll be returning there again.

---

Nancy Warren's best known series is the Vampire Knitting Club, set in Oxford. She also writes the Abigail Dixon series of historical mysteries. [Nancywarrenauthor.com](http://Nancywarrenauthor.com)

## Dreaming of Paris by Victoria Zackheim

My dream of living in Europe began in college, watching classmates embark on various Studies Abroad programs, and then returning the following year cultured, confident, sophisticated.

Twenty years later, when my children were off to university, I revisited that dream. Live for three months in Barcelona, polish my tarnished Spanish, and get a taste of another

world. I had visited this beautiful city years earlier and was looking forward to exploring. However, friends suggested that Spain was not the best choice for a single woman. Not because of danger, but because single American women were viewed with suspicion.

I considered Amsterdam and London, but had promised myself I'd be conversant in Spanish, French and Italian before my fiftieth

birthday. Italian was my third choice and time was running out.

Paris.

I arrived at Roissy on a bitterly cold December morning. My plan was to stay one week, long enough to find a short-term rental and enroll in a language program. I was told it could take months to find an apartment, but I felt certain that everything would work out.

I found the perfect place on my second day, in a building constructed in the early 1600s. I paid the deposit, enrolled in a language program at L'Alliance Française, returned home, packed my computer, printer and winter clothing, and set off on my journey.

Three months in Paris! What could be better?

I stayed for five years.

It was sometime in 1996, nearly a year after returning to California, that **The Curtain Falls in Paris** was born. I was a freelance marketing writer for such companies as Apple, HP, and SunMicro, and my primary challenge was to write about exciting innovations in technology. This is when I learned that I could write with authority and knowledge, while having no comprehension of how that product actually worked!

How did the idea for the Paris novel come to me? I awoke one morning, turned on my clunky old PC, and got to work creating what I hoped would be billable tech copy. As I wrote, a thought arrived. *Had I dreamed something exciting during the night? And if so, what was it?*

I continued working, but the thought persisted. And then I saw the Word file on my monitor: *Mystery*. I opened it and found three pages describing a murder in a Paris theater. Yes, I had pulled myself away from the

warmth of my bed, padded into my study, turned on the PC ... and transcribed the entire dream.

And so began the tiny steps fueled by tenacity and hope.

Over the next 27 years, I wrote, revised, tore apart, and revised. I had an agent who was selling my anthologies. She loved them; she did not love my mystery. I struggled to implement her suggestions, until she gently informed me that if I wanted to get this novel published, I'd have to seek another agent. I was heartbroken. It felt like a divorce.

Until I remarried.

My new agent, along with an editor who was interested in buying the novel, pinpointed the elusive problem. I had one of those *how did I miss that?* moments, did the necessary revision, and it was done.

**The Curtain Falls in Paris** was published last spring. Its first sequel comes out in June (**Murder at Hotel Gloriosa**), and the second will be published in 2027. I have another novel that came out April 14, **Death Times Seven**. That makes four novels in three years. Thrilling? Yes. Exhausting? Absolutely! At eighty-one, who knows how long I can sustain this? But for now, I'm all in.

---

Victoria Zackheim is the author of four novels: **The Bone Weaver**, **The Curtain Falls in Paris**, **Death at Hotel Gloriosa**, and **Death Times Seven**. She is the editor of seven anthologies. Zackheim is also an essayist and playwright and teaches creative nonfiction (Personal Essay and Memoir) in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. She is a frequent conference speaker and writing instructor. [www.victoriazackheim.com](http://www.victoriazackheim.com)

## Saint-Paul-de-Vence: Toujours Cool, Just Add Murder

by Elizabeth Zelvin

The village of Saint-Paul-de-Vence is a well-known tourist destination. Its medieval ram-parts rise above the hills of the Alpes-Maritimes northwest of Nice and the French Riviera. Today's visitors explore its winding cobble-streets, shop in its boutiques behind their plate glass windows, sample artisanal cheeses and pâtisseries, and have a choice of luxury hotels with a surfeit of amenities. My 90-year-old French artist friend Henri, who grew up in Saint-Paul, once said, "Liz, if you ever have the misfortune to go back there .."

My short story, "A Friendly Glass," in the Derringer Award-winning anthology **Murder, Neat: A SleuthSayers Anthology** (edited by Michael Bracken and Barb Goffman, Level Short, 2024), is set in a fictional village based on the Saint-Paul I first visited in the summer of 1962 and again for a month in 1966. That unspoiled Saint-Paul had no plate glass windows, no tourists, no glitzy hotels. My fictional 1960s village, Sainte-Marie-sur-les-Remparts, bubbled with nostalgia for Saint-Paul like vintage champagne.

In the '60s, Saint-Paul was filled with artists, writers, and an eccentric expatriate community. My friend Ginny the novelist first came to France to work for the *International Herald Tribune* and stayed to keep an ocean between herself and her mother. Lois the elderly English dancer and her twenty cats lived in a cellar that was literally a stone cave. Adrian, the quintessential English gentleman, had a bulldog who looked just like him. Henri the artist had an atelier and knew all the painters and

printmakers. Fifteen-year-old Mark from England, an aspiring artist high on independence and Gallic *ambiance*, was Lois's lodger. The Colombe d'Or, discreet rather than glitzy, was the one first-class hotel, a gathering place for French culture's *crème de la crème*: artists, writers, and performers, all brilliant, all famous. Back then, if you weren't brilliant, you weren't famous.

All I had to do was add a murder.

The editors of and contributors to **Murder, Neat**, who all blog on *SleuthSayers (Professional Crime-Writers and Crime-Fighters)*, collectively decided that the theme of our anthology would be bars, and by extension, booze and drinking. I was the lone naysayer, since, as many in the mystery community know, one of my "other hats" is a long career as an alcoholism treatment professional. To write a mystery short story about drinking promised to be my biggest challenge since participating in the infamous "Booze Panel" (formally, "Alcohol and Crime Fiction") at Bouchercon Baltimore in 2008 without losing my cool or my sense of humor.

My solution was to go back to a time when I didn't know anything about alcoholism. Like many people, when I was young, I thought getting drunk was funny. Back in the early Sixties, the young had not yet discovered drugs. It was the thing to drink—and to drink in France, where wine came from, not to mention cognac and champagne, was the ultimate in sophistication. In the '60s, we hadn't heard of California or New Zealand wines. Ah, the French

knew how to drink. I could set a rip-roaring drunk scene in a village in the South of France and fill a glass with poison.

Full disclosure: I wrote the first draft of “A Friendly Glass” fifty years ago as a mystery novel, then called **A Friendly Glass of Poison**. I acquired an agent, much easier for an untried writer to do in the ’70s than nowadays. I now thank heaven that she failed to sell it. By my current literary standards, it was terrible. The kindest label I can give it is *juvenilia*, written before I learned enough about writing and revising my work to acquire a mature voice. On the other hand, that old typewritten manuscript preserved some memories and elicited others, so I could write my way back to that young American girl turned loose in the coolest medieval village in the South of France.

Julie, the young American protagonist of “A Friendly Glass,” is *not* the young Liz. As everyone knows, we fiction writers tell lies for a living. For one thing, I was not in love with the French artist. If I had been, I doubt that we would still be friends today, when he’s 90—and still exhibiting and evolving as an artist—and I’m in my 80s. But Julie had to be in love with my fictional artist. She *had* to care enough to find out who killed his bitchy wife, so he wouldn’t be convicted of a crime he didn’t commit. Again, full disclosure: like many mystery writers, I deliberately chose my real-life friend’s bitchy wife as my very first victim. She needed killing. In real life, they eventually divorced, and my husband and I are very fond

of his second wife. But you don’t want to hear about that. It’s no fun.

I knew I’d have to update my original motive for the murder, because so many secrets that were worth killing for in the ’60s have become the small change of everyday life today. On the other hand, I was writing *about* the ’60s, so today’s permissiveness would be anachronistic. I found the middle ground I needed in the difference between French and American culture.

One of my characters makes a comment about someone I hoped readers would identify as Marilyn Monroe, although I chose not to name her in the story.

“Americans are very fond of morality,” he said, “even in the film world. Europeans don’t think that superstar of yours, poor girl, did anything terribly scandalous, but she shocked the American public with not much more than scanty clothes and outrageous statements.”

Who did what with whom, in Saint-Paul or elsewhere, recently or in the past? Was it or is it *cool* (still a widely used French word) or information someone would kill to keep a secret? Those medieval ramparts hold everyone who might know in their embrace.

---

Elizabeth Zelvin is the author of two long-running series, the Bruce Kohler mysteries and the Mendoza Family Saga. *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* calls her “one of the most celebrated short story writers in our genre.” Liz’s newest book is **The Old Lady Shows Her Mettle**, her third poetry collection. [elizabethzelvin.com](http://elizabethzelvin.com)

## On Monaco and Mystery by Ally Zetterberg

Monaco is one of the world’s safest countries—a place where violent crime is virtually non-

existent. With 515 police officers serving a population of just 35,000 across 490 acres, it

has the highest police presence per capita and per square mile in the world. For a serial killer—and an author—that means you have to get creative.

Of course, confined spaces have long been a staple of crime and mystery writing. The sleepy British village, the isolated Alpine resort—settings that feel too familiar, too safe to host darkness. Monaco offers something different. It is a magnet for wealth and complexity, a place where celebrities, billionaires, and nationalities mix like nowhere else.

And yet, we hear very little about crime.

The last murder to take place on Monegasque soil was in 1999, when banker Edmond Safra died in a fire in his luxury penthouse—later revealed to have been orchestrated by his nurse, who hoped to pose as a hero. The case even inspired a recent Netflix documentary, *Murder in Monaco*.

I chose to set my novel—about a board game designer—in this small principality. And, almost like a board game itself, Monaco is divided into distinct neighbourhoods, each with its own character. There's Larvotto, home to the main beach. Condamine, with its picturesque market and low-built traditional buildings. Monte-Carlo, where the famous casino and Hôtel de Paris stand as symbols of glamour and excess.

It invites a kind of narrative playfulness. Rather than “it was Colonel Mustard in the dining room,” it becomes “it was Monsieur Alberti in Condamine.”

Of course, Monaco does not exist in isolation. Though surrounded by France, it sits just 32 minutes by train from Ventimiglia, an Italian seaside border town. Every day, thousands commute into Monaco for work, from there and France—crowds spilling out of the station

just before 9 a.m., while others arrive by car, creating long traffic queues along the coast.

Life in Monaco extends beyond its 490 acres. Nearby Nice, the mountain resort of Auron, and the towns of northern Italy all form part of its orbit. I use these in my novel too. Because with such a strong police presence, if you were ever to find yourself in possession of a lifeless body the morning after a below average date... *would you really try to dispose of it in Monaco?*

In fact, even Monaco's most famous murder case took place outside its borders. In 2014, Hélène Pastor—heir to one of Monaco's dynasties—was shot outside a hospital in Nice by her son-in-law.

While the principality has its own prison, perched dramatically on a cliff above the sea, just steps from the Prince's Palace, it rarely deals with violent crime. Most offences involve financial crime, theft, or driving under the influence. Intriguingly, it also has one of the highest proportions of female inmates in the world, at 24%.

As an author, Monaco gave me the “small town” setting I wanted, but with surroundings that made anything possible. It demanded a creative villain—perhaps one who thinks a little, or a lot, differently. In a place where even picking pockets is difficult to get away with, my protagonist commits several high-stakes crimes. *How?*

In true Monaco-Cluedo style, I leave you with these clues:

It was Tilda in Fontvieille with the vase. It was Tilda in Beausoleil with the staircase. It was Tilda in Jardin Exotique with the pill.

---

Ally Zetterberg is a British-Swedish writer living in Monaco, the setting of her debut thriller *The*

**Dating Game.** She is a mum of three and when not at her desk writing she can be found walking her dog along the nature trails of the south of

France, searching for the perfect coffee, or reading anything from romcom to crime.

## COLUMNS

### Mystery in Retrospect: Reviews

Reviewed by Aubrey Nye Hamilton

**The Corpse with the Silver Tongue** by Cathy Ace (Touchwood, 2014) is the first book in a globe-trotting series about the Welsh Canadian professor Cait Morgan, who is a criminal profiler. She is in Nice for a conference, where she bumps into a former supervisor named Townsend whom she disliked. A lot. Townsend invites her to a party such that she can't decline and then he dies from poisoning during the dinner. Everyone at the party is a suspect, including Cait. The motive for the killing was believed to be the theft of a Celtic collar, an ornate gold neckpiece with a mythological history. Art thefts are discovered soon after the murder, which may be connected. Or perhaps not. Cait decides to clear herself, using her outstanding intelligence and photographic memory, while annoying people along the way, which does not help her investigation. The series of fifteen books is popular among cozy mystery readers.

**The King Arthur Case** by Jean-Luc Bannalec (Minotaur, 2022) is the seventh case of Commissaire Georges Dupin and his team in the Commissariat de Police Concarneau. They go on an office outing, which seems to be the French equivalent of the US team-building weekend. Dupin will also use the trip to conduct an interview on behalf of his Parisian po-

lice friend Jean Odinet. Their destination is the enchanted Forêt de Broceliande, the largest forest in France. In addition to being home to fairies and similar beings, legend places much of the Arthurian saga around Broceliande, and it is an Arthurian scholar whom Dupin is to meet. So while his three colleagues plan to visit sites of mystical significance, Dupin arrives at the home of Monsieur Fabien Cadiou and finds him lying in a pool of blood. Dupin promptly calls the local police and Odinet in Paris. He intends to hand the case over to the regional authorities but the Paris police decide that Dupin should lead the investigation. The plot is a variation of cop goes on vacation and is pulled into a murder case. The setting is so fabulous, though, that the investigation pales beside the wealth of Arthurian lore. I found the insight into French police procedure intriguing and Dupin himself is a fine character. For readers enthralled with the Arthurian legend, with strong atmosphere, and with regional mysteries.

**Murder in High Provence** by George Bellairs (John Giffords, 1957) opens with the Minister of Commerce, Spencer Lovell, asking Inspector Thomas Littlejohn to investigate the death of Lovell's only brother Christopher and his wife Elise, who were killed in a car accident in a remote part of northern Provence. Littlejohn has visited the area before and knows the na-

tives to be unfriendly to outsiders but he agrees to try. He and his wife go to the village of St. Marcellin, a tiny rundown place where his bland inquiries are met with silence. When one of the locals drinks too freely and hints that there is more to the story than the official version, he is nearly killed in a freak accident and then he vanishes overnight. Littlejohn's suspicions are aroused immediately. Reading Bellairs when he takes Inspector Littlejohn abroad is always like reading a well-written travelogue. His gift for describing the land and the people who have chosen to live there is equal to Edith Rivett's. His plotting too is sound and even in this title late in the series, surprises pop up throughout the narrative and the outcome is well hidden. I rely on Bellairs for a pleasant well-constructed mystery and he has never failed me.

**Not Dead, Only Resting** by Simon Brett (Scribner, 1984) features Charles Paris, an out-of-work actor, who seizes an opportunity for a free meal with friends at a swanky restaurant. While he's there, the gay couple who own and run the restaurant quarrel publicly. When the murdered body of one is discovered a few days later, the other, who has disappeared, is assumed to be the culprit. Charles is enlisted by the cousin of the vanished restaurant owner to clear his name. This unofficial investigation takes Charles to a country villa in France and to gay escort services and many places in between, always fortified first by strong drink. A nicely layered plot with murder, blackmail, and criminal assault; lively characters, one of whom uses Cockney rhyming slang so often he's hard to understand; and an unexpected ending, all woven into a detailed backdrop of the realities of the acting world. This book was

shortlisted for the Gold Dagger Award in 1984.

**Keep Away from Water** by Alice Campbell (Collins, 1935; Dean Street Press, 2022) introduces Sarah MacNeil on her way to apply for the position of companion to a Miss Venables who advertised in the London morning newspaper. Miss Venables has been receiving anonymous letters threatening her life for a year. The police have been unable to identify the letter writer, and Miss Venables has decided that she can never be alone. Hence her decision to hire a companion. She is planning to return to the south of France, where she previously stayed. Miss Venables is distressed to receive yet another letter before she leaves, telling her that she must avoid water in Ste. Brigitte-la-Mer. Campbell has a gift for conveying suspense. Sarah suspects first one character, then another but she never quite makes up her mind and ends up mistrusting nearly everyone. Her vacillation and fear are sharply and convincingly drawn. The body count is surprisingly high for a Golden Age mystery. Campbell does not shy away from killing off her characters. Nothing cozy here. The exposition of how the murders were committed at the end of the book essentially recaps the plot from the criminal's perspective, an original wrap-up.

**The Emperor's Snuffbox** by John Dickson Carr (Harper, 1942) is about expatriate Eve Neill, who finally convinced her cheating husband Ned Atwood to cooperate in a divorce. They were married in France and the divorce action completed there. After a few months Toby Lawes, the stuffed shirt son of the English expatriate family across the street, begins to court her. The murder of the family patriarch, Sir Maurice Lawes, changes everything.

Sitting up late admiring a new and expensive acquisition for his collection of tchotchkes, Sir Maurice is brutally and fatally attacked with a poker. The French police zero in on Eve, whose clothing has unexplained blood and who has no alibi. She also has no motive but that does not bother them. The French inspector calls in Dr. Dermot Kinross, an eminent English criminal psychologist who often works with the police, and who begins looking hard at the family, all of whom were in the house at the time and had the easiest access. From that point on, one startling plot twist after another unfolds. Highly recommended for fans of locked room mysteries.

**Summertime, All the Cats Are Bored** by Philippe Georget and translated from the French by Steven Rendall (Europa Editions, 2013) is the first of five Inspector Gilles Sebag books. The heat along the French Mediterranean coast and the boring job have Inspector Gilles Sebag down. His real interest is his family, all of whom are gone for part of the summer. A serial killer who goes after Dutch girls shakes things up. The team follows thorough but plodding police procedures with some success, but it's Sebag's instincts that finally get them a true break. Sebag dislikes guns, doesn't carry one unless he has to, and has to think to remember where he put his service weapon. He runs marathons; his practice sessions give Georget frequent reasons to describe the picturesque scenery of southern France. He enjoys housework. He feels great compassion for those caught on the wrong side of the law. The typical detective of crime fiction he is not. Intricate and well-executed plot; gorgeous writing, for which the translator must take some credit; great behind-the-scenes look at the op-

erations of an investigative law enforcement team; powerful sense of place. Starred review from *Publishers Weekly* and a PW Pick.

**What Dread Hand** by Elizabeth Gill (Cassell & Co., 1932; reprinted by Dean Street Press, 2017) is the second of three mysteries by Gill, born Elizabeth Joyce Copping, whose promising career as an author was cut short by an unfortunate early death. Julia Dallas is part of a theatre-going group which included her fiancé, her guardian Professor Edward Milk and his sister Miss Agatha Milk, with painter and amateur sleuth Benvenuto Brown. Murder is committed before the night is out, and Brown is enlisted to find the culprit. He and Julia follow a lead to Provence, where the populace is being terrorized by a robber called the Tiger, who stops vehicles on lonely roads and relieves their occupants of their money and jewelry. Julia and Brown decide to capture the Tiger, not forgetting the original reason for their visit to France. I was completely taken aback by the culprit, once identified, which to me is the hallmark of a good mystery. In retrospect there were hints here and there but I missed them in Gill's skillful misdirection. I had hoped for more involvement in and around the theatre but still a pleasant read with a twisty plot and unusual characters.

**The Butler** by Claire Mackintosh (Podium Publishing, June 2026) is about Baxter, a butler who freelances for wealthy individuals. He's been hired to run a villa near Cannes for a house party during the film festival. Alec Prescott and his ex-wife Sylvie Calloway are also celebrating the 21st birthday of their only child Carter. Prescott arrives with his much younger girl friend Kaitlynn. Prescott and his girlfriend and Prescott's godparents Damian and Fran-

cesca Huxley make up the rest of the party. Damian loses no time in trying to convince Alec to finance his next film, Alec declines and tactlessly suggests Francesca is too old to play a leading role. Alec tells Prescott his allowance is ending. Sylvie and Alec trade jabs over his youthful girlfriend. The sniping continues whenever a few of the party are together, and dinner with everyone is downright fractious. Early one morning Baxter finds Alec Prescott at the bottom of the swimming pool, quite dead, and he decides to investigate. Readers familiar with Agatha Christie's **4:50 from Paddington** APA What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw will immediately see the similarity of Baxter to Lucy Eyelesbarrow, that expensive but capable housekeeper who assisted Miss Marple. A good mystery with a strong *Upstairs, Downstairs* feel.

**Murder à la Mode** by Patricia Moyes (Collins Crime Club, 1963) is the fourth case of Inspector Henry Tibbett and his wife Emmy, who are globe-trotters, undertaking murder cases all over the world, but this case is in London and Paris. Emmy's niece Veronica comes to London from quiet Devonshire to try her luck as a model. She finds herself at a high-fashion magazine, flying to Paris to be photographed wearing the latest designs while the magazine reporters identify important new details for fashion-starved Britons. There's a colorful description of the frantic scramble to select and compile into layouts photos and accompanying information gathered in Paris at the spring style shows and flown into London that night. One of the writers is killed during the all-night slog to assemble the last-minute photos and text into a print-ready file for delivery to the printers early the next morning. The ensuing investigation

is undertaken amid photography shoots and copy rewrites. It's complicated by rumors of affairs among the magazine staff and by gossip about closely held designs from Parisian ateliers showing up in places where they shouldn't be. As much a nice gossipy read about couture as a fine mystery.

**The Sorbonne Affair** by Mark Pryor (Seventh Street Books, 2017) is the seventh book featuring Hugo Marston, former FBI agent and now head of security for the US embassy in Paris. Helen Hancock, an internationally famous romance author, is staying in Paris working on her latest opus and teaching a seminar on writing with a small group of students. She reports a hidden camera in her hotel. Shortly thereafter a hotel employee with a gambling problem is found stabbed in a hotel stairwell. When images from the camera in Helen's room are found on his laptop, the police assume that he planned blackmail. Two more murders follow, complicating the investigation being conducted by Hugo and a Paris police lieutenant. In the meantime the convicted bank robber from the last case Hugo worked as an FBI agent has obtained parole and disappears. Tom Green, Hugo's former FBI partner and current tenant, is convinced that the man is heading for Paris for revenge. Pryor loves Paris, every inch of it. The people, the food, the streets and parks, the architecture, all are glowingly described. The book is well worth reading just for the travelogue but the dual investigative thread is very good.

**The Milliner's Hat Mystery** by Sir Basil Home Thomson (Eldon Press, 1937; Dean Street Press, 2016) was the seventh of eight mysteries featuring PC Richardson, who advanced up the law enforcement ladder throughout the se-

ries. Richardson achieved the rank of Chief Constable by the opening of **The Milliner's Hat Mystery**, and in keeping with his lofty status, he is a peripheral presence, only advising his subordinates Chief Inspector Vincent and Detective-Sergeant Walker who do most of the investigative groundwork. A dead man is found in a barn by a couple of young men seeking shelter from a storm. A gunshot wound with no weapon nearby means homicide but lack of identification stymies the local police, and the inquest is adjourned as Vincent arrives to take over the case. The investigation takes Vincent to France and back again, which results in a running commentary about the differences between the criminal justice systems of both countries. This story is an early police procedural, demonstrating Thomson's experience in Scotland Yard which informed his writing extensively. Not a complicated mystery but involved enough to hold my interest, and the realism of the investigative detail is notable. Worth the attention of any Golden Age student.

Lifelong mystery reader and former librarian Aubrey Nye Hamilton reviews newish crime fiction on *Kevin's Corner*, <https://kevintipplescorner.blogspot.com/>, talks about older books on *Happiness Is a Book*, <https://happinessisabook.com/>, and writes occasional pieces for *Mystery Readers Journal*.

### Reviewed by Lesa Holstine

**The Dark Vineyard** by Martin Walker (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009)

Bruno Courreges may think of himself as a simple village policeman, but he's a shrewd man who loves Saint-Denis and its people, the ones he serves. **The Dark Vineyard**, the sec-

ond in Martin Walker's Bruno, Chief of Police series, demonstrates his ability to maneuver through local and French politics.

When a big fire destroys GMO crops and a shed, Bruno finds himself investigating some of the local residents for an arson charge. But, he's not the only one investigating, although he's the sole policeman in Saint-Denis. He can work with Captain Duroc, head of the *gendarmes*, but when Parisian politicians send in a brigadier to investigate the arson, he's afraid he won't be able to deal with the high-level politicians and police. Fortunately, the mayor, his boss and friend, is on the side of the local residents. But when a large American wine company shows interest in the region, Bruno is afraid his interests and that of the mayor might be in conflict.

There's a lot of interest in the Bondino family's plans for buying up property and making wine. The representatives of the company, including the heir to the family business, assure the mayor those plans will mean money and jobs. Bruno is afraid those plans will mean the loss of the charm in the city he loves. But, if Saint-Denis ends up in the spotlight because of arson, and bar fights, two deaths, and the arrest of a prominent businessman, it could spell trouble for the village. Bruno must use all of his knowledge of the people, and his investigatory skills to find answers before the media descends on the local community.

I've only read two books in Martin Walker's series, but I'm finding Bruno to be charming, with his love of the village, women, good food and good wine. As I said, he's a shrewd policeman who knows his community. I'm looking forward to seventeen more books in this series.

**Black Diamond** by Martin Walker (Vintage

Books, 2010)

I've only read three of Martin Walker's Bruno, Chief of Police books, but I'm hooked. *Black Diamond* actually has a subtitle on the cover, "A Mystery of the French Countryside". I like that, but I'm guessing the other subtitle makes it obvious that Bruno is the featured character in the book.

This time, the police chief of St. Denis has a complicated case. It starts locally when a sawmill closes due to environmental concerns. Although Pons, the owner, blames it on government regulations, his own son leads the Green party demonstrators. All politics is local when a Vietnamese stall holder at the local market is attacked by a group of Asian thugs who pour a black substance over the stall, and throw a stun grenade. Then, one of Bruno's best friends is murdered, with evidence he was tortured before his death. Local politics become national politics when Bruno learns the Vietnamese and Chinese families are at war in France, fighting for control of crime and illegal immigration.

While Bruno's life seems easygoing in the Perigord, with his hunting, rugby, tennis lessons and meals with his friends, there are times when it's action-packed, with meetings with high-ranking officials, fires, and murder. The combination of the slow pace of life, and the political overtones of Bruno's life, along with his romances, makes for books that are a little different in tone than other mysteries. Despite the action, a Bruno book is a chance to spend time with the police chief who is wise beyond his forty years.

I enjoy the return to St. Denis, with the chance to visit with Bruno and his friends. I always learn something when I read these. In this case, **Black Diamond** features fraud in the

truffles market, the French political and historical past involving Vietnam, and the crimes involved with illegal immigration from China. This third book is a dive into a police procedural with a shrewd, likable police chief. It's comforting to know I have sixteen more books to go.

**The Bookseller** by Mark Pryor (Seventh Street Books, 2012)

I finally read Mark Pryor's debut Hugo Marston novel from 2012. I wish I had read **The Bookseller** earlier, but now I have eight more books in this series to read as well as the spinoff series. **The Most Mysterious Bookshop in Paris**, also featuring Hugo Marston, is scheduled for release March 31.

Hugo Marston is security chief at the American embassy in Paris. Forced to take a two-week vacation, he hopes to go home to Texas to talk with his ex-wife, but she's moved on. He had planned to take a couple special books with him, so he headed for his favorite *bouquiniste*, Max. Hugo is disturbed by what he observes, another book stall owner physically assaulted by a man, but Max stops him from interfering. Hugo buys two rare books, but when he returns, he watches helplessly as Max himself is kidnapped and taken away by boat, while Hugo is held off by gunpoint. Although Hugo reports the kidnapping to the police, his story is brushed aside and ignored.

With two weeks on his hands, Hugo is determined to find Max, and uncover the truth behind the attack on *bouquinistes*. He doesn't get far until his secretary provides him with assistance. As he continues to dig, he gets help from an attractive local journalist, and then his retired CIA friend, Tom, who flies over to back him up.

Although the ambassador warns Hugo not to get involved for political reasons, Hugo finds that the kidnapping and murder of booksellers leads to a mysterious man in charge of the booksellers' union, then to a police case involving drugs, police corruption, and violence.

**The Bookseller** is a fascinating novel set in Paris where World War II history is still alive, not just a couple pages in a history book. The book is fast-paced and atmospheric with unexpected twists. But, it's the characters who bring the story to life, Hugo Marston and his friends. Thanks to my own friend, Kaye Wilkinson Barley, who has praised this series for years, I finally picked up the first book. It's only the first of the ones I'll be reading in this appealing series.

**The Crypt Thief** by Mark Pryor (Seventh Street Books, 2012)

It took me a little longer to get into the second Hugo Marston novel by Mark Pryor, **The Crypt Thief**. The first book, **The Bookseller**, was more personal to Marston. It was a friend of his who was killed. But, once again, murder and politics are entwined, and Marston and his friends drew me in.

It's a double murder at night in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris that sucks in the head of security at the American embassy. One of the young people killed was a new intern there, but he was also the son of Senator Norris Holmes. That was enough to draw their attention, but the young woman was a Pakistani who entered the country with a man on the CIA's watch list. That interested Tom Green, Hugo's friend, and the Senator. Hugo tried to convince both of them there was no reason to search for a terrorist, but they needed to look

for a killer. No one wanted to listen to Hugo, other than his friend Capitaine Garcia of the French police.

Chases through cemeteries, boats on the Seine, dancers from the Moulin Rouge... Pryor picks up speed as Hugo follows his own hunches with the help of a reporter and sometimes lover, Claudia. She has instincts and Parisian history that helps Hugo search for a killer.

**The Crypt Thief** has one of my least favorite tropes in crime fiction. It not only follows Hugo and other law enforcement friends, but we see the killer's viewpoint. I'm not a fan, but I am a fan of the characters and setting in the Hugo Marston books. Unless we continue to see the thoughts of killers in future books, I'll continue to read the Hugo Marston novels.

**The Blood Promise** by Mark Pryor (Seventh Street Books, 2014)

Because I'm reading Mark Pryor's Hugo Marston books in order, I reviewed #3, **The Blood Promise**.

While the third book in Mark Pryor's Hugo Marston series had a fascinating two-hundred-years-old mystery, it was also a tragic book. **The Blood Promise** introduced a new character, but the killing of another one was shocking. I made it through the murder, but I cried during the funeral procession. And, Hugo's talk with the widow was emotionally tough for the character and the reader to get through.

In Paris in 1795, an elderly man writes a letter and encloses proof of the letter's importance in a sailor's chest. But, a death changes the course of history. Two hundred years later, as Hugo protects an "ugly American" Senator, that box surfaces again. The senator, sent to France for negotiations between

the US and France, is staying at a chateau, but causes a ruckus when he insists someone was in his room one night. But, French police aren't too concerned about those complaints after they find the box and fingerprints are linked to a murder. Now, Hugo must juggle his responsibilities to the embassy and the senator with the search for a killer. Then, a killer strikes again.

Hugo Marston is an appealing hero, and his Paris is a wonderful setting, almost a character in Mark Pryor's books. The cases Marston undertakes are personal to him, which is why he steps in. He works closely with recurring characters. As I said, there is a tragic death in this one, one that deeply affects Hugo. That depth of feeling, and his connections and loyalty to friends influences this reader's feeling about the characters and the mysteries. **The Blood Promise** is not a fast-paced, action-packed story. These are deep, thoughtful books worth investigating if you like meaty police procedurals.

Mark Pryor's website is  
<http://www.markpryorbooks.com/>

### Reviewed by L.J. Roberts

**Paganini's Ghost** by Paul Adam (St. Martin's Press, 2010)—2nd in series

*Over the half a century that I have been working as a violin maker and repairer, I have had instruments brought to me in many different ways.*

Luthier (violin maker) Gianni Castiglione receives a rare opportunity. He is asked to repair Paganini's famous violin, "The Cannon," for that night's concert by Yevgeny Ivanov, the winner of an international competition. The next day, a Parisian art dealer is found mur-

dered. The only real clue is a corner torn from sheet music belonging to Yevgeny. Also found is a gold box, now missing the 20-cm-long gold and jeweled violin given to Paganini by a sister of Napoleon. Gianni's friend, Det. Antonio Guastafeste, asks his help in solving the murder linked in history to classical music.

There were so many things which made this book stand out for me. The opening chapter is great. Adam is a very introspective writer, which works wonderfully well with his protagonist.

Gianni is 64, widowed, children grown and gone with children of their own. He has a new love, but it is a mature love that allows each of them their own lives and is described in Gianni's description of the universal pattern of our sexual lives. His friendship with Detective Antonio Gustafeste is not only, at times, touching, but also adds some wonderful humor to the story. I love an author who can make me laugh. I also appreciated Gianni's perception of the great churches and his views on faith.

Many authors create a strong sense of place. Adam does that, but he also creates an amazing sense of emotion. Not only does he provide a wonderful description of what sets one instrument apart from others to make it great and valuable, but the way the protagonist feels about being able to touch and play that instrument for just a brief period.

Certainly, it helps to have a love of history, craftsmanship and music to perhaps love this book as much as did I. Adam flawlessly weaves the biographic details of the historic characters and events into the story. Rather than being boring or take you out of the story, it is included in such a natural way as to be fascinating.

The book is also a very well-done mystery. It is a matter of following both the physical and

historic clues. Although there are coincidences, there are bodies, red herrings and twists along the way. I did not solve the mystery before the end.

**Paganini's Ghost** is the second of Adam's violin series and I do hope there are more to come.

**And Only to Deceive** by Tasha Alexander (Morrow, 2005)—1st in series

*Few people would look kindly on my reasons for marrying Phillip; neither love, nor money, nor his title induced me to accept his proposal.*

Emily had only known her husband a very short time when he died during a hunt in Africa. But over a year later, she discovered his journal and found he had loved her and learned of his passion for antiquities. In her efforts to learn more, she learns about stolen and forged artifacts and comes to fear her husband may have been involved in a fraud on the British Museum.

I started this one evening and could not go to bed until I had finished it. It is the perfect blend of Victorian sociology, art history, romance and mystery. The characters are strong and well-drawn; intelligent, independent Emily, her friend Ivy, domineering mother, vapid acquaintances, grand dame Cecil du Lac, the butler Davis and maid Meg, painter Renoir, two handsome suitors, her late husband Philip, and the list goes on.

Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the number of characters, each is so distinct, they make a strong contribution to the story and the growth and character of Emily. You want to personally know these characters, to study Greek antiquities and re-read the Iliad. The romance is appropriate to the period and the

mystery compelling.

I enjoyed **And Only to Deceive**, and enjoyed many of the following books in the series.

**Game of Patience** by Susanne Alleyn (Thomas Dunne Books, 2006)—2nd in series (1st by publishing date)

*Aristide did not often set foot in the Place de Grève.*

Aristide Ravel is an freelance police investigator working for Commissaire Brasseur in Paris. They are called to a fashionable apartment to view a double murder scene. One victim: the apartment owner and, they learn, a blackmailer. The other victim: a young woman from a wealthy family and the blackmailer's victim. A friend of the young woman, Rosalie Clément, points Ravel toward a handsome young man, Philippe Aubry, who the victim loved. She is adamant Aubry is guilty but the evidence is less certain. Ravel must find the true killer and find out why Rosalie is determined to see Aubry beheaded.

First, a caution: Do not read the flyleaf of the hardcover as it gives away too much of the plot without conveying any of the emotion you experience reading the book.

Set two years after "the Terror," it is a fascinating look at Paris after the Revolution. Alleyn's descriptions are exacting and powerful. Her level of research is clear and well represented by the exacting detail included in every aspect of the story. I very much appreciate the information included in the Foreword and Historical Notes.

Her dialogue is excellent. It conveys the cadence of French without trying too hard but, moreover, it conveys strong emotion without ever being strident or histrionic but is, at times, filled with pathos. There is one conver-

sation dealing with fathers and sons which was so well done.

Ravel is such a wonderful character. After his experiences, he dreads the possibility of sending one who is innocent to the guillotine. Each of the characters of this story were very strong, particularly those of Ravel, Rosalie and, to a slightly lesser degree, Sanson. As we get to know each one, we learn more about the others; their history and their motives.

The story is very well plotted, and the plot is driven by motives. There are excellent twists. Even though I perceived the direction one twist would take, the impact was no less powerful when it was realized. The story, and particularly the ending, was sad, poignant and tragic, yet ultimately satisfying. That's a tough combination to pull off successfully, yet Alleyne does it admirably.

**Game of Patience** stayed with me long after having closed the cover. I lost sleep reading this book, even waking in the night to note that it has a very cinematic quality to it and, strangely, made me think of *Casablanca*.

There are four books in this series, plus two standalone books: **A Far Better Rest**, and the excellent **The Executioners Heir**. I cannot recommend them highly enough.

**The Last Troubadour** by Derek Armstrong (Künati, 2007)—1st of 2 books

*The approaching Mayday festival drew larger than normal crowds to the unholy city of Carcassonne.*

It's 1241, Pope Gregory is soon to die and the Inquisition is responsible for the torture, murder and burning of those deemed heretics. Dame Esclarmonde de Foix, the High Lady of the Cathar Christians has been captured and brought to Carcassonne to be tried as a heretic.

Ramon is a Troubadour whose mother had been burned at the stake. With the aid of a sorceress, a Templar, the Baug Balar entertainers and other friends and allies, Ramon has a plan to rescue the Lady.

What a remarkable book. Armstrong symbolizes each of the main characters with a card from the Tarot deck, but each character is also taken from history and the events of the time. It is not necessary to have any knowledge of the Tarot to understand or enjoy this story, yet I found it interesting to learn how old it is.

It's hard to say enough about the characters. Many of them develop as the story progresses. There is Ramon, the talented, fair and roguish troubadour; Arnot, the strong and tattered Templar; Nevarra, an albino woman with a white owl who can cast magic; and many others. They become real; you cheer for the heroes and heroines and you despise the villains.

The story is set after the Crusades to the Holy Lands and the Cathar Crusade, during the time of Inquisition. Armstrong, through his sense of place and the characters, illustrates the brutality of the period. The descriptions of the battles, torture and deaths are graphic and horrible. These are offset these with scenes of humor, charm, romance and a touch of magic; black and white.

The action in **The Last Troubadour** escalates with each chapter to a wonderful conclusion.

**Death in Brittany** by Jean-Luc Bannalec (Minotaur Books, 2015)—1st in series

*The seventh of July was a magnificent summer's day, one of those majestic Atlantic days that always lifted Commissaire Dupin's spirits.*

Parisian transplant Comm. Dupin's morn-

ing coffee is ruined by learning of the murder of Pierre-Louis Pennac, owner of the Central Hotel in Pont-Aven. But who would murder a ninety-one-year-old man? Dupin needs to find out before the crime also murders the town's tourist season.

Dupin is a somewhat deceptive protagonist. At first meeting, one might not be that impressed; yet one's impression quickly changes with the arrival of a murder. He has a slight "Columbo" style of "just one more thing..." that is delightful. LeBar, Dupin's second, is interesting. He has come to know Dupin's style, and to anticipate his needs. Nolween, the woman who holds things together at the police station, is wonderfully resourceful. It is through her that we learn the history of Brittany and the Breton.

Set in Pont-Aven, it is interesting to learn the history of the town and its link to Paul Gauguin and the other artists of his time. Wonderful descriptions provide an evocative sense of place... "Inhale in Concarneau and you tasted sale, iodine, seaweed, mussels in every breath, like a distillation of the entire endless expanse of the Atlantic, brightness and light." "As evening came on, the light became more and more bewitching. The colours of witchcraft: everything shone brightly, warm soft and golden." One is tempted to pack their bags and book a flight.

Food features deliciously in the story. Sometimes there are those things which are not so appealing; others times things such as Dupin's favorite entrecôte and chips; aka rib-eye steak and fries. It's interesting the diversions Bannalec takes in order to provide descriptions of locations. It's not a bad thing, just an interesting style. It is also interesting the way Dupin will plan to, or say that he is going somewhere

immediately, but then doesn't. Bannalec conveys both the satisfaction of solving a case, and the frustration that can come from the actions of the higher-ups afterward. Yet Dupin, as does the ancient town in which he lives, perseveres.

**Death in Brittany** has a plot that definitely keeps one involved, and the motive, when finally revealed, was interesting. There are excellent, shocking twists, yet it is always a delight when one reaches the "ah ha!" moment.

**Blue Madonna** by James R. Benn (Soho Crime, 2016)—11th in series

*It was a nice day for a drive.*

Captain Billy Boyle is court-marshaled, busted down to Private, and sentenced to three months hard labor. But it's all a ruse in order to get Billy behind enemy lines to rescue an Allied soldier currently at a not-so-very "safe house" in France. Not only do they have to worry about the Germans, but someone is killing the soldiers housed there.

What an effective way to start a story. Even though you suspect it's a setup, you don't know where the story is going, but you definitely want to find out.

Sudden bursts of action keep things exciting, but they are nicely offset by things such things as learning more about the background of Kaz, a wealthy man, who had gone to England to study, whose Polish family had been wiped out by the Nazis, now working with the American Army and living at the Dorchester Hotel in London.

Benn does an excellent job conveying the danger of situation, and the risky and important role women played during the war. These weren't clerks in safe offices, but resistance fighters working to defeat the Germans. Add in a murder into the midst, and

Billy's history as a Boston cop comes into play with time to investigate as we witness the inhumanity of the SS.

Pacing is one of Benn's many strengths, along with plotting. You are drawn into the story and kept there, needing to know what happens next. The balance between the hunt for a killer within their midst, while surviving the danger from the war provides a constant tension with highs and lows.

The characters are so very real and interesting. Benn's voice, through Billy, is so well done—"As I stepped over the threshold, I had a momentary feeling of terror as I recalled a story that had scared the hell out of me as a kid. 'The Cask of Amontillado,' about a guy who was tricked into entering a basement niche and walled up inside. Thanks a lot, Edgar Allen Poe." The Count is a wonderful character brought into this book. He is very much a representative of that which is good about nobility; a guardian of centuries of history for his family, his region, and his country, but he is also a father.

**The Blue Madonna** has an excellent triple climax. The book is suspenseful, dramatic, and a bit terrible. There are well-done plot twists. The entire series is so well done. I do recommend starting at the beginning with **Billy Boyle**.

**The First Fingerprint** by Xavier-Marie Bonnot, translated by Ian Monk (Quercus, 2008)—1st in series

*For some time, there had been only a diffuse glow in the sky, a faint light whose source was presumably somewhere behind the jagged row of black rocks, high up there, far above the tiny form now hurrying along,*

*guided by the narrow beam of a torch pointing at the ground.*

Commandant Michael De Palma, of the Marseilles Murder Squad, is the best; he always gets his man. That determination comes into play with the discovery of a brutal murder and a killer who leaves behind a negative impression of a three-fingered hand. The second body, found near a recently discovered underwater cave with pre-historic images, is that of Christine Autran, a professor of the prehistoric era. De Palma feels there will be more killings, all somehow linked to this period.

Because the book was written in French and translated by a Brit into English, there was occasional awkwardness, particularly with the dialogue, but never to where I found the book difficult to read. The descriptions and sense of place were wonderfully done. Having the story set in Marseilles was a nice change, although I have read the Martin O'Brian books set there as well.

I really enjoyed the characters. Bonnot provides their history, as the story progresses, and creates wonderful interaction between them. De Palma is a detective reminiscent of Ian Rankin's John Rebus. He is nearing retirement, loves opera, but other music as well, is not an alcoholic, but his dedication to his job, which comes through in a very visceral way, may be costing him his marriage.

**The First Fingerprint** contains graphic violence, but it is infrequent and offset with excellent suspense, and a hint of romance. There are only four books in the series, but I do recommend seeking them out.

**Folly Du Jour** by Barbara Cleverly (Soho, 2008)—7th in series

*Harland C. White of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania shuffled resentfully after his wife, May, through the Egyptian rooms in the Louvre museum.*

It is Paris, 1927, Lucky Lindburgh has just landed, and Josephine Baker and American Jazz has taken Paris by storm. Commander Joe Sandilands has come to Paris in aid of his friend, Sir George Jardine, who has been arrested for the murder of a fellow Englishman. The possible witnesses, two beautiful blonde women, one who was with Sir George and the other with the victim, have disappeared. Joe, with the assistance of Jean-Philippe Bonnefoye and Francine, a young usherette, work to prove the innocence of Sir George.

Cleverly's Sandilands series is always a delight to read. The insertion of real people into the story adds verisimilitude to the sense of time and place, but sense of place is an aspect at which Cleverly excels. She creates great characters, Joe is one of my favorites, and I certainly didn't figure out the villain.

**Folly du Jour** is a very good read with delightful characters. As always, I recommend starting at the beginning of the series with **The Last Kashmiri Rose**.

**Long Lost** by Harlan Coben (Dutton, 2009)  
9th in series

*"YOU don't know her secret," Win said to me.*

When talent/sports agent Myron Bolitar's girlfriend, Ali, breaks it off, there is no reason not to respond to a call from his former lover, Terese Collins, and fly to Paris. Terese had married, had a daughter who died in a car accident, and divorced.

Myron is stopped, but released, by French

Homeland security, but finds he is followed as he meets with Terese. Things quickly turn to shootouts in cafes, terrorist groups, murder and the possibility that Terese's daughter may, in fact, be alive.

The plot was certainly timely as the story involved terrorism, black sites, torture and twilight sleep. The plot was very good, in a twisty, horrible way, as it dealt with the dangers of extremism, and asks some serious questions while wrapped up in a story with some very real characters.

I had forgotten how much I like these characters; Myron, his parents, Esparanza, Big Cindy and, yes, even Win, about whom we learn a bit more. There is a lot of violence and one scene with Myron's health that does stretch credulity just a bit.

The pace of **Long Lost** never slowed down, from beginning to end. It was an exciting, somewhat thought-provoking, enjoyable read.

**The Cup of Ghosts** by Paul Doherty (Headline, 2005)—1st in series

*"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."*

Mathilde, trained as a physician by her father, finds her life in jeopardy and uprooted. With the Pope's declaration of Templars as heretics, she is taken to her uncle for safety just before her father is executed. The only way for her uncle to keep her safe is for her to become lady-in-waiting to Princess Isabella and, after Isabella's marriage to Edward II of England, escape to England as part of the Royal household.

First in a series of three books, this is as much a novel of French and English history as a mystery. The attention to period detail is exacting.

The story is told in retrospect by Mathilde

and it is interesting to see Mathilde use her training to uncover causes of death during this period. That is not to say, however, that it lacks for danger, intrigue, and bodies galore; almost too much so, for I didn't feel I ever really had time to connect with the character.

However, if turbulent history and court intrigue fascinate you, **The Cup of Ghosts** is the book for you.

**The Confidant** by Hélène Grémillon, translated by Alison Anderson (Penguin Books, 2012)

*I got a letter one day, a long letter that wasn't signed.*

Camille Warner is in publishing, pregnant, abandoned by her lover, and sorting through condolences from her mother's death. One letter, much thicker than the rest, stands out not only for its size, but its lack of either salutation or signature, and seems to be part of a story. As more segments arrive, Camille is curious, thinking perhaps it's an author looking to be published, then intrigued as the characters begin to be identified. As the story evolves, Camille realizes just how personal the story is.

In the beginning, it's not easy to identify which narrator is speaking when. Usually, I find this highly annoying. I don't, however, believe the story really would have worked any other way. I also realized that, after only a few pages, I was so immersed in the story, I didn't mind. In the beginning, there were a few portents—always a major flaw in my view—but even those, I forgive.

The author's/character's voice, with the help of her translator, immediately drew me in. Her writing is punctuated with small truths that are both illuminating and disturbing... "As the curtain fluttered closed I thought of how once

the last survivor of a family is dead, there is no one left to receive letters of condolence." and "It is not other people who inflict the worst disappointments, but the shock between reality and the extravagance of our imagination."

I shan't tell you any more about the characters beyond my summary above. Learning who they are, reading their stories as they unfold and learning how the relationships intertwine is all integral to the plot itself. It should not be spoiled.

The story is set in two time periods; the 1975 present and the years before WWII. I appreciated learning of the milestones in history leading up to the war and seeing the European—in this case French—perspective of events. In some ways, the notions as to how women conceive and remedies for infertility were more disturbing as they were more immediate to the story.

This is a story within a story, within a story, within a story. I was drawn in immediately and kept turning the pages to the very end. Whatever you do, *do not* cheat and read the ending, particularly the poem, until you reach it in its proper time.

**The Confidant** is a very compelling book; I do highly recommend reading it.

**A Bouquet of Rue** by Wendy Hornsby (Perseverance Press, 2019)—12th in series

*From the butcher to the baker to the café tabac, word spread through the village of Vaucreson that Monsieur John-Paul Bernard had moved a woman into the house he had ever so recently shared with his wife, Marian.*

Documentary filmmaker Maggie McGowen is settling into her new life in France and her new live-in relationship with Jean-Paul Bernard and his son Dom, and houseman, Syrian

refugee Ari. Trouble arises when Ophelia, the daughter of Jean-Paul's neighbor, disappears, especially as she was last seen in the company of Ahmad Nabi, a fellow refugee being tutored by Ari. Nabi is also missing. It is important that the teens be found before anti-refugee sentiments get out of control.

Isn't one always curious as to what others say about one? The beginning is a perfect setup for the protagonist to introduce herself and the community in which she now lives, as well as the home in which she now abides. A very well-done summary brings new readers up to date on Maggie, her life, and career.

Set in France, the dialogue includes common French words and phrases. One needn't be bilingual; however, their meaning is either easily inferred, or they are immediately translated, often for Maggie.

Food—one cannot have a story set in France without wonderful food. Ari's fish soup of tomatoes, grilled haddock, onion, garlic, peppers, and fresh oregano sets the juices flowing. However, meals also serve as a way to learn more about the characters, and Syrian refugees—"Afghans don't have surnames unless they decide to adopt one." ... "I had learned that the current wave of refugees pouring out of mid-eastern war zones were, like Ari, more likely to represent their nation's educated urban elite than any other group."

The underlying theme of the story couldn't be more relevant; prejudice, fear, and distrust of those who are different while those who are afraid never make the effort to reach out. It is an irrational fear of the "other" based only on the fact that they are different from "us." This transitions nicely into the equally timely issue of bullying. Hornsby manages this in a way which is easy and natural to the scene.

It is nice to see the character of the police, in this case a policewoman, go from being an adversary to an ally. The detective's reference to Maggie as the fictional Inspector Maigret is delightful.

Maggie is a wonderful character. One can't help but admire her for the way she can handle a difficult situation. All of Hornsby's characters are very human and relatable. This is never truer than when she turns an antagonist into someone for whom we feel true sympathy. Lest one think everything is dark and grim, rest assured there are interjections of humor—"Detective Delisle has her eye on you." ... "Tread gently, my friend, ... She packs heat." Those who love Shakespeare may chuckle at the summary of *Hamlet*. Such bits as these add both veracity and a soupçon of relief to the seriousness of the story.

**A Bouquet of Rue** is as much a commentary on today's social issues as it is a mystery and it is highly effective in both aspects. It reminds us that *schadenfreude*—pleasure derived by one at the misfortune of another—and the "domino effect of revenge" is a fascinating, and rather dangerous, principle worth contemplating. Yet the story also reminds one that life goes on.

**A Desperate Fortune** by Susanna Kearsley  
(Sourcebooks Landmark, 2015)

*My cousin didn't try to catch the bride's bouquet.*

Sara Thomas finds that, having Asperger's Syndrome, it is much easier for her to work on her own. A computer programmer, she uses Sudoku as a way to control her episodes. Presented with the challenge of breaking a cipher, which she does in 17 seconds, leads her to a job within a family home in Paris deciphering

and translating the journal of Mary Dundas, a Jacobite exile yearning for freedom and a place to belong. Divided by centuries, these two women are each on a journey of self-discovery.

Kearsley is an absolute delight to read. She introduces us to an interesting, unusual character, creating an immediate affinity, and then adds a very intriguing puzzle.

Her wonderful descriptions allow us to walk into the middle of a scene... “It was, I thought, the perfect postcard view of what an English village green should look like, right down to the pond at the far corner, with its trailing golden willows and its noisy scrambling ducks...” Yet it’s the details of something seemingly insignificant, such as a man and his gun-shy Gordon Setter, that make such a difference... “He took his glove off when he shook my hand—the mark, my father always said, of a true gentleman.”

Kearsley does a wonderful job of providing a very concise, yet informative, lesson on Scottish history and the Jacobites. She also brings characters across from past books, but in a way that someone reading this, and no other, aren’t left wondering. Sara, our present day protagonist, is a very interesting character and the information on Asperger’s is fascinating but included in such a way that is natural and fits with the flow of the story. Luc, to whom Sara is attracted, is a bit too good to be true, but don’t we all wish. However, it is through him that we learn about French laws related to children and the school schedule.

The dialogue is excellent, capturing the structure of English, French, and Scots characters. There are lovely descriptions of meals, from the simple snack of bread with lots of butter, chocolate and milk or coffee, to a festive dinner... “We had champagne and oys-

ters, smoked salmon on toast and roast pork and a platter of delicate cheeses, with wines for each course and a chocolate log cake for the finish.”

While dual-time-period stories can often be frustrating, Kearsley handles them beautifully. The character and plot in each period hold their own; one doesn’t feel less important or significant and both are equally intriguing. What is even more impressive is that it reflects what usually happens when reading historic texts or journals. We, in the present, have only an overview, somewhat of a summarized view of the events of the past. By including the story from Mary’s point of view, we are privy to the actual events. It is within Mary’s story that we find wonderful suspense and tension. It also opens the door to learning things we otherwise might not, such as the history of fairy tales. And for those who love stories of Highlanders, McPherson is a true, red-headed Scot with two swords, one being a basket-hilt Scottish sword, and the other a dirk.

The depth of Kearsley’s research is very impressive. Within the historic period, much is based on actual figures, places and events, all of which adds richness and veracity to the story.

**A Desperate Fortune** begins in the present, and ends in the past, yet both stories are complete, satisfying and completely wonderful and touch your heart. It’s a definite “must-read.”

**Jacquot and the Waterman** by Martin O’Brien (Headline, 2005; MobukPress, 2023, as **The Waterman**)—1st in series

*They had called there four summers now, at the end of their holiday, on the northern shore of Lac Calade, in the wooded hills above Salon-le-Vitry.*

Chief Inspector Daniel Jacquot is still recognized for scoring the winning try (touchdown) in a Five Nations final 20 years earlier. He's facing a new challenge now with a serial killer who is leaving nude, sexually abused dead woman in various watery locations around Marseilles and becomes dubbed the Waterman. The investigation takes Jacquot among both the criminal and the wealthy, who have secrets of their own to hide.

To quote Amazon: "A wonderful book for the Francophile, it is not only a gripping detective story but also a highly atmospheric novel, bursting with warmth and wit."

Good police procedurals are one of my favorite types of mysteries, and this was good! Jacquot is an interesting and memorable character who is tied to his city, his friends and his past. He may not be lucky at love, but he loves what he does. He is out to get the bad guys, but has a certain realistic viewpoint about it. There were a lot of characters, but I never felt confused.

The suspense begins at the opening chapter and, while not nail biting, is maintained through the story. The dialogue is excellent. Not knowing Marseilles at all, I'd have liked a stronger sense of place, but it didn't diminish my enjoyment.

There are very good twists along the way and even for the one bad guy who gets away you a sense it will catch up with them down the line.

**Jacquot and the Waterman** is the first of 11 books in the series. I highly recommend them to fans of police procedurals.

**All the Devils Are Here** by Louise Penny (Minotaur, 2020)—16th in series

*"Hell is empty, Armand," said Stephen Horowitz.*

Chief Inspector Armand Gamache and his wife Reine-Marie have come from Canada to Paris for the birth of a new grandchild. After a celebratory dinner with their two children, their spouses, and Armand's billionaire godfather, Stephen Horowitz, Stephen is deliberately struck by a vehicle and now lies in a coma. A grim discovery at his apartment prompts an investigation and the uncovering of family secrets leaving Armand to determine just who can be trusted.

Paris is not a city about which one can be objective. It is a city that enthralls from the moment one arrives and, even if one never has the chance to return, it lives within one forever. Penny has captured perfectly that sense of having found the city of one's soul and portrays it perfectly. Even the hardcover book's glorious end sheets, designed by MaryAnna Coleman, draw one into the beauty of Paris. Opening with lines from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is the perfect balance to the City of Light with a history of darkness.

Although not an issue for new readers, series readers may have a sense of being a stranger in a strange land having the story set outside the usual environs of Canada and Three Pines. This was an effective decision as it is echoed by Gamache having the same sense of not knowing who to believe, who to trust. It illustrates the duplicity of people and is effective in heightening the suspense and tension. The connections made back to Three Pines and the Sûreté du Québec are nicely done.

The mystery is well-plotted as it grows upon itself and is delightfully complex taking one down unexpected roads. Yet, more than a

mystery, this is a story of relationships, and with that comes wisdom.

Penny employs her characters wisely. Involving family members as part of an investigation can be risky. However, in this case, no one is superfluous; neither are any of their roles forced or out of character. Each has skills that contribute, and each is humanly imperfect with weaknesses and foibles. In other words, they are real. Even the use of an unseen, yet critical, character is wonderfully done. The theme of abandonment, which appears in various ways through Penny's books, is heartfelt and recognizable to so many.

Penny's ability to place the reader within the story is second to none. Sitting in the hospital, awaiting news of a loved one, you feel, hear, and smell the starkness and desperation of those who are there, and the unwillingness to give up hope. Her use of dialogue is evocative. The banter between Jean-Guy and Armand is always something one anticipates and enjoys, but this was lovely as well— "Please, Dad," Daniel now said. "Tell me you were a commando." "Better." His father leaned closer and dropping his voice further. "I taught commandos."

When reading Penny, there are always lines that make one stop and consider, small lessons to be learned— "It had taken Beauvoir years to see the power of pausing. And of patience. Of taking a breath to consider all options, all angles, and not simply acting on the most obvious." She teaches one the value of seeing not only what is there, but what is not; what is real, and what is facade, and that— "People believe what they want to believe. Beginning with their own lies." "Hell is the truth seen too late," said Reine-Marie."

**All the Devils Are Here** is a book I thor-

oughly enjoyed. It is complex, suspenseful, and emotional with a small touch of the paranormal. It has a cracking good, twisty plot—you don't see where it is going—and an excellent ending. Most of all, it demonstrates Penny's continuing growth as an author and, I suspect, as a person. And isn't that the goal of us all?

**Madam, Will You Talk?** by Mary Stewart  
(William Morrow, 1956)

*The whole affair began so quietly.*

WWII war widow Charity Shelbourne's holiday in France becomes life changing. It starts with a large dog and a young, clearly troubled, boy in Avignon and progresses with a suspicious step-mother, an Englishman who reads poetry and a way-too-handsome Frenchman, via a thrilling car chase, to a man who had been accused, but acquitted, of murder and is desperate to connect with his son, in spite of others desperate attempts to prevent it.

I love Mary Stewart's pre-Merlin books. The story starts off placidly, but you are told things are going to quickly change as all the players are in place. Stewart's writing is incredibly visual. Her sense of place is vivid to the point that you feel the heat and smell the flowers. Her use of analogy is wonderful.

With only a few words, you know who these characters are. Her protagonist is strong, smart and very capable. Her friend, Louise, plays a minor role but is memorable in her own right. I don't always like the way children are portrayed but, again, Stewart has drawn a lovely character in the boy, David.

Stewart creates and builds suspense, but adds just a subtle, mostly off-scene, dash of romance to make a wholly satisfying read. Even the chapter headings add to the story. My only personal nitpick is the use of portents, which is

just a personal irritant for me, but so minor when compared with the rest of the story.

**Madam, Will You Talk?** was an absolute pleasure to read. Best of all, her books never get old.

**This Poison Will Remain** by Fred Vargas, translated by Siân Reynolds (Harvill Secker, 2019) 7th in series

*Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, sitting on a rock at the quayside, watched the Grimsey fishermen return with their daily catch as they moored their boats and hauled up their nets.*

Spider bites can kill. But three elderly men, living in one area, killed by a small reclusive spider seems more than accidental to a member of Inspector Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg's team. As information is gathered, Adamsberg decides to investigate, a decision that causes a rift within his team. Running an unauthorized investigation and possibly losing his best friend and right-hand man is a risk, but seeking justice is worth it.

What an interesting opening to have the protagonist, the former commissaire of the Paris Serious Crimes Squad, on a quay in Iceland. Adamsberg's respite doesn't last long before he is called back to his team who knows him well—"Lieutenant Veyrenc...knew that when the commissaire was in charge, the squad was like a tall sailing ship, sometimes with a brisk wind behind it, other times becalmed and its sails drooping, rather than a powerful speedboat churning up torrents of spray."

For those who have read previous books in the series, there is a feeling of coming home. For those who have not, Vargas conveys the sense of the team members and their loyalty, from the very start. And what a quirky team it

is, filled with affection and respect, right down to the cat, and Mathias, a character from her Three Evangelists series. It's interesting seeing Adamsberg go through the case and the evidence with the team, which adds veracity to the story. The verbal exchanges often make one smile—"It's called Le Curé de Tours, The Priest of Tours." "Thank you," said Estalère warmly... 'Still Balzac didn't bust a gut making up the title, did he?' 'Estalère, one doesn't say of Balzac that "he didn't bust a gut".'

As a historian and scientist, Vargas wrote a definitive work on the bubonic plague, and her knowledge certainly contributes to the story's plot. There is certainly nothing usual or ordinary about this case to which Adamsberg is attracted, as well as the realism of having the squad working more than the one case. There are very good twists and an escalation in the depth of the crimes involved and in the tension within the team. Yet it is all the characters who are the core of the story, including Louise Chevier and Adamsberg's brother, a revelation in his own life, and the return of the imagery of a ship, which keeps us immersed in the story. Vargas plays fair with the reader. As Adamsberg begins to put the pieces together, so may we.

It is very difficult to quantify Vargas' work. She takes one into the world of the best, most unique police squad one will ever find, although some similarities may be made to Christopher Fowler's Bryant and May team.

**This Poison Will Remain** is a story filled with delightful imagery, a unique plot, and a truly touching ending. For those who like the unusual and quirky, reading Vargas can be addictive.

**A Taste for Vengeance** by Martin Walker (Al-

fred A. Knopf, 2018)—11th in series

*On this cool, damp Sunday afternoon in spring, with clouds and rain showers sweeping in from the Atlantic some sixty miles to the west, Bruno Courrèges had his day off.*

With his promotion, from being responsible only for St. Denis to now covering the entire valley and two additional jurisdictions, Bruno is still most involved with the people of his town. One of his star rugby players could be chosen for the French national squad, except that she is pregnant and unwilling to expose the father's name. British tourist Monica Felder was coming to St. Denis for a cooking vacation but fails to show up. Her husband can't be reached, and she, along with an Irishman, is found dead. More than a murder case, the investigation soon goes from murder to possible terrorism.

The map of St. Denis not only orients one, it makes one feel part of the village. The description of the rugby match isn't so much about the game as it is the community and the excitement.

It is such a pleasure to have Bruno be a policeman who is respected by the townspeople, his colleagues, and his superiors, as witnessed by his promotion ceremony. And being France, there is, of course, food—"They would be eating foie gras with a glass of sweet, golden Monbazillac wine, followed by fresh trout with toasted almonds, accompanied by a white wine from the town vineyards, then cheese and salad, tarte au citron and coffee."

Walker does a very good job of introducing all the characters and providing background on them. Bruno's modesty makes him the type of person one would want to know. He is one

of the most well-developed and well-rounded characters one will find. He has a military background and is an excellent cook, he fought in a war, but takes pleasure from acting as a crossing guard when the infant school lets out, he rides and hunts, and teaches tennis and rugby to the town's school children, and the list goes on. Yet Bruno never seems too good to be true as he can make mistakes.

Walker paints such a wonderful picture of St. Denis, both in terms of the physical description—"The day had dawned clear, still chill from the night with the sun not yet above the horizon... the rays began to reach him slantwise through the trees, lighting up the first leaves, brilliant in the pure, fresh green of springtime and serenaded by the dawn chorus of the songbirds."—and the barter system between the town's residents—"His friend Stephané, the cheesemaker, kept Bruno in butter, cheese, milk, and yogurt in return for the ducks, chickens, and truffles that Bruno brought him..." But don't mistake this for a cozy mystery.

Details of the crime scene and forensics, and the information on the victims is very thorough and quite interesting, even for those who are not 'on scene.' As the story progresses and we learn there is more here than a domestic murder, we learn some history and are reminded both that—"terrorists had their own rules" and that hatred and bigotry are passed down from generation to generation—"...some of the old diehards don't give up and many of them try to raise their kids the same old ways, with the same old songs and legends."

**A Taste for Vengeance** meshed the threads of the story in a way that wasn't anticipated, with danger, suspense, and heroism. This is a book to be read slowly so as not to miss the details.

## Reviewed by Lucinda Surber

**The Paris Widow** by Kimberly Belle (Park Row, 2024) begins when Stella and her husband Adam are leaving a tiny Parisian café just a few hours before their flight home to Atlanta. Stella is a flight attendant and Adam is an antiques importer. They have both traveled the world, but never together until this trip. Over the past 21 days they have enjoyed sharing favorite places together, visiting Amsterdam, Malta, and Venice. Walking back to the hotel, Adam realizes he left his sunglasses behind, and convinces Stella to head back alone to finish packing. She is nearly there when an explosion knocks her to the ground. Turning around she spots a thick column of smoke. Pushing through the crowd she discovers the café is now a smoldering hole in the ground, and Adam is nowhere to be found. Stella stays to help give first aid and is interviewed by a reporter, showing a picture of Adam on her phone and tearfully begging for help finding her husband. Back at the Hotel Luxembourg Parc, Stella is visited by Lieutenant Colonel Collumb of the Paris Police Force, who informs her that Adam's Architectural Antiques business is a legitimate front for a secret business dealing in blood antiquities—looted and stolen artifacts. Stella refuses to believe what Collumb is telling her, but can't help remembering the way Adam's eyes lit up when he unrolled a Chagall canvas that looked real, his replica of a Roman statue, the collection of copies of Dutch East India Company coins. Collumb believes Adam was the target of the bomb, which Stella thinks is ridiculous. Then her hotel room is ransacked, and Stella fears that Collumb might be right; whoever was willing to destroy a café full of people to pun-

ish Adam might be after her as well. This exploration of dangerous secrets won the 2025 Edgar Award for Best Paperback Original.

**The Madwomen of Paris** by Jennifer Cody Epstein (Ballantine, 2023) is set in 1880s Paris, in the Salpêtrière asylum housing over 3000 female patients. Laure Bissonet, the daughter of a doctor who died in debt, had a breakdown and was committed to the hysteria ward. Now 19, Laure has been pronounced cured, but with no money or skills is forced to remain at the asylum as a resident ward attendant. A young woman is dragged from an ambulance covered in blood, screaming "Don't touch me!" The woman is suffering from amnesia, and agrees to be called Josephine. Laure is relieved when Josephine is diagnosed by Salpêtrière director Doctor Jean-Martin Charcot as hysteric, sending her to Laure's ward rather than the dreaded lunacy division few women emerge from. Charcot treats his hysteric patients with hypnotism, and Josephine proves to be the perfect subject, falling quickly into an hypnotic state and then progressing through his sequence of four hysterical stages: "epileptoid, clonic, passionate poses, delirium." Josephine is quite attractive, and quickly becomes the star of Charcot's public lectures to eager men from the press, authors, and wealthy patrons who enjoy seeing scantily clad women responding to Charcot's hypnotic directions. Josephine has no memory of the hypnotic sessions, and asks Laure to tell her everything that happens. In the passionate poses section Josephine acts out the sexual and physical abuses she endured from the age of 14 by the master of the house she worked in. Others interested in neurology, like George Gilles de la Tourette and Sigmund Freud, visit to study under Char-

cot, learning to use his hypnotic technique. As time goes on and the hypnotic suggestions become more suggestive and sexual, Laure begins to worry that the hypnosis is not helping Josephine, but instead making her fears worse, keeping the memory of rape constantly at the forefront of her mind. In fact, Laure suspects the only reason she herself recovered was because she was not susceptible to hypnosis and thus left alone to recover on her own. The two young women grow closer, and Laure plots an escape from the asylum. This frightening historical thriller inspired by actual events in the Salpêtrière asylum was a finalist for the 2024 Edgar Award for Best Mystery.

**The Paris Apartment** by Lucy Foley (William Morrow, 2022) begins when Jess Hadley spends most of her limited funds traveling from London to Paris, fleeing a threatening boss and an ill-conceived revenge. Her older half-brother, aspiring journalist Ben Daniels, has reluctantly agreed to let her live with him for awhile in his Paris apartment. The half-siblings aren't close, but Jess has always tried to keep in touch with Ben, and she is surprised when she arrives at the swanky apartment building and he isn't there to let her in as promised. An unpleasant resident tells Jess that Ben isn't there, but Jess watches him enter the code to the gate keypad and slips in as soon as he vanishes into the dark courtyard. On the third floor Jess uses her hoop earrings to pick Ben's lock, entering an apartment much larger and grander than she imagined. She recognizes an old khaki jacket of Ben's on the coat stand, and finds his keys and wallet in the pocket. Inside the wallet is the business card for Theo Mendelson, Paris editor, *Guardian*. Scribbled on the back of the card is a note in Ben's hand-

writing: "Pitch story to him!" Over the next few days Jess talks to Ben's neighbors but they all deflect her questions, claiming to know nothing about where Ben might be. Interspersed sections from the perspectives of the residents reveal the secrets they keep hidden from Jess. Sophie Meunier (penthouse) is the victim of blackmail. Timid young Mimi (fourth floor) is infatuated with the charming Ben. Ben's old friend Nick (second floor) connected Ben with the empty apartment and now regrets that kindness. Antoine (first floor) is an aggressive alcoholic who suspects Ben was having an affair with his wife. The Concierge (the loge) rarely leaves her small cabin except to clean and deliver the post, warning Jess it is dangerous for her to stay. The last voicemail Jess received from Ben giving her the address and number of his apartment is interrupted by the sound of the door hinge, a groan, and then silence. Jess plays the message for Theo, who agrees it is very strange, but has no idea where Ben might be or what the big story he was researching is about. Together Theo and Jess try to track Ben's movements while Jess becomes increasingly convinced she can't trust any of the building residents and may even be in danger herself.

**Creation Lake** by Rachel Kushner (Scribner, 2024) is the tale of "Sadie Smith," a former FBI agent who was let go after an accusation of entrapment, now working for the private sector. Her current assignment is to infiltrate Le Moulin, a rural French commune of radical environmentalists suspected of destroying heavy equipment at the nearby construction site for a new reservoir. Sadie used the "cold bump" technique to meet Lucien Dubois, a wealthy Parisian filmmaker and boyhood friend of

commune leader Pascal Balmy. Six months later Sadie and Lucien are a couple, and he is talking marriage. Sadie tells Lucien she was making a living as a dog walker in Paris, and Lucien is concerned she is wasting her life. He suggests she might translate the book Pascal and his friends wrote into English, since she has too much free time while he is working. Lucien has inherited the decaying Dubois family home near Le Moulin, and Sadie sets off to make it her home base while working on Pascal's book and spying on the commune. Pascal's political views were inspired by his older mentor Bruno Lacombe. Sadie has access to Bruno's email, and is enthralled by his messages describing the last twelve years he has spent living in the caves he discovered under his home. Bruno is obsessed with the Neanderthals, whom he calls Thals, citing their superiority over the Homo Sapiens for many reasons, including their talent for abstract art and discovering tobacco can be smoked. Bruno's conviction that returning to the ideals of the ancient past is the only way to free oneself from the constant distraction of modern life is seductive, especially since Sadie is increasingly weary of her own existence. This reflective noir exploration of activism, espionage, and the meaning of life was shortlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize.

**The Anomaly** by Hervé Le Tellier, translated by Adriana Hunter (Other Press, 2021) is the story of the passengers on an Air France flight from Paris to New York. In March 2021 the plane traveled through "the storm of the century," but managed to land safely. Three months later JFK air traffic control receives a distress call from the same plane piloted by the same pilot, Commander David Markle, and

carrying the same passengers. ATC verifies the pilot's information along with the fact that Markle is currently on life support at Mount Sinai Hospital. General Patrick Silveria takes over communication with the plane, informing Markle he is activating Protocol 42 and re-directing the plane to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. Meanwhile, Professor Adrian Miller, a probability expert and professor at Princeton gets a call on the bulletproof charcoal-gray smartphone he has been carrying at all times since 2001, when he and fellow mathematician Tina Wang inventoried and developed protocols to handle all possible air traffic catastrophes following the events of 9/11. The two young researchers identified 37 basic protocols along with contingent pathways for response. After submitting their 1500+ page top-secret report, the Department of Defense returned it with one question: "What if we're confronted with a case that fits none of the situations covered?" Sure that that would never happen, the two created Protocol 42, named after the question asked in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and recommended in that instance scientists should be entrusted with the solution, writing their own names and recommending the bulletproof cellphones. Adrian and Tina are transported to the Pentagon, and tasked with figuring out what to do with the duplicated 13 crew members and 230 passengers aboard the Boeing 787. Interspersed chapters introduce characters from the plane, including a contract killer, a Nigerian pop star hiding his sexual orientation, a Black American lawyer pressured into working for Big Pharma, and an author who wrote a book called *The Anomaly*. Changes have occurred in the 106 days between flights: the breakup of a relationship, a cancer diagnosis, a pregnancy, a

suicide. When the characters are eventually introduced to their duplicates, they struggle with questions of identity and the alluring yet frightening possibility of making different choices than their doppelgänger. This mind-bending mix of thriller and speculative fiction is fascinating.

**Murder Takes a Vacation** by Laura Lippman (William Morrow, 2025) features Mrs. Muriel Blossom, a former assistant to private investigator Tess Monaghan. Now widowed for ten years, Mrs. Blossom is uncertain about her place in the world after her daughter's announcement that her family is moving to Tokyo and no longer needs her assistance with the grandchildren. She decides to use some of her new-found wealth from a winning lottery ticket on a cruise through France. On the transatlantic flight to her connection in London, Mrs. Blossom meets Allan Turner, a handsome silver-haired gentleman who explains the wonders of business class and offers her a melatonin gummy to help her sleep, gifting her the vial of gummies to help overcome jet lag when she arrives in France. Concerned about possible issues when going through customs, Mrs. Blossom hides the gummies in the secret compartment in her pill case that already stores her diamond stud earrings. Arriving at her hotel in Paris, Mrs. Blossom texts Allan that she has arrived safely, but doesn't get a response. At a crowded restaurant, a charming young man asks to share her table, introducing himself as Danny Johnson, a stylist in town for Fashion Week. The next day Danny whisks her off to a designer friend who creates a striking caftan dress, the most comfortable and flattering outfit she has ever worn. Returning to the hotel, Mrs. Blossom finds the

police waiting, explaining that her text was the last Allan Turner received before falling to his death from his hotel balcony. After boarding the small cruise ship, Mrs. Blossom is surprised to see Danny again, now claiming to be an agent with the FBI's stolen art division in search of a missing antiquity, a small statue of a Quqnoz, a mythical bird stolen from Pakistan. Mrs. Blossom has no idea what the missing statue has to do with her, but her brief connection with Allen has made her the focus of suspicion and she has an uneasy feeling she is being followed during the excursions on land. Series fans will enjoy Mrs. Blossom's calls to Tess Monaghan for advice, though Mrs. Blossom proves capable of drawing her own conclusions about how far to trust the new people she meets.

**The Stranger in the Seine** by Guillaume Musso, translated by Rosie Eyre (Back Bay Books, 2023) begins when Paris police Captain Roxane Montchrestien tries to resign after a violent street protest targets the police. Her boss convinces her to take a reassignment to the Bureau of Unconventional Affairs (BUA), taking some time to reconsider her decision. The BUA was set up in 1971 to handle unusual cases the judicial police couldn't find a rational explanation for, and has been mostly idle for years. The sole investigator is Superintendent Marc Batailley, an old-timer from Major Crimes counting down the days to retirement. Batailley is unconscious in the hospital after taking a bad fall down the cast iron spiral staircase from his tiny office in the belfry four stories up in the narrow building. Roxane discovers a young woman on the second floor landing: Sorbonne student Valentine Diakité doing research in the strange old case files dealing

with phenomena like hauntings, telekinesis, and mind control. Roxane tries to evict her, but Valentine offers to run errands in exchange for the opportunity to continue her research. On the answering machine Roxane finds a message from the prefecture infirmary: a naked young woman with two recent tattoos on her ankles was pulled from the Seine in a state of total amnesia. In German, the woman asked them to call Marc Batailley. The woman was transferred to a clinic, and then vanished, leaving only a handful of long blond hair and a bit of urine in the toilet. Since Roxane no longer has access to police resources, she sends Valentine off on her moped with the samples to a private DNA lab. The results that arrive a day later are startling: the live woman pulled from the Seine is Milena Bergman, a famous German-Swedish pianist killed in a plane crash a year earlier, the body identified by DNA at the time. Milena was engaged to Marc Batailley's son Raphaël, currently in seclusion while working on his latest novel. Roxane's investigation leads her into a maze of secrets and deception in this engrossing thriller.

**Goering's Gold** by Richard O'Rawe (Melville House, 2022) finds former IRA soldier James "Ructions" O'Hare living in Saint-Émilion, France, with his share of the £36.5 million National Bank of Ireland robbery he orchestrated three years earlier. Eleanor Proctor, the bank employee he seduced and then fell in love with, is enjoying their quiet life, assured by Ructions that the IRA, who were unjustly blamed for the robbery, will never find them to collect a cut of the money. Then IRA Commander Robert "Tiny" Murdoch spots Ructions on the street, surprising them both. Ructions gets in touch with his fence Serge Mer-

cier, who doesn't know how the IRA tracked Ructions down, but confesses he is worried about another matter. Ructions arranges a meeting, but before he can get there five disguised men with German accents invade Serge's Lake Geneva mansion, demanding the Ceremonial Field Marshal's baton Reichsmarschall Herman Goering received from Hitler, and killing Serge's elderly butler who didn't make it into the safe room. French Police Superintendent Thierry Vasseur arrives to investigate the murder, finding a sheet of paper in Serge's office with the word RUCTIONS and a phone number. Serge admits to Ructions that he does indeed have Goering's baton, moved recently to his safe deposit box when he learned that a Neo-Nazi group led by Karl Keller and calling themselves the Fourth Reich, was searching for the baton, believing it holds a clue to the location of the gold bullion plundered by Goering. Ructions gets the baton from Serge's bank, and discovers a painting hidden inside, indicating the gold is somewhere in Ireland, which was neutral during the war. Hunted by both the IRA, the Fourth Reich, and the French police, Ructions has to use all of his cleverness to stay one step ahead, keep Eleanor from being kidnapped, and find the gold. Second in the series, this heist thriller is great fun.

**Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace** by Olga Wojtas (2022) begins when middle-aged librarian Shona McMonagle, a time-travelling former pupil of the Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh, is transported to the tiny French Alpine village of Sans-Soleil. The village, circled by high mountains, is in constant shade. Shona knows only that she is there for one week to solve a problem, but has

no clue what the problem is. She meets a group of five men: the mayor, the judge, the teacher, the police officer, and the undertaker/cheesemonger. The men are surprised that Shona has suddenly appeared in their remote village, clothed appropriately in a period outfit except for her beloved Doc Martin boots. After a short argument about how to pronounce her name, settling on Madame Maque Monet Gueule, and that Scotland is not the same as England, Shona is asked why she is there. Noticing a newspaper with the date July 9, 1900, she declares that she is there for the celebrations on the fourteenth, meaning Bastille Day, but the village instead celebrates Cheese. The group decides Shona should board with newly widowed Madeleine, whose husband Sylvain, the previous police officer, was torn apart by wild animals in the forest. Madeleine, who was not allowed to see her husband's mutilated body before burial, insists he is still alive and searches for him every day. Shona asks for tea, which is unavailable, and settles for coffee without milk, which is also unavailable. A child arrives to milk Madeleine's cow, and then scampers off with the bucket of milk, meeting other children in the street carrying milk to the cheesemonger. Shona assumes the children are engaged in some sort of practical biology lesson, but soon learns they haven't had a proper academic lesson since the previous teacher was also torn apart by wild animals in the forest. Despite the abundant buckets of milk, the cheese shop is shuttered, and there is no milk for sale at the tiny store. Wondering if her mission has something to do with the wild animals in the forest, Shona convinces Madeleine to lead her to the English milord's castle on the edge of the forest. There she meets Lord Erroll, a thin man with his face mostly hidden

by a muffler. He offers Shona homemade shortbread and tea, reluctantly providing a small portion of milk. Lord Erroll tells Shona the castle was built to order, replicating his favorite windowless octagonal room from the family castle in Slains, Scotland. It isn't until she has left the castle that Shona makes the connection to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, written when he was on holiday in Port Erroll, just next to Slains. She immediately concludes that all the villagers are vampires, living in Sans-Soleil because of they can't abide sunshine. One wrong conclusion after another finally leads Shona to the end of her mission, rescuing the village and restoring milk for their tea. This second in the series starring the well-educated whiz at obscure martial arts is perfect farcical fun.

**The Excitements** by C.J. Wray (William Morrow, 2024) starts when London art gallery owner Archie Williamson meets his great-aunts Josephine and Penny in Sloane Square. Archie is in charge of planning weekly "excitements" for his great-aunts, and today's lunch is to discuss their upcoming part in the VE Day celebration at the Royal Albert Hall. Both in their late 90s, the great-aunts served in World War II: Josephine was a Wren (Women's Royal Naval Services) and Penny a FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry). Archie first met his great-aunts as a child, and the small boy immediately bonded with the two women in their 60s, who treated him as a small adult and were interested in his opinions and preferences. The sisters taught Archie to live life by their philosophy, borrowed from a fictional alley cat named Mehitabel—one must be *toujours gai*. Soon after the Albert Hall celebration Archie gets a call from the French ambassador to London. The sisters have been

nominated for the *Légion d'honneur* for their services to France in the war. Archie is thrilled about a trip to Paris, and his great-aunts don't have the heart to tell him that secretly each has her own reason for not wanting to go. Excerpts from Penny's diary from July 1939, when she and Josephine were spending the summer with relatives in Paris, reveal events that changed both their lives. Just 17, Josephine fell in love with August Samuel, who showed them the safe hidden in the floorboards of their apartment bathroom, filled with jewels smuggled out of Austria when the family fled to Paris. Meanwhile Penny (14) discovered she had a talent for languages, and was soon fluent in French. Their idyllic summer was ended by a telegram from their father, "War imminent. Send girls home." Back home Josephine suffered through a mysterious illness and then

joined the Wrens, and Penny became a FANY as soon as she was old enough. Archie has always suspected that the great-aunts had a more exciting past than they revealed, especially after Aunt Penny quickly dealt with a would-be mugger using just her umbrella on their way home from a late show. In Paris Archie is horrified to realize that Josephine's Wren nemesis Davina Mackenzie, who now claims the honor of being the oldest surviving Wren, is also being awarded the *Légion d'honneur*. Meanwhile Penny, who also has a talent for shoplifting, is planning a heist to settle old scores, hoping to finally put an end to events that have haunted her for decades. This enjoyable caper novel is the first under the C.J. Wray pseudonym by romance author Christine Manby.

## Children's Hour: Mysteries Set in France by Gay Toltl Kinman

### Picture Book

Bazaldua, Barbara. Don Williams, Illus. **The Hunchback of Notre Dame: Quasimodo the Hero** (Golden Books, 1997)

This classic is simply told with lots of illustrations. And as the subtitle states—Quasimodo is a hero. In medieval Paris, Quasimodo is the bell ringer of Notre Dame, and is hunchbacked. He is a hero because he saves Esmeralda, a gypsy dancer, from being unjustly executed.

Gruener, Nina. Stephanie Rausser, Photographer. **Kiki & Coco in Paris** (Cameron + Company, 2011)

Kiki has a doll named Coco. They are inseparable. However, they do get separated in

Paris. How will Kiki find her again? Folio size.

Lagonegro, Melissa, adaptor. Disney Storybook Art Team, Illus. **Beauty and the Beast** (Golden Books, 2017)

Belle finds herself in an enchanted castle. And then she meets the Beast! By getting to know him she finds out that you can't judge a book—or a beast—by its cover. Who is this mysterious Beast? Only Belle can uncover the secret.

Lewis, J. Patrick. Gary Kelley, Illus. **The Stolen Smile** (Creative Editions 2004)

Who has the most famous smile? Mona Lisa. The painting was stolen from the Louvre in 1911. Thief Vincenzo Peruggia tells how and why he stole it.

Mancuso, Jackie Clark. Hudson and the Puppy series: **Lost in Paris** (La Librairie Parisienne, 2018)

Hudson, an American dog living in Paris, finds a lost puppy. Hudson takes him on a tour of Paris hoping he will recognize his neighborhood.

Seignobosc, Francoise. **Noël for Jeanne-Marie** (Scribner, 1953)

Patapon, a sheep, is worried that he doesn't have a wooden shoe to leave out for Father Noel. The shoe will be filled with presents as it is for its owner, who is a little French girl. Can someone solve this problem?

### Early Middle Reader

Galdone, Paul. **Puss in Boots** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016)

Puss, a clever cat, outwits an evil giant so that a poor young man can gain a fortune and a beautiful princess. Now, how did Puss do that?

Greenhut, Josh. Macky Pamintuan, Illus. Flat Stanley's Worldwide Adventures series. **Framed in France** (Harper, 2014)

The premise of the series is that Stanley Lambchop is flat, almost like a silhouette, but that doesn't stop him from doing things that a boy can do. To help catch the possible thief of the Mona Lisa, he poses as a painting on the wall. Yes! And he has more adventures in Paris.

Kulling, Monica, adaptor. Stepping Stones Classic. **Victor Hugo's Les Misérables** (Random House, 2005)

Jean Valjean is an escaped convict trying to lead an honest life. He risks everything to care for a young orphan girl during political up-

heaval in Paris.

### Middle Reader

Baratz-Logsted, Lauren with Greg Logsted and Jackie Logsted. Lisa K. Weber, Illus. The Sisters 8 series. **Petal's Problems** (Sandpiper, 2010)

Petal, one of the Huit octuplets, gets her power in the month of June. She needs it desperately to stop crazy Aunt Serena from trying to kidnap Rebecca and planning to throw her off the Eiffel Tower while the rest of the family attends a wedding. Let's hope Petal succeeds!

Berna, Paul. Charles Keeping, Illus. John Buchanan-Brown, Translator. **Flood Warning** (Pantheon Books, 1963)

A French boarding school is isolated by a raging flood. A boy and his teacher help fellow school members escape—no matter what their differences are. An English translation of *La Grande Alerte*.

Bennett, Cherie and Jeff Gottesfeld. **Anne Frank and Me** (Putnam's 2001)

In the present day, Nicole Burns suffers a concussion while on a class trip to a Holocaust exhibit. Through the miracle of time travel, she meets Anne Frank, living in Nazi-occupied Paris. What happens next? How will she get back to her internet diaries and boy troubles? Adapted from the play *Anne Frank and Me*.

Clewes, Dorothy. **Missing From Home** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978)

Two English children living in France devise a scheme to bring their parents back together so they will all be a family again. How can they do that?

Haldar, Raj. Beatriz Castro, Illus. World Travelers series. **World Travelers and the Big**

**Chase in Paris** (Sourcebooks eXplore, 2023)

Eddie and MJ travel with their teacher Ms. Cassatt to a city art museum—Paris’s Louvre—and discover an art thief!

Harper, Paris. Marcos Calo, Illus. Greetings From Somewhere series. **The Mystery of the Stolen Painting** (Little Simon, 2014)

Twins Ethan and Elia are on the hunt for a secret bakery and a stolen painting. Or is it the other way around?

Hunt, Elizabeth Singer. Brian Williamson, Illus. Secret Agent Jack Stalwart series. **The Mystery of the Mona Lisa**. (Weinstein Books, 2007)

The *Mona Lisa* painting is stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris. Is Jack’s Hypo-Disk a match for the glove that shoots laser beams? Better yet, can he outsmart the thief?

Kelly, Karen, Adaptor. Eric Scott Fisher, Illus. **Alexandre Dumas’s The Count of Monte Cristo** (Magic Wagon, 2011)

In 1815, Edmond Dantes is sent to prison, wrongly convicted. He escapes many years later and finds a treasure, which he uses to take revenge.

Leeds, Constance. **The Unfortunate Son** (Viking, 2012)

Luc becomes the apprentice to a fisherman. Life is good—until it isn’t. He is kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery. The story is set in France and moves to Africa during 1485 to 1500. How does he get out of this mess?

Messner, Kat. Kelley McMorris, Illus. **D-Day: Battle on the Beach** (Scholastic 2018)

Ranger, a search and rescue golden retriever, time-travels to Normandy on D-Day. Leo, a Jewish boy, and Walt, an American sol-

dier, team up to save France from the Nazis.

Miller, Eugenia. **The Sign of the Salamander** (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967)

A schoolboy time-travels back to France during the reign of Francis I in the 16th century. The king is also the final patron of Leonardo da Vinci. Mystery and adventure are part of the story.

Moss, Marissa. **Mira’s Diary. Lost in Paris** (Jabberwocky, 2012)

Mira receives a postcard from her missing mother. The postcard is from Paris so she and her father and brother go there. She discovers her mother is in trouble—but not in this century. How can Mia reach her, solve her problem and bring her back?

Norris, Zack. **The Tunnel of Bones** (Sterling Children’s Books, 2012)

In Paris, twins Otis and Cody Carson, father Hayden and cousin Rae discover a crime wave there. Priceless paintings are disappearing, being replaced with excellent forgeries. The family hides out in the Louvre to catch the thieves.

Osborne, Mary Pope. Sal Murdocca, Illus. The Magic Tree House series, Super Edition.

**World at War 1944** (Random House, 2017)

Siblings Jack and Annie go back in time to 1944 when England is being heavily bombed. The two are also parachuted into Normandy, France, behind enemy lines on June 5 to crack a code. What are their chances of getting back to the tree house? The Super Edition is a longer story with additional facts and photographs. Previously published as **Danger in the Darkest Hour**.

Peacock, Shane. **Last Message** (Orca Book Publishers, 2012)

Adam flies to Paris following the request of his dead grandfather. He has three tasks—find a lost painting, a famous book, and a forbidden cave. What clues does he have? How well will he do?

Phelan, Matt. **The Sheep, the Rooster, and the Duck** (Greenwillow, 2022)

In 1783 Benjamin Franklin has Emilie, 10, as his caretaker. He finds himself involved in a sinister plot so he helps France's undercover guardians—sheep, rooster and duck—to save the world. I'm sure B.F. is enjoying this story wherever he is.

Sachar, Louis. **Holes** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996)

Stanley Yelnats is under a curse and has been unjustly sent to a detention center, Camp Green Lake—a dried up lake. There the boys 'build character' by spending all day, every day digging holes exactly five feet wide and five feet deep. Stanley soon learns what it's all about. The warden is looking for something—hence the holes in the dried-up lake. Stanley intends to find out what they are all digging for.

### Junior High

Alender, Katie. **Marie Antoinette, Serial Killer** (Point / Scholastic 2013)

How's that for a title! Colette Iselin is in Paris on a class trip. She thinks there's a possible connection between Marie Antoinette, a series of gruesome murders—and maybe her own family history.

Dickens, Charles. Edited, abridged and annotated by Joanna Jellinek. **A Tale of Two Cities** (D. McKay Co 1976)

The two cities are London and Paris. The

French Revolution is in full swing. Aristocrats are losing their heads—literally. Charles Darnay gave up his title years ago—yet now he is scheduled to be guillotined. Can he be saved?

Dumas, Alexandre. Thomas Kidd, Illus., Lowell Bair, Translator. **The Three Musketeers** (William Morrow, 1998)

In the early 1600s in France, D'Artagnan befriends three musketeers—Aramis, Athos, Porthos. They join together to outwit the enemies of the King and Queen—the main ones being the Cardinal and the duplicitous Milady.

Gibbs, Stuart. The Spy School series. **Double Cross** (Harper, 2013)

Greg and the Musketeers return to Paris to find it under siege. They try to prevent the overthrow of King Louis. Will they change history?

Penot, Jessica. **The Monster Hunter's Manual** (Our Street Books, 2014)

All that's left of Gabriel's family is his whiny baby brother—and their crazy aunt. The two boys have to live with her. She owns the castle Château Larcher in France, where the walls creak and groan. Haunted? Gabriel learns that not all skeletons are scary and ghosts can be interesting. Great title!

Ryan, Carrie. **Divide and Conquer** (Scholastic, 2012)

In medieval Paris, Dak, Sera and Riq help the inhabitants repel the imminent invasion of the Vikings. That's hundreds of ships carrying thousands of warriors. Are the three in over their heads? Sequel to **A Mutiny in Time**.

Selznick, Brian. Jeff Woodman, Narrator. **The Invention of Hugo Cabret** (Scholastic Audio,

2007)

In 1931, Hugo, 12, is an orphan. He repairs the clock in a busy Paris train station. He is also a thief who lives in the walls of the station. His survival depends on no one knowing he's there. The old man, who runs the toy booth in the station, and his young goddaughter change all that. Hugo tries to sort out a cryptic drawing, the appearance of a mechanical man, and a hidden message from his dead father—but not get caught. Also in DVD.

Tolin, Rosanne. **Freedom's Game** (Reycraft Books, 2024)

In 1942, Ziggy is sent to an orphanage for Jewish children in northern France. The Nazis control the country. A new gym teacher, Georges Loinger, offers to help them escape to Switzerland as they are in danger. Ziggy and his new friend Elka think he might be a Nazi spy—which means they will not be free. What kind of game is Georges playing?

## Young Adult

Banks, Lynne Reid. **Melusine: A Mystery** (Harper, 1991)

Teenage Roger and his family are vacationing at Château de Bois-Serpe. The other residents are Monsieur Serpe and his daughter Melusine. He orders Roger to stay away from his daughter. But Roger suspects something evil is going on and he's going to find out what it's all about.

Mobley, Jeannie. Mary Sarah, Narrator. **The Jewel Thief** (Viking, 2020)

Set in 17th-century France. Juliette Pitau is the daughter of a master gem-cutter. She is about to be executed as she is charged with stealing a valuable diamond. She hopes by telling the story of how King Louis XIV's blue diamond was stolen, she will be released. René, the scribe for the court who is taking down the story she is telling, is the man she loves. However, he is carrying a grudge. Tune in to find out what happens!

## Meurtres en ... France by Kate Derie

Mystery and crime dramas are just as popular in France as they are in the US and UK. *Murder in...* / *Meurtres en...* is a catch-all collection on MHz Choice that includes unrelated French TV movies from a variety of regions outside of Paris, grouped into 15 “seasons” according to when they were first broadcast on MHz. There are currently 171 crime dramas in this group, mostly featuring investigators from the *Police nationale* (formerly called the *Sûreté*) and the *Gendarmerie*, with an occasional forestry or maritime officer. Many shows include a romantic subplot and/or a family reconciliation. As in all of MHz's

shows, there are large, readable subtitles, and a few of the more popular shows are also available in dubbed versions, including six seasons of *Murder in...*

In addition to *Murder in...*, there are close to 100 mystery series from France on MHz, across the spectrum of subgenres from quirky humor (*Captain Marleau*) to gritty procedural (*Spiral/Engrenages*). They include two classic Maigrets: The French series from 1991–2005 with Bruno Cremer, and the BBC series from the '60s with Rupert Davies. Check the MHz webpage at <https://watch.mhzchoice.com/france> for more shows than you could binge in

the entire summer.

*Deadly Tropics / Tropiques criminels*, is set on Martinique. This Caribbean series, filmed on location, feels to me more true-to-life than *Death in Paradise*. The *Hôtel de Police* (in French, *hôtel* means any large building) has been battered by tropical weather until it looks about ready to fall down. We see houses that are sometimes little more than shacks, but rooms are touchingly decorated with colorful calendars and one or two treasured pieces of porcelain. We even see the actors feeling the heat occasionally. It must be said that the main characters follow some of the common tropes—the boss of the homicide squad looks like a fashion model, her partner is a loose cannon who can be counted on to break the rules at least once per episode, their boss is exasperated, and the *médecin légiste* (medical examiner) is frankly goofy. But they each have their own unique qualities and over the course of six seasons (so far) I have come to be quite fond of them. MHz, Netflix, Tubi.

*The Art of Crime / L'art du crime* starts with a somewhat implausible premise: a cop who constantly overreacts with violence in the field is reassigned to the Art Crime squad, where hopefully he can do less damage. Unfortunately, Capitaine Verlay (Nicholas Gob, ubiquitous in French crime drama) responds to art like a tone-deaf person reacts to music—he just doesn't get it. To help out with the specialized aspects of their cases, the squad's boss brings in an art historian who is so involved with her subject that she has visions in which she sees and talks with the artists. Yes, of course an ongoing romantic subplot ensues, while the writers create all kinds of obstacles that cause the two to deny their feelings for yet another season. Meanwhile they combine their

special talents to investigate unusual art thefts, murder in the Louvre, and so on. It's fun and even educational, especially if you look up things online to see if the show gets the facts right. MHz (12 two-part stories); Amazon (6 two-part stories). New season in July.

*Candice Renoir* is a favorite with my female friends and me. Although the basic premise sounds rather like a Hallmark movie—a recently-divorced homicide officer moves back to France after ten years away, and copes with a hostile squad at work and four active children at home—the characters are so well-written and appealing that they quickly become like personal friends. The show nicely balances weekly cases with the long, long arc of Candice's life and loves. (MHz, 97 eps.).

*Détectives* centers on a family who owns a traditional detective agency and decides to merge with a more modern, cyber-oriented investigator (Sarah Martins, *Death in Paradise*). Wonderful characters and focus on family dynamics. (MHz, 16 eps 2013–2014; Discovery+ has eps 9–16.)

There are also French crime dramas outside of MHz. PBS Masterpiece offers *Astrid* (French title *Astrid et Raphaëlle*), which follows impetuous officer Raphaëlle Coste (Lola deWaaere) as she discovers the unique talents of neurodivergent archivist Astrid Nielsen (Sara Mortensen). The two women learn to work together and rely on each other, and their strengths balance each other to make them a uniquely effective investigative team. Astrid's place on the autism spectrum is treated sympathetically, including portrayal of her weekly support meetings where a small group of neurodivergent individuals discuss their interactions with neurotypicals—one of the most appealing parts of the show. Besides its very high rating on IMDb

(8.2) and the Tomatometer (91%!), you know this show is successful because it's been remade for the UK as *Patience* (which is very different and surprisingly good).

Netflix gives us *HPI* (*Haut Potential Intellectuel*) aka *HIP* (*High Intellectual Potential*), which stars Audrey Fleurot (*Spiral*) as a woman with a different kind of neurodivergence. She is simply brilliant in terms of IQ, but she is a hot mess in terms of her everyday life. Initially working as a cleaning woman at the police station, she knocks over the crime board and when she puts everything back, the solution is obvious. Unlike Astrid, Morgane never seems to learn how to cope—she is constantly late, forgets to pay her bills, etc. She gets on my nerves a bit, but there are some good laughs as she manages to get out of her tangled situations while solving the crime of the week. Fortunately, her initially uptight partner has learned to relax a bit or Morgane would send him to the asylum. It was remade for the US as *High Potential*, set in Los Angeles

(on Hulu).

France loves a good criminal and the character of gentleman thief Arsène Lupin is a national icon. To update the idea, the creators of *Lupin* centered their series on a Senegalese immigrant named Assane Diop, who is inspired by the novels to become a master thief. Then the show guaranteed a hit by getting the charismatic Omar Sy (*Intouchables*) to play the lead. The series kicked off with a dizzying caper as Assane stole a diamond necklace from the Louvre. Perhaps he inspired the 2025 jewel theft at the same location! A Netflix Original Series; season 4 starts this fall.

I have given both English and French names for these series because you never know which name IMDB and the streaming service are going to use. In particular, many of the *Meurtres en ...* episodes appear in IMDB under the name they had when they first appeared as standalones on French TV, while MHz calls them *Murder in ...* some location.

## Spiral (*Engrenages*): France's Compulsive Masterpiece of Crime, Corruption, and Character by Pattie Tierney

If you're in pursuit of one of the absolute best police investigation series ever produced—in any language—then *Engrenages*, known to English-speaking audiences as *Spiral*, should sit proudly at the top of your list. This French powerhouse ran for eight seasons and a whopping 88 episodes from 2005 to 2020, delivering consistently brilliant television that feels as fresh and urgent in its final season as it did in the first.

Make yourself a sandwich before you even press play. In the same way that *Line of Duty*

had viewers glued to the screen, *Spiral* is sensationally compulsive viewing. It's not just about the crimes; it's the richly drawn characters whose messy personal lives prove every bit as riveting as the cases they're trying to solve. And be warned: once you sit down to watch this, hours will slip by in what feels like minutes. You'll emerge from a binge feeling strangely jetlagged, blinking at the daylight, wondering what day and time it is.

What sets *Spiral* apart is its authentic portrayal of the French judicial system, where de-

tectives, investigating magistrates, prosecutors, and defense lawyers work cheek-by-jowl on the same cases. This constant friction—cops battling not only criminals but also political corruption and obstructive bureaucrats—creates a deliciously tangled drama. The series shows the daily reality of justice as a messy, compromised, and often infuriating business.

At the heart of it all is Caroline Proust as Captain Laure Berthaud. Initially somewhat off-putting with her uptight demeanour, Proust's performance deepens beautifully over the seasons. Laure is small but mighty, fighting to be as tough as the men around her while quietly yearning for a partner, children, and something approaching a normal life outside the force. She's a wonderfully sympathetic character who earns every bit of your loyalty.

Then there's the glorious Audrey Fleurot as the flame-haired, continuously vexing lawyer Joséphine Karlsson. Beautiful, ambitious, and utterly ruthless, Joséphine wouldn't hesitate to stab her own mother in the back if it furthered her career. She's the sort of villainous delight you love to loathe—and yet you cannot look away. Fleurot makes her so watchable that you'll find yourself half-rooting for her even while plotting her demise.

One of my personal favourites is a veteran of French TV, Philippe Duclos, as the eccentric investigating magistrate, Judge Roban. Weird, intense, brilliant, and more than a little unsettling, he's the kind of character who simultaneously draws you in and makes you want to edge your chair backwards. Duclos delivers a masterclass in quirky gravitas.

Adding a generous helping of eye candy (and moral complexity) is Grégory Fitoussi as the prosecutor. He's exasperating, endearing, and quietly tragic all at once—another figure

you'll find yourself unable to stop watching.

And then there's my absolute favourite: Thierry Godard as the streetwise detective Gilou. Warm, loyal, and endearingly roguish, Godard brings real heart to the police team. (American viewers may recognize him from *A French Village*, where he played Raymond Schwartz.)

Everything about *Spiral* clicks: the clever, twisting plots, the superb ensemble acting, and the way it interweaves major investigations with smaller, often bizarre side cases. These miniature stories aren't padding—they brilliantly illustrate the chaotic, never-dull reality of detective work. The energy and creativity on display are astonishing, making the entire series feel like a sustained triumph of smart television drama. I spent days in mourning after this series ended.

There are occasional moments of gore—mutilated or charred corpses do appear—but they're handled with restraint. A quick glance away is usually sufficient, and they never derail the momentum.

Critically, *Spiral* earned the acclaim it deserved: multiple Globes de Cristal nominations (with one win), a BAFTA nomination for Best Drama, and the 2015 International Emmy Award for Best Series. Yet it remains a bit of a hidden gem for many international viewers who assume subtitles will be a barrier. Trust me—after a couple of episodes, you won't even notice you're reading them. You'll be too busy gasping audibly at plot twists, only to look around and wonder where that noise came from.

*Spiral* is an absolute must-watch. It's literate, layered, addictive television that respects your intelligence while refusing to let you go. Clear your schedule, stock the fridge, and pre-

pare to lose track of time. You won't regret a single jetlagged minute.

*Spiral* is currently available for viewing on the MHz Choice streaming platform.

Pattie Tierney has been a devoted mystery reader for as long as she can remember. For twenty years, she has channeled her passion into design-

ing unique mystery-themed jewelry, which she sells through her popular Etsy shop. A food blogger as well, she recently released her debut cookbook, **Murder on the Menu: Recipes from Sleuthing Stars**, a delicious collection of recipes from actors, authors, and fellow mystery enthusiasts.

## Jean Gabin—the Greatest Maigret *by Jim Doherty*

The term “police procedural” wasn't yet coined when Georges Simenon was, at the age of 15, hired as a police reporter for the *Gazette de Liège* in Belgium. But it was only a year or so later that he made his way to the neon-lit avenues of Paris, France, where he worked as a journalist. He was also selling short fiction, and was starting to be recognized for his crime stories.

In the course of his work as a police reporter, Simenon became familiar with the famous Parisian detective, Commissaire Marcel Guilleme, who commanded the *Brigade Criminelle* at Paris Police headquarters, 36 Quai des Orfèvres. By the late 1920s or early '30s Simenon had conceived of a character who had the same job as Guilleme. Physically, though, this character, burly and powerful looking, slow-moving and slow to anger, more closely resembled Simenon's father.

Simenon's protagonist, Commissaire Jules Maigret, made his debut in **Pietr-le-Letton** (Fayard, 1931). An English language edition, **The Strange Case of Peter the Lett**, was soon published in the UK (1933), translated by Fulton Oursler.

The character was off and running. Simenon wrote and sold another *nineteen* Maigret novels over the next two years.

Movies would soon follow.

Pierre Renoir became the first actor to portray Maigret on the screen in *La Nuit du carrefour* (1932), written and directed by the actor's brother, Jean Renoir, who'd go on to have an astonishingly successful career in film. It was based on Simenon's seventh Maigret novel, first published in English in 1931 as **The Crossroads Murders**.

Other films, featuring other actors playing the wily detective, followed. Over the next two decades, Maigret was portrayed by Albert Prejean, Harry Baur, Abel Terride, Michel Simon, and Maurice Manson, among many others.

One English-language film, *The Man on the Eiffel Tower* (1950), shot on location in Paris, was the first film ever made in color in the French capital, but was financed with US money, and cast with American and British actors. Based on Simenon's novel **La Tête d'un homme** (1931), translated by Geoffrey Sainsbury as **A Battle of Nerves** (1939) *The Man on the Eiffel Tower* is gorgeous to look at, but it stumbled by casting Charles Laughton as Maigret. An exaggerated mustache, rather than making Laughton look authoritative, merely seemed to add a comic touch.

And those were just the Maigret films made in (if not necessarily by) France.

Movies and TV series featuring the character have been made in, among other places, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Hungary, and even the Soviet Union. Over thirty different actors have played Maigret since he first appeared in *La Nuit du carrefour*. And, occasionally, the actors chosen have been badly miscast.

Laughton wasn't the only misstep.

A current *Maigret* TV series, being run on *Masterpiece* (PBS, 1971– ), stars Benjamin Wainwright as a bearded, tousle-haired, grungily dressed millennial Maigret. Wainwright, said to be in his late 30s, but looking at least a decade younger, possesses nothing that suggests Simenon's authoritative character.

But, at that, Wainwright's an improvement over the actor cast in the role just prior to him, Rowan Atkinson. A superlatively talented comedy actor, Atkinson was painfully miscast as Maigret in a series that, after initially airing on ITV in 2016–17, streamed in the US on BritBox and Ovation.

Still, not all comparatively recent Maigrets have been misfires. The late Bruno Cremer was widely, and justly, praised for his interpretation of the character in a long-running French TV series (1991–2004) that adapted a large number of the original novels and stories.

Rupert Davies, on a BBC-TV series (1960–1963) and Michael Gambon on an ITV series (1992–1993) both earned accolades for their performances.

Gerard Depardieu has received solid commendations for his recent interpretation in a film titled simply *Maigret* (2023), based on Simenon's novel *Maigret et la jeune morte* (1954), published in the US as *Maigret and the Dead Girl* (1955).

But there was one actor who stood out above all the others. Even Simenon thought so. Appearing in three films between 1958 and 1963, he, more than any other portrayer of Maigret, captured the essence of the character. What Jeremy Brett was to Sherlock Holmes, what Humphrey Bogart was to Sam Spade, what David Suchet was to Hercule Poirot, this actor was to Simenon's iconic cop.

By the time he was cast as Maigret, Jean Gabin was already a major force in French, indeed in world cinema. Among other roles, he played the title character in *Pepe le Moko* (1937), a WW1 fighter-pilot-turned-POW in *Le Grande Illusion* (1937), and a lovestruck stevedore in *Moontide* (1942). Along the way, he was awarded a Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin Film Festival, and a Volpi Cup for Best Actor given at the Venice Film Festival.

He was also capable of real-life heroism. During the Nazi Occupation of France, he enlisted in the Free French Forces, fighting under General DeGaulle as a tank commander, earning the *Médaille militaire* and the *Croix de guerre* for his service.

Following his war service, he returned to film, appearing in a variety of movies, including, in a kind of preview of his Maigret role, the cop in a film version, set in contemporary France, of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1956).

The book that award-winning filmmaker Jean Dellannoy chose to adapt was **Maigret tend un piège** [Maigret sets a trap] (1955), in which Maigret leads the search for a serial killer who has already murdered five women in the Montmartre neighborhood of Paris. His back against the wall, Maigret resorts to using policewomen who fit the killer's victim profile, as decoys to try to lure him into a trap.

Gabin was splendid in the role.

The film was a huge, international hit. In France alone, *Maigret tend un piège* (1958) sold more than two and a half million tickets. Released in the US under the title *Inspector Maigret*, it got solid, enthusiastic praise from American film critics, wowed audiences, and won director Dellanoy and his two script-writing collaborators, Michel Audiard and Rudolph-Maurice Arlaud, an MWA Edgar Award for Best Foreign Mystery Screenplay.

It also was nominated for three BAFTA Awards in the UK, including Best Film from Any Source, and Best Foreign Actor for Gabin.

But the highest award was the approval of Maigret's creator.

Georges Simenon was cautiously optimistic when Gabin was cast, saying, "I believe that Jean Gabin will be nearest to Maigret, to the idea that the public has of Maigret and, in any case, to the idea that I myself have of him."

When he saw the finished product, he was unabashedly enthusiastic.

"Gabin has done an incredible job," he said after viewing the film. "He's spoiled the rest for me a bit, because I can't picture Maigret any more except with his features."

Ironically, there was, no English-language edition of the novel available, which meant that Simenon missed out on what might have been lucrative "movie tie-in" sales. An English version, translated by Daphne Woodward, was finally published in the UK as *Maigret Sets a Trap* in 1965.

The success of the film led to an almost immediate sequel, this one based on one of the earliest novels in the series, *L'Affaire Saint-Fiacre* (1932), published as *The Saint-Fiacre Affair* (1941) in the US, as translated by Margaret Ludwig.

In the film version, *Maigret et l'affaire Saint-Fiacre* (1959), as in the novel, Maigret is summoned to Saint-Fiacre, the small town in which he grew up, by an anonymous letter predicting that a murder will occur in the town's church during the All Souls' Day Mass. When the prediction comes true, Maigret, though having no official authority, sticks around to investigate.

Jean Dellanoy returned as director, and again collaborated on the script with Arlaud and Audiard.

Gabin was again praised for so perfectly embodying Simenon's character.

With its small-town setting, "whodunit" plot, and Maigret's status as an "outside investigator," the story seems less like a Simenon novel than one by Agatha Christie.

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it does introduce a note of dissonance. The film was never released to US theatres, but was eventually made available for home viewing on DVD as *Maigret and the St. Fiacre Case*.

Four years would pass before Gabin returned to the role. The final film in the trilogy was *Maigret voit rouge* [Maigret Sees Red] (1963), directed by Giles Grangier and written by Grangier and Jacques Robert. It was based on *Maigret, Lognon et le Gangsters* (1951), published in the US as *Inspector Maigret and the Killers* (1954), as translated by Louise Varrèse. The film was released in English-speaking countries as *Maigret Sees Red*.

This was the most action-packed of the Gabin trilogy, as Maigret and his squad, along with the hapless Inspector Lognon, a recurring character who works out of one of the district stations rather than headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres, go after a trio of American gangsters who are wreaking havoc in the City of

Light. There's a nice scene in which Maigret goes to the US Embassy to consult a friend who's the FBI's diplomatic attaché in France. They actually speak to each other in English, and the subtitles disappear (presumably, in the prints released in France, the subtitles are added).

*Maigret Sees Red* does not, perhaps, have the stylistic flourishes that the first two Delannoy-directed films do, but it's got a special place in my heart, since it's based on the first Maigret novel I ever read, back when I was 12 or 13, and transitioning from the Hardy Boys and the Three Investigators to Sherlock Holmes, Perry Mason, Ellery Queen, George Gideon, and the

87th Precinct.

Gabin never returned to the role after *Maigret Sees Red*. He'd occasionally appear in other crime films, sometimes playing the bad guy (as in *Action Man*, 1967), sometimes the good guy (as in *Pasha*, 1968, in which he portrayed a Maigret-like cop), and the male lead in *Le Chat* (1971), an adaptation of a non-Maigret novel by Simenon.

But, though he never portrayed Maigret again, his stamp on the character is indelible.

Not the first. Not the last. Not the most frequent.

Just the *best*.

The very best Maigret ever seen on film.

## True Crime France by Cathy Pickens

Readers expect a French murder mystery to have a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a clever difference in scene and circumstance, something to savor, like an airy croissant. As with food and mysteries, when it comes to true crime, the French have certainly added their own something special.

### *Crime Passionnel*

A crime of passion isn't uniquely French, but the French have a long history of treating those accused of crimes committed in high emotion with more drama and indulgence than other jurisdictions. A *crime passionnel* is defined as a violent act done on sudden impulse and with intense provocation. In such a case in the US, a homicide charge may be reduced to involuntary manslaughter, but never given outright forgiveness.

On March 16, 1914, a murder occurred in Paris that brought passionate crime into the international spotlight. Madame Henriette

Caillaux was the wife of the French foreign minister, but their love affair began years earlier when they were both married to other spouses. When she asked, Henriette's husband quickly granted her a divorce. However, Joseph Caillaux had more trouble freeing himself; he'd been married for only two years, and his wife was reluctant to part with him, delaying his divorce for at least three years.

Joseph and Henriette finally married in 1911. With their inherited fortunes, the Caillaux became one of the wealthiest couples in France.

Soon after their wedding, while he served as France's prime minister, Joseph settled rising tensions with Germany by gaining Morocco as a protectorate in exchange for ceding interests in the Congo. This action spurred rumors and political attacks on Joseph that grew amid the gathering tensions leading to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, and the start of World War I one month

later.

Then attacks on Caillaux by rival newspapers became personal. News editors lined up on either side, according to their political stances as liberals or conservatives, in favor of appeasing the Germans or of opposing their power grabs. In the fervor, according to Henriette's later court testimony, *Le Figaro* and editor Gaston Calmette published lies about her husband and caused all of Paris to direct ridicule and vilification at her and her husband.

The biggest lie, she said, was that her husband sold Congo for advantages that yielded him a small fortune. With part of his ill-gotten gains, his enemies reported, Joseph bought Henriette a bejeweled crown worth 750,000 francs—millions of dollars of buying power today. An outright lie? An exaggeration? Misinformation from a “reliable source”? No matter. Because *Le Figaro* was a well-regarded paper, she said, she couldn't ignore its attacks the way she would have if it had been “gutter press.”

Editor Calmette also published a love letter from Joseph to Henriette, written during their lengthy adulterous affair, that contained a dynamite political revelation. Of concern to Henriette was that the paper also printed the pet name Joseph used with her: “Ton Jo.” The “Ton Jo” letter alerted Henriette that Calmette might have other, spicier love letters exchanged by the foreign minister and his then-mistress.

Was the paper motivated only to show voters what Joseph Caillaux's true politics were? Or would it also print his love letters, for the purpose of humiliating him? Caillaux's stance on several issues had given him a stable of enemies.

Henriette would not wait to see what else Calmette would print. She took a taxi to the of-

fice of *Le Figaro*, walked into Calmette's office, pulled a Browning pistol from her fur hand-muff, and shot him four times. He died later that day. She never denied what she'd done. She believed her action justified by his outrageous behavior.

In *la belle époque* France, readers loved their *feuilleton*, the newspaper section that focused on gossip and fashion. And newspapers loved to give them what they wanted. The Caillaux case delivered it all—a wealthy family, tricky pre-World War I politics, a doubly adulterous relationship, and now, a colorful and unrepentant female killer. What could be better? French newspapers weren't restrained by defamation laws and freely speculated on evidence, giving opinions on guilt and innocence even before the criminal trial began.

Likely because of the *carte blanche* allowing French newspapers to speculate, more than one news editor had been killed for reporting scandalous accusations. The cases were well-known in France. In one 1898 case, Mme. P, as she was known, had unsuccessfully tried several times to meet with *Lanterne* editor M. Millerand. When he wouldn't see her, she shot his secretary instead. The jury acquitted Mme. P, agreeing with her defense attorney that not a jury in France would have convicted her.

Henriette Caillaux's trial began on July 20, 1914. She was given free rein to tell the jury “everything that seems useful to you.” Thanks to the international interest in the case, she could tell the world her story. And she knew how to weave a captivating tale. She had to be convincing; she faced the death penalty or life at hard labor in prison.

In reporting on the trial, *Le Figaro* naturally found nothing redemptive in her testimony. They described her appearance as having “the

banality of a shop girl” and her testimony as dry and emotionless. According to historian Edward Berenson, another paper described her as a Valkyrie, “a death rider from the depths of Wagner’s imagination.”

No matter what the press said, the jury acquitted Mme. Henriette Caillaux. Her defense argued that her emotional state and the actions of others in precipitating those emotions were to blame, not her. She was, after all, a woman and therefore easily ruled by her passions.

The Caillaux case became the archetype for *crime passionnel* trials, in large part because of the notoriety of the parties, their place in the growing turbulence of European politics, and the self-righteous assuredness of the defendant, Henriette Caillaux.

### Crime-Fighting Firsts

French firsts in crime fighting are numerous and important, including forensic photography, the first organized attempt to identify and catalogue criminals, and the first forensic crime lab. Before Alphonse Bertillon began his work in 1879, police would arrest criminals without any way to know of any prior criminal acts. Booking photographs existed, but, without the clear close-up or front and side views or good lighting that are now routine, the photos couldn’t match new arrestees with their criminal pasts. Bertillon advocated the widely accepted front-and-side view close-up mugshots.

Bertillon also pioneered photos of crime scenes. He photographed victims *in situ*, showing the items close to the body, the wounds, the clothing (or lack), the placement and shape of blood spatter—what we’re accustomed to seeing in current-day crime scene photos. He also created a tall tripod that he could place

over the victim’s body, to snap a downward view showing more clearly how the body was situated.

In 1879, he also developed the meticulously detailed Bertillon system for cataloguing those convicted of crimes. Within a year of implementing the system, Bertillon had identified over 240 repeat offenders that would have entered and left the jail system without anyone linking them to their prior crimes.

The Bertillonage system had its drawbacks. Taking eleven measurements of bony parts of the human body (head width, middle finger length, etc.) was difficult, time-consuming, and easily inaccurate. But it was the best system available, and, thanks to Bertillon’s passionate promotion, it spread across parts of Europe, the US, and elsewhere until the early 1900s, as fingerprints inevitably became the gold standard for identification.

In 1903, the case that highlighted the flaws in Bertillon’s system was documented at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. William West was serving a life sentence for murder when a man named Will West entered the prison, charged with a less serious offense. Prison officials were befuddled because William’s and Will’s measurements were identical. Their photographs were eerily similar, both front and side views. The clear difference, though, was their fingerprints.

Fingerprints were already gaining ground as reliable identification; the case of the two Wests emphasized the reasons why. Bertillonage soon faded away.

In 1910, another French contribution to crime-fighting opened in Lyon. Dr. Edmond Locard created the first forensic science lab. Interestingly for mystery lovers, Locard was a Sherlock Holmes fan. The way Holmes used

scientific study inspired Locard's work using science to solve real-life crimes.

Locard, famous for his maxim that "every contact leaves a trace," expanded on his teacher Bertillon's work with scientific techniques and gathered experts to create a scientific hub where investigators from around France and Europe could have evidence analyzed in troublesome cases.

### The Poisoned Pens

Law enforcement officers around France began calling on Dr. Locard and his lab when faced with the unsolvable. Among his other investigations into using science to fight crime, Locard spent time exploring handwriting analysis or graphology, which studies handwriting characteristics to identify the writer's likely personality traits—a "study" discredited now. (Interestingly, graphology was a study that Bertillon refused to invest time in.)

In 1917, a spate of poison-pen letters began arriving at houses in Tulle, France, the manufacturing town famous for producing tulle fabric, the stiff net used in bridal dresses and ballet tutus. It wasn't the first outbreak of venomous letters in Europe or the US, and it wouldn't be the last.

Often, poison pen writers were impossible to identify. But in Tulle, Locard's study of handwriting comparisons proved valuable in finding the author of more than 100 letters, sent over a five-year spree.

As men left jobs to serve in World War I, women were admitted into the workforce in places where they wouldn't have been hired before the war. That's how Angèle Laval became typist for the *préfecture* or police station in Tulle. Sometime after she began work, Angèle became obsessed with her boss, Jean-

Baptiste Mouray. The exact course of her unrequited passion isn't clear, but when all else failed, she decided to arouse his protective instincts by sending him an anonymous letter besmirching her character.

When Mouray finally shared the missive with her, she showed him an equally nasty note she'd received—one attacking him as a seducer. Not surprising to sane and sensible people, Angèle's ruse failed to lure Mouray. To add insult to her wounded longing, Mouray began dating a new typist in the department: Marie-Antoinette Fioux. The poison letters really started flying, like missives from Hogwarts.

The Fioux-Mouray affair cooled—not because of the poisonous letters but because Marie-Antoinette saw Mouray leaving the house of yet another mistress, the mother of his illegitimate child. With all the intrigue, one wonders how the police department in Tulle ever got any work done. Letters sent about this secret lovechild served to chill the affair because Mouray wrongly suspected Marie-Antoinette was the letter-writer. Who else could know about the affair and the child?

Any celebration on Angèle's part was dashed after Marie-Antoinette convinced her lover that she wasn't to blame. The couple married—and Mouray invited Angèle, his lovelorn typist, to the wedding.

Not surprisingly, the letters really began to fly after that. Now, her recipients weren't limited to workers at the *préfecture*. She took aim at any number of citizens. When everyone in town began keeping watch over the post boxes, hoping to catch the writer, Angèle started sprinkling notes around on windowsills, on sidewalks, in building hallways. Long before cyberbullying, the malicious use of ink and

pen could prove permanently ruinous to some recipients and impossible to link to the writer. In Tulle, the scandals from the letters ruined job prospects and social standing, led to divorce, suicide, and admissions to asylums. By the 1920s, the *New York Times* was reporting on the French victims who harmed themselves because of the letters.

Writing poison-pen letters wasn't a crime in France. Nonetheless, their ill-effects permeated the town. According to the thorough research into news reports by Amber Miner, from Seattle Mystery Bookshop, investigators "employed a sorcerer, a hypnotist, a medium," and a priest—who recognized the handwriting on a letter-in-progress when he called upon Angèle Lavale and her mother. [See Amber Miner's blog link in References below for a deliciously detailed account of the case.]

In January 1922, to solve the case, citizens collected funds to hire Locard. He studied the available letters—and they provided plenty of words for analysis, most in embellished capital letters.

Locard eventually called eight women to come together to the prefecture, including Marie-Antoinette, Angèle, her mother, and a couple of their female family members. In a grueling session of lengthy dictation, accompanied by bouts of weeping and fainting, Locard got what he needed to name Angèle as the primary writer, with her mother as a probable copycat.

After the truth came out, condemnation drove the two women together to a pond, pledging to commit suicide. Only Marie-Louise, Angèle's mother, succeeded.

Angèle was charged with defamation of character, though the statute of limitations had run on all but the latest letters. Her attorney, Victor Filliol, mounted a fierce defense, in-

cluding intense cross-examination of Dr. Locard and using "alienists" (early forensic psychologists) to argue she was not a criminal but rather should be confined to an asylum.

The jury found Angèle Laval guilty, with a one-month suspended jail sentence and 300 francs for a combined fine and compensation to the victims. She remained in seclusion until her death in 1967. Though the Tulle outbreak had another one hundred-plus poisoned pen letters written by obvious copycats, none of those writers were identified or prosecuted.

**More reading.** Golden Age mystery writers did not ignore the dramatic possibilities presented by real-life cases of poison pen letters. According to Curtis Evans writing in *CrimeReads*, the first poison-pen novel was Ethel Lina White's *Fear Stalks the Village* (1932). Nasty letters also featured in Dorothy L. Sayer's *Gaudy Night* (1935), Agatha Christie's *The Moving Finger* (1942), Edmund Crispin's *The Long Divorce* (1951), and Robert Barnard's *A Little Local Murder* (1976), among others. [See link to Curtis Evans' *CrimeReads* article on other poison pen cases in fact and fiction.]

## References

C. A. Asbury. "A Fingerprint Fable." *Identification News*, Nov. 1987, and <https://caasbrey.com/a-fingerprint-fable-the-will-and-william-west-case/>.

Edward Berenson. **The Trial of Madame Caillaux**. (Univ. of Calif. Press, 1992).

Curtis Evans. "Early 20th Century's Strangest Crime Wave." *CrimeReads*, March 10, 2020. <https://crimereads.com/poison-pen-letter/>.

James W. Garner. "Criminal Procedure in France," 25 *Yale Law J.* 255-284, 279 (Feb. 1916).

Amber Miner. “Murder by Mail: Art Imitating Life.” <https://my52weekswithchristie.com/home/>.

Cathy Pickens’s award-winning mystery series has been re-issued by Joffe Books as the Blue Ridge Mountains Mysteries (with new titles).

The last book in her ten-volume regional true crime series with History Press, **True Crime Stories of the South Carolina Lowcountry**, is available. **True Crime Stories of the South**, originally a Books-A-Million exclusive, was reissued by History Press in December 2025.

## From the Editor’s Desk by Janet Rudolph

It’s always wonderful to be in France, but since it looks like I won’t be there any time soon, I am glad that I can revel in the beauty, food, and culture through reading mysteries that take place there. Luckily, there is no shortage of crime fiction set in France! Let this issue be your guide. *Trop de livres, trop peu de temps*.

And, if one issue on Mysteries Set in France isn’t enough, we have had two others.

**Volume 28, No. 1: 2012: Mysteries Set in France:** <https://mysteryreaders.org/journal-index/mysteries-set-in-france/>

**Volume 16: No. 2: 2000: Mysteries Set in France:** <https://mysteryreaders.org/journal-index/mysteries-set-in-france-2/>

I first visited Paris many, many years ago when I was studying in Italy. After that introductory trip, I visited France once a year for the next five years or so, including a summer where I worked my way throughout France visiting cathedrals and museums, eating bread and chocolate on the train, and trying my best to speak the language.

Several years later when I became more “adult,” I had the opportunity to return to France. It was exciting and satisfying to be able to dine in good restaurants and stay at nice places. No more bread and chocolate. I made more several trips where I drove through the

countryside and ate at 1- and 2-star country restaurants. I also got to stay overnight on Mont-Saint-Michel and at several chateaux, while traveling through Brittany and Normandy, as well as winding my way through Burgundy, other wine regions, and ending up on the Côte d’Azur.

But the coup de grâce for this Francophile—I married a French teacher! O.K. An American with an African French accent, but French! Alas, for the past several years, I have not been to France. Work, family, and health have prevented my return, but I’ve “visited” through the many mysteries set there. Thank you, mystery writers.

**UPCOMING ISSUES.** The next issue of the **Mystery Readers Journal** will focus on Cross-Genre Mysteries. **Cross-genre fiction** blends the themes, tropes, and conventions of two or more distinct literary genres. It doesn’t fit neatly into one category. A **cross-genre mystery** is a story that retains a central investigation or puzzle at its heart, but layers in other distinct genres such as science fiction, fantasy, or Westerns. In terms of our next issue, we are not including historical mysteries, as we have had five Historical Mystery issues of *Mystery Readers Journal* on that theme.

We did have one past issue of **Cross-Genre Mysteries** in 1999 (Volume 15: No. 1):

<https://mysteryreaders.org/journal-index/cross-genre-mysteries/>

**Deadline** for articles, reviews, and author essays for this **Cross-Genre** issue is **August 15, 2026**. Articles: 500-1000 words; Reviews: 50-100 words; Author Essays: 500-1000 words about yourself, your books, and the “Cross-Genre” connection. Be sure and add a title and 2-sentence bio. Subject line: Cross-Genre Issue. Send to: [janet@mysteryreaders.org](mailto:janet@mysteryreaders.org).

The final issue of **Mystery Readers Journal** for 2026 will focus on **Mysteries Set in India**. Deadline October 10, 2026.

**Mystery Readers Journal** is available with a subscription (PDF) that includes all four yearly issues (<https://mysteryreaders.org/subscribe/>), or as single copies available at Amazon. We also have past print copies available on the website, and we’ll post links to future print copies on our website, as they are published. <https://mysteryreaders.org/journal-index/>.

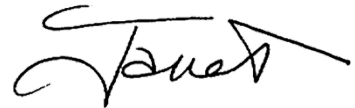
**MACAVITY NOMINATIONS:** Thanks to everyone who nominated books and stories for the **Mystery Readers International Macavity Awards**. The nominations list is on the back cover. Watch for your ballots.

**BEHIND MY GARDEN GATE:** We had a lot of rain early on this year, and my garden is spectacular. Roses are now in their second bloom,

the fruit is ripening, and everything is verdant. The rabbits are mostly still in the canyon, so it’s only the squirrels eating the buds and flowers, but they, too, are getting plenty to eat elsewhere. We do have a fox den in one of the gar-ens behind mine (my property borders four other properties). The fox has kits, and they’re darling. They sit on my back fence, and occasionally, on my deck. My ravens have fledglings, who entertain us every day with their antics. They had four this year! Noisy, but so much fun to watch. It’s quite the nature preserve here! My garden keeps me sane in this crazy world. You can get glimpses of my garden (*Behind My Garden Gate*) on my Facebook profile page. <https://www.facebook.com/janet.rudolph/>

Be sure and check out my blog *Mystery Fanfare* ([www.mysteryfanfare.com](http://www.mysteryfanfare.com)) for mystery info, articles, reviews, holiday-themed lists, and more. Want some chocolate with that? Stop by my blog *Dying for Chocolate* ([www.dyingforchocolate.com](http://www.dyingforchocolate.com)) for recipes and chocolate reviews. One can never have too much chocolate.

Have a great summer! *À la prochaine.*



Janet A. Rudolph, Editor • Kate Derie, Associate Editor

All unattributed material in the *Mystery Readers Journal* is written by Janet A. Rudolph, Editor. MRI 2026 membership is \$15 for PDF download, and includes a subscription to Vol. 42 of the *Mystery Readers Journal*. Subscribe at [www.mysteryreaders.org/subscribe](http://www.mysteryreaders.org/subscribe). Links to purchase print copies of Volume 42 of the *Journal* will be available on the website as each issue is published. E-mail [janet@mysteryreaders.org](mailto:janet@mysteryreaders.org). ISSN 1043-3473. © 2026 Janet A. Rudolph, all rights reserved.

## Macavity Nominations 2026 (for works published in 2025)

### Best Mystery Novel

**Crooks** by Lou Berney (William Morrow)

**King of Ashes** by S.A. Cosby (Flatiron Books)

**Clown Town** by Mick Herron (Soho Crime)

**River of Lies** by James L'Etoile (Oceanview)

**The White Crow** by Michael Robotham  
(Scribner)

**All This Could Be Yours** by Hank Phillippi Ryan  
(Minotaur)

### Best Mystery Nonfiction

**Vacations Can Be Murder: A True Crime**

**Lover's Travel Guide to New England** by  
Dawn M. Barclay (Level Best Books)

**Blood and the Badge: The Mafia, Two Killer  
Cops, and a Scandal That Shocked the Nation**  
by Michael Cannell (Minotaur)

**Murderland: Crime and Bloodlust in the Time  
of Serial Killers** by Caroline Fraser (Penguin)

**V Is for Venom: Agatha Christie's Chemicals of  
Death** by Kathryn Harkup (Bloomsbury Sigma)

**Edgar Allan Poe: A Life** by Richard Kopley  
(University of Virginia Press)

**Cooler Than Cool: The Life and Work of Elmore  
Leonard** by C.M. Kushins (Mariner Books)

### Sue Feder Memorial Historical Mystery

**Bye Bye Blackbird** by Elizabeth Crowens (Level  
Best Books)

**A Daughter's Guide to Mothers and Murder** by  
Dianne Freeman (Kensington)

**City Lights** by Claire M. Johnson (Level Best)

**The Case of the Christie Conspiracy** by Kelly  
Oliver (Boldwood Books)

**The Case of the Missing Maid** by Rob Osler  
(Kensington)

**No. 10 Doyers Street** by Radha Vatsal (Level Best)

### Best First Mystery

**Savvy Summers and the Sweet Potato Crimes** by  
Sandra Jackson-Opoku (Minotaur Books)

**Dead Money** by Jakob Kerr (Bantam Books)

**Voices of the Elysian Fields** by Michael Rigg  
(Level Best Books)

**Stillwater** by Tanya Scott (Grove Atlantic)

**History Lessons** by Zoe B. Wallbrook (Soho  
Press)

### Best Mystery Short Story

“Six-Armed Robbery” by Ashley-Ruth M.

Bernier (in **Donna Andrews Presents Malice  
Domestic: Mystery Most Humorous**, edited  
by John Betancourt, Carla Coupe, and Michael  
Bracken, Wildside Press)

“Hollywood Prometheus” by Christa Faust (in  
**Crime Ink: Iconic: An Anthology of Crime  
Fiction Inspired by Queer Icons**, edited by  
John Copenhaver and Salem West, Bywater  
Books)

“Finding Jimmy Baldwin” by Cheryl Head (in  
**Crime Ink: Iconic: An Anthology of Crime  
Fiction Inspired by Queer Icons**, edited by  
John Copenhaver and Salem West, Bywater  
Books)

“The Devil Himself” by Vaseem Khan (in **Double  
Crossing Van Dine**, edited by Donna  
Andrews, Greg Herren, and Art Taylor,  
Crippen & Landru Publishers)

“The Skies Are Red” by Richie Narvaez (in **On  
Fire and Under Water: A Climate Change  
Crime Fiction Anthology**, edited by Curtis  
Ippolito, Rock and a Hard Place Press)

“Julius Katz Draws a Straight Flush” by Dave  
Zeltserman (*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery  
Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2025)