

Cherchez les Français

Lenny Picker looks at the crime and mystery fiction scene in France

Many mystery readers in the US automatically consider their beloved genre as an Anglo-American creation, tracing the genre's roots back to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue". But consider this: an investigator perfectly describes a fight solely by a close study of the footprints left behind by its participants. Or this: a drug-taking, misanthropic private detective with a gift for observation and logical deduction, knowledgeable about the chemical and forensic science of the period, who was a master of disguise, and whose amazing cases were narrated by his friend and confidant, a doctor.

Even the most devoted reader could be excused for believing that those examples derive from the *ne plus ultra* of detective fiction—Arthur Conan Doyle's immortal Sherlock Holmes, who debuted in 1887. But the first comes from the pen of Alexandre Dumas, the creator of *The Three Musketeers*, whose series hero D'Artagnan impressed King Louis XVI by recreating a duel based on the duellists'



footprints, and those of their horses in 1847's *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*.

And that Holmes-like figure? It is Maximilien Heller, who actually debuted in 1871 in Henry Cauvin's *The Killing Needle*, over a decade before the appearance of Holmes in Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*.

Cauvin was first published in English in 2014 by John Pugmire's Locked Room International, a small publishing house at the forefront of making quality French mysteries available to an English-speaking audience, featuring Pugmire's own

translations. Even Gaston Leroux, best known for *The Phantom of the Opera*, wrote whodunits, including the all-time locked-room classic, 1907's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, the first in a series of seven featuring reporter Joseph Rouletabille.

Locked Room International has also given English readers 15 books from the ingenious imagination of Paul Halter, a modern master of the impossible crime puzzle, who carries on the Golden Age legacy of John Dickson Carr, most recently, in July 2017's *The Madman's Room*, in which the decision to unseal a supposedly-cursed room leads to multiple murders whose explanations apparently require suspending the laws of science. Halter—and Dumas—are both represented in *The Realm of the Impossible* (August 2017), an anthology which Halter co-edited with Brian Skupin.

In addition to Cauvin and Halter, Pugmire has published the first English translations of Jean-Paul Torok's *The Riddle of Monte Verita*, an ingenious locked-room murder mystery published in 2012, and two works by the undeservedly-obscure 1930s writer Noel Vindry: *The House That Kills*, published in 2015 (in which there are witnesses to no less than three impossible murders), and 2016's *The Howling Beast*, a

bravura piece of armchair detection. A third Vindry, *Double Alibi*, is scheduled for publication in 2018.

Locked Room International is not the only publishing home for French authors who integrate the fantastic into their mysteries. French historian, archaeologist and author Frédérique Audoin-Rouzeau (who uses the pen name Fred Vargas and has drawn comparisons with John



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Dickson Carr) has written nine such novels. They include 2013's *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (Penguin), which is one of the best recent examples of a rational sleuth confronting the seemingly supernatural. Random House UK has published her second series, *The Three Evangelists*, most recently in September, publishing *The Accordionist*. The works feature an eccentric Commissaire, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, and his equally odd colleagues in the Serious Crime Squad, which include a narcoleptic, a walking encyclopedia and a naturalist. Vargas has the distinction of winning three

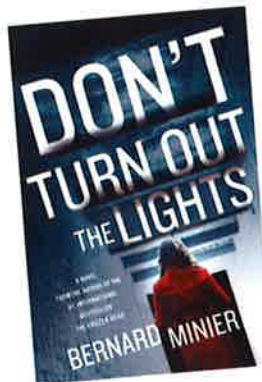


Don't Turn Out The Lights, one of *Publishers Weekly's* Top 10 Mysteries of 2016. The fourth, *Night*, which promises a final showdown between the enemies, will appear in 2018.

Quercus Press's MacLehose Press imprint will offer an alternative to Vargas' take on a group of oddball French investigators in next April's *The Awkward Squad*, by Sophie Hénaff, in which Anne Capestan is assigned to a new unit comprised of "misfits, troublemakers and problem cases", who are expected to solve cold cases. And in November, the imprint will publish Prix Goncourt winner

International Dagger Awards from the Crime Writers' Association, for three consecutive novels.

For Thomas Harris fans, the current French mystery-writing scene also includes the twisted brilliance of Bernard Minier, whose novels feature the Lecter-like Julian Hirtmann, the nemesis of Commandant Martin Servaz. Minotaure has published the first three in the series: *The Frozen Dead* (2013), *The Circle* (2015) and



Pierre Lemaitre's *Three Days and a Life*, in which an adult deals with the repercussions of a crime he committed as a child. Meanwhile, *Arab Jazz*, by documentary filmmaker Karim Miské, published in March 2016, won the English PEN Award, and demonstrates the versatility of the genre with its exploration of present-day multicultural tensions in France through the lens of a whodunit.

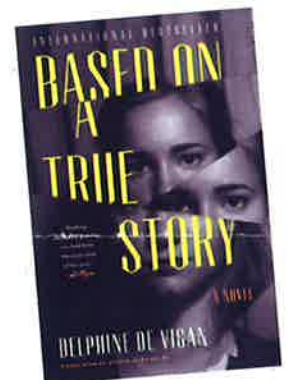
An exploration of society of a different sort is on display in Laurent Binet's *The Seventh Function of Language*—published this past August by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Binet, another Prix Goncourt winner, transformed the death of the French founder of semiotics, philosopher Roland Barthes, who'd lunched with Francois Mitterand right before his fatal encounter with a motor van, into a murder mystery. *Publishers Weekly's* starred review called it a "loving inquiry into 20th-century intellectual history that seamlessly folds historical moments... into a brilliant illustration of the possibilities left to the modern novel".

The *roman a clef* concept is taken literally in the title of Delphine de Vigan's *Based on a True Story*, out this spring from Bloomsbury. It's a meta-fictional thriller in which a bestselling author's life is imperilled by a manipulative woman.

And readers who want their protagonists walking down French mean streets, rather than the country's picturesque countryside, will find their tastes for noir met by *The King of Fools*, the fifth classic thriller by Frédéric Dard, published in May by Pushkin Press's Vertigo imprint. While Dard is still

largely unknown in the US, his books have sold more than 300 million copies in France.

Thanks to publishing houses of all sizes, there's never been a better time for English readers to indulge their appetites for French fictional murder and mayhem, and enough variety—noir, whodunits, psychological suspense—to more than validate the French maxim *chacun à son gout*.





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