

Rethinking the *Littérature de Gare*: Crime Fiction in France and the U.S.

Train stations aren't what they used to be. Take a look at a few then-and-now photos of [European and American terminals](#) and you'll notice a few things beyond the usual observations of technological innovation and increased patronage. First, the grandeur of the older stations has made way for more sterile architecture, as in the cases of St. Pancras and Roma Termini. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the interiors of modern stations bear an uncanny resemblance to shopping malls. Gone is the notion of the train station as a transient space: no more in and out; no more creaky, dark corridors – a proliferation that can only conclude with in-station condos – but somewhere within the riff raff, terminal newsstands still provide a small window into the world of a literature they came to define. The bookshelf is still a staple of the train station and the genre associated with it is long known to the French as *littérature de gare*. Cheap paperback thriller, crime, and mystery novels constitute a popular but critically maligned minor literature that was meant to be quickly consumed and usually thrown away (the low-quality paper often fell apart after one or two reads and the ink constantly smudged), but now, in the way that the train station was updated to cater to the needs of a modern populace, so too is the French crime novel finding ways to stay relevant in the 21st century. Following the recent emergence of big name Scandinavian crime novels in the international market, the French are poised to [export their own brand of crime literature](#), several examples of which have already seen release stateside, with more to come from American publishers and translators.

Hitchcock defined suspense as “the state of waiting for something to happen.” When dealing with genre fiction, definitions come at a premium, and they are often replaced by a constantly evolving network of subgenres and special topics. We can, however, break down major categories and historical movements:

Crime fiction can be taken as a blanket term to understand the entirety of the genre. In its most traditional definition, crime fiction deals with crimes, their detection, criminal behaviors, and the movies that drive them. Structurally, most (but not all) crime novels follow a common framework: a crime (often murder) is committed; an investigation takes place; a culprit is uncovered and eventually faces judgment. In the English-speaking world, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is considered the proto-and-archetype for crime fiction. In France, it is Émile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq, with the ultimate policeman/detective being Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret. In fact, the introduction of crime fiction into the French came via translations of English-language books, most notably Baudelaire's translations of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories.

Roman policier or **polar** is the French genre concerning narratives that deal with crime and the punishment of criminals. However historically, the French have had an affinity for the grittier elements of crime fiction. Since Maurice Leblanc's 1907 "gentleman thief" Arsène Lupin, a Robin Hood character who always got the better of the police, we can observe a kind of reversal of focus from crimes being solved to crime becoming an all-enveloping milieu in which the characters navigate. During the Nazi occupation of France, **noir** proper was born with Léo Malet's *120 rue de la Gare*. Nestor Burma, a Parisian Phillip Marlowe, exhibited the independence, shadiness, and unconventional ethos that was so typical of American hard-boiled fiction of the time with the unique perspective of the underworld of Vichy Paris (the text itself is still unpublished in English, although a graphic novel titled *The Bloody Streets of Paris*, by the great Jacques Tardi, does exist). Noir grew to be defined by the cynicism of its main characters, a constant cycle of violence, and the environments of shadowed, urban decay.

As crime fiction developed, its scope widened from the city to the world at large. Today, crime novels have taken on up-to-the-minute issues facing the increasingly shrinking world. In the wake of proliferation, the need to keep readers enthralled gave rise to the **thriller**. Usually defined by the intensity of emotion they elicit, thrillers tend to employ fast pacing, tension, uncertainty, anticipation, terror and excitement to stimulate the reader's moods. In other words, the thriller is a direct appeal to both the senses and emotions of the reader. The reader can expect twists, reversals, and a constant threat of collapse. Often the protagonist faces an impending disaster (terrorist attack, finding the antidote, etc.). With malleable definitions, it should come as no surprise when Franck Thilliez calls the polar a "super-genre" with an ever growing set of categories and vantages.

French variants include the previously mentioned **roman noir**, instantly recognizable as a result of its heavily stylized use of atmosphere and emotional detachment (Marcus Malte is a quintessential stylist), and the **roman social**, which deals with contemporary social, economic, moral, and political issues against the backdrop of injustice (Dominique Manotti's *Bien connu des services de police* and Marin Ledun's sociopolitical *L'Homme qui a vu l'homme* are top examples alongside Didier Daeninckx). The **roman policier politique** takes similar social issues and ups the stakes by focusing on politics from the top down, taking special interest in the mechanisms of state power and corruption as well as outside power struggles stemming from terrorism (DOA's *Citoyens clandestins* and *Saturne* by Serge Quadrupani both typify the intensity of this subgenre). The **roman policier historique** incorporates real or imagined historical intrigue, with many contemporary writers finding source material from World War II (*Après la guerre* by Hervé Le Corre) and the Algerian War. **Voyageur** writers add exoticism to the genre by bringing readers to far-off lands and unfamiliar cultures (*Zulu* and *Mapuche* by Caryl Férey take us away from the European/American comfort zone, likewise with Ian Manook's *Yeruldelgger*). As with many

genres, a capacity for self-deprecation finds itself in the *humour noir*, which relies on tropes and absurdity to deliver a humorous, if not critical examination of both the genre and the themes it encapsulates (Jean-Bernard Pouy's *Spinoza encule Hegel* is a classic example). For a more detailed history and a list of titles, the Institut français and Quais du polar have assembled a comprehensive [overview of the French polar](#).

In contemporary American crime literature, Tom Clancy's techno-thrillers and action/adventure rollercoasters like Robert Ludlum's *Bourne* series have defined the public's general understanding of the genre. Because of their action-packed plots and visual style of exposition, these types of bestsellers are often adapted to film. In France, a direct comparison can be drawn with writers like Franck Thilliez (*Gataca*), Jean-Christophe Grangé (*Les Rivierès pourpres*), and Maxime Chattam (*La Promesse des ténèbres*). These writers lace tense narratives with suspense, apprehension, action, and technological sophistication in a cinematic style of prose. Other examples of modern French crime or thriller novels include *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* by Fred Vargas, *Death from the Woods* by Brigitte Aubert, *Alex* by Pierre Lemaitre (which was also made into a film in the U.S.), *Bed of Nails* by Antonin Varenne, and the international smash hit *The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair* by Swiss writer Joël Dicker.

Many of France's promising novels, however, remain untranslated. Just to name a few, Guillaume Nicloux, known in both the U.S. and France as a film director, has written nearly ten crime novels that are as of yet unpublished in English. Jérémie Guez's *Le Dernier Tigre rouge* is heavily influenced by American hard-boiled detective fiction with an Indochine twist. Emmanuel Grand explores the clandestine activities of the mafia in an increasingly connected underworld of organized crime in *Terminuz Belz*. Corsica's history as a criminal island takes center stage in Alexis Deniger's *I Cursini*. As output continues, the opportunity to discover new and exciting texts grows.

Several of the aforementioned titles have won some of France's biggest literary and crime fiction prizes. Pierre Lemaitre won the 2015 Prix Goncourt for *The Great Swindle*, while Didier Daeninckx won the Goncourt de la Nouvelle for *L'Espoir en contrebande*. Lemaitre, whose novels usually bear a strong affinity for thriller narratives, was praised by Steven King as "a really excellent suspense novelist." On the centennial of his birth in 2003, Simenon's oeuvre gained entrance to the prestigious Pléiade library. His works are also being published in the U.S. by Penguin and New York Review Books through a veritable army of translators. The movement of the genre from a paperback afterthought to a regular contender for large prizes and international book deals signals usually reserved for *lettres de noblesse* signals a definite elevation. No longer confined by the *roman de gare* title, authors like Vargas and Lemaitre are pushing the boundaries of the crime novel for a larger, more receptive audience, as well as critical examination.

To [compare figures](#), and in 2013 that amounted to 16.4 million crime fiction novel sales. In the U.S., 2010 marked a turning point for crime fiction. While many presses reported a downturn in sales, mysteries and thrillers accounted for nearly 30% of all fiction sales in the U.S., leading several publishing houses to launch crime imprint presses. Little, Brown rolled out Mulholland. Pegasus Books launched Pegasus Crime specifically for crime fiction in translation. As a result, a mutually beneficial relationship between international writers and American audiences who are open to international crime fiction is beginning to form. From the initial 2010-2014 wave of translations came successful titles by Lemaitre, Vargas, and Varenne, while more recently, Penguin/Random House, Deep Vellum, Europa (whose World Noir series features three French authors: Caryl Férey, Pierre Georget, and Jean-Claude Izzo), Akashic, Archipelago, and Open Letter have all taken a keen interest in publishing books in translation, with French titles leading the way in a post-Larsson “Scandi-Noir” landscape.

In order to understand some recent French crime/thriller novels in translation, we interviewed nearly a dozen publishers, writers, and bookstore managers. Generally, they broke down the genre via an idea we’re calling “The French Touch”: a certain cultural perspective or relativism that informs French writing in general. “[It] consists in the peculiarities of everyday life in French cities,” writes Michael Reynolds of Europa Editions, “how they die, what they live for...” with perhaps a bit more “philosophy and politics” than the average American counterpart, notes Johnny Temple of Akashic Books. On the legendary Simenon, Sarah Stein of Penguin Random House attests to his particular “atmospheric quality,” adding that his style “lends itself to the thriller and to the genre of suspense in general.” The apex of this “French touch” is without a doubt Fred Vargas. Vargas, the pen name of medieval historian, archaeologist and folklorist Frédérique Audoin-Rouzeau, is a master of creating atmospheres. Her books capture the settings of Paris, Brittany, even Quebec with precise fluency, local renderings, scene specifics, and nuance; details that transport the reader and make her a favorite among readers and publishers alike. Characters have also taken on deeper psychologies in contemporary texts. Where once the detective-archetype informed our understanding of the genre, writers have given more depth and meaning to their characters and bring readers through internal and external landscapes, as we find in Lemaitre’s *Alex*. Like their counterparts in the U.S., French thrillers are fast-paced, plot-driven, and keep the reader’s attention, but the added benefits of new stages and cultural perspectives make them appealing to an audience that tends to be quite receptive to works of the same genre from abroad, according to Reynolds. Similarly, a socio-political layer adds to the complexity and appeal of many French crime titles, adds Temple.

In the bookstores, where sales show us the most empirical signs of progress, we discovered some revealing bits of information. At Mysterious Bookstore in New York, bookseller Ian Kern told us that expectations in style and content are what separate French crime fiction from Scandinavian noir, the current top international crime seller. “With Scandinavian crime,” Kern said, “[one can expect] great, endowed detectives. With the French, readers

expect dark, moody characters and much more violence.” Also, French novels, compared to other imports like British and Italian crime fiction, tend to be thrillers if they are published in English. “Americans haven’t read translated crime fiction until Larsson,” Kern said, “and French publishers were a little slow [in reaching international audiences].” While he has noticed an uptick in customers asking for books set in France, “One or two really great ones to get people talking about it” would help raise the profile of French crime novels in the international market. British and Scandinavian titles lead in sales, with Italians and French behind them. Kern went on to say that the genre itself has a wide scope of target audiences from young to old, with specific themes and narratives that appeal to various readers. At Albertine, the French/English dual language bookshop on the Upper East Side, the manager told us that, on average, the people buying French *polars* tended to be middle-aged men, and that the summer months accounted for the genre’s best sales. If we take the customer profile for what already exists in translation and compare it to the broadening output of French crime fiction targeted at different audiences, we can identify emerging demographics who can further establish the genre against current major imports.

As it happens, several French crime/thriller writers have found themselves enjoying recognition as their works are being translated into English. Through a growing and dedicated audience at home (at events such as Lyon’s Quais du polar) and recommendations from bestselling American novelists, French writers have been featured at U.S. festivals like ThrillerFest and Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. At this year’s ThrillerFest in New York, David Khara and Eric Giacometti (both of whom have recently been published in English by Le French Book) presented a panel on crime fiction in the international market. When we sat down for an interview, they both spoke at length about the impact of the audience/writer relationship in the genre and how it can determine future success. “To some, writing [literary fiction] is still seen as a solitary pursuit in France,” Giacometti said, but went on to say that popular fiction is thriving as a result of a continuous exchange between readers and writers. Publishers have taken note of this generated interest from an American audience that already reads and understands the genre well. “What’s nice about [crime/thriller fiction] is that you can rely on a readymade audience,” Sarah Stein writes. “Once an audience for that subgenre has been identified, it’s easier to reach them for similar titles.” While (as in the other genres) the popularity of *polars* in France is not a direct indication of future success in the English-speaking world, the relative appetite for crime fiction remains high.

Writing about the American noir novelist Raymond Chandler, Ian Sansom calls crime fiction a “necessary by-product of an all-corrosive and corrupting high modernism. As Virginia Woolf determinedly strode off in one direction, away from the crowd, so Raymond Chandler had no choice but to walk the mean streets towards them.” In other words, the constant movement forward in terms of technology, globalization, alienation, and uncertainty can be understood as the perfect incubator for crime fiction, and with that, the potential for new

perspectives to find themselves in publication. The old images of trench-coated men handing off briefcases in shady railways are making way for cybercrimes and multinational criminal enterprises against the frame of globalized society. In the States, our own obsession with the thriller is mostly cinematic in venture. A good crime novel can be said to play out like a film, with Hollywood at the core of that belief, with notable adaptations of crime books such as *The Big Sleep* all the way through modern suspense dramas like *Gone Girl* or *The Da Vinci Code*. 2013 saw the release of *The Family*, a comedic crime film based on Tonino Benacquista's *Malavita*. But as for literature in its pre-cinematic shape, the French are still embracing what was once considered a quintessentially American genre in its purest form while still continuing to break new ground. As a niche market, we believe French crime novels can carve out a space for themselves, and American readers looking for fresh perspectives in the genre need look no further. Just as the modern train station asks you to stay a while and enjoy, so too do we recommend a journey into the French spin on crime and thriller novels.

Critical perspectives:

Sociologist Luc Boltanski's study of the polar's success in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in *Énigmes et complots* attempts to situate the genre alongside the development of modern capitalism. *Énigmes et complots* received a French Voices Award in 2013 and was translated into English as *Mysteries and Conspiracies* by Polity Books in 2014.

Pierre Bayard engages with the genre via psychoanalytic theory in *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (published in English as *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* and translated by Carol Cosman) and again in *L'Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (English: *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong*, Bloomsbury, 2008).

Going forward:

Do not miss our detailed [list of French crime novels](#) published in English.