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French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: Past Crimes, Present Memories

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Claire Gorrara's latest study on French crime fiction blends academic criticism of a popular genre with both war studies and memory studies. In the interdisciplinary study of memory, 'memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed' (p. 3) in the present. Narratives, whether oral histories or fictional representations, reflect the perspective of the speaker, formed by the narrator's socio-political surroundings. Fictional representations, such as crime fiction, considered as cultural memory, function as a shared narrative making the past accessible. The role of popular fiction in cultural memory is largely underestimated until a novel like Didier Daeninckx's *Meutres pour mémoire* reminds the public of the potential to harness 'generic conventions of crime fiction for an exposé' (p. 10), which in the case of that particular novel, contributed to the trial of the then-elderly Maurice Papon for war crimes. By focusing on crime fiction series by select authors and publishers, Gorrara filters out random crime narratives to consider only those that follow the narrative template. Crime fiction texts stand alongside other memory texts 'amongst a cluster of other shared cultural reconstructions of the past' (p. 15), and are as vital to the study of

a historical period as other resources. Her analysis starts with publications from the 1940s and 1950s, and continues through subsequent chapters on the decades that follow, up until the 1990s and 2000s where narratives come less frequently from survivor memories and more from 'civic memories' (p. 16).

French crime fiction in the 1940s and early 1950s challenged the mainstream message of the resistance epic: half-victim, half-vanquished. An idealized version of men taking up arms in the countryside as an act of resistance represents only part of the occupation experience. This 'heroic [model] of masculine subjectivity' (p. 29) does not reflect those sent to labor camps or, worse, concentration camps, nor those who profited from the occupation through collaboration or activities on the black market. Crime narratives, especially those in the style of the *roman noir* ? where multiple murders lead to both a reveal and a resolution, instead of the standard 'whodunit' ? reflected the realities of marginalisation, violence, and moral ambiguity, though in a fictionalised form. Crime fiction of the period offered a voice for those reluctant to share their own stories, and a way to empathise with the suffering of others without engaging with actual situations. Gallimard's *Série Noire*, started by surrealist Marcel Duhamel, initially published French translations of British and American crime novels before publishing French authors writing in the same style, and tending to use a 'darkly dystopian cityscape' setting (p. 27). The *roman noir* ? as presented by novelists Jean Meckert, André Héléna, and Gilles Morris ? allowed the representation of a France different from that of the 'Vichy-sponsored values of family, work, and fatherland' (p. 28) and from that of the Gaullist 'French sovereignty during wartime' (p. 23). The archetypes of crime fiction, including the femme fatale and the male victim, are easy to place in a war or occupied setting, where heroes are in short supply. The fictional narratives of crime fiction, combined with the 'résistancialiste myth' (p. 22), still fail to represent all experiences, but the gap between the myth and the reality is made slightly smaller.

In the second chapter, Jewish wartime experiences as represented in several novels by Léo Malet and Hubert Monteilhet are analyzed, raising issues of guilt and complicity. During the transition years of 1958?61, with De Gaulle's Fifth Republic in place as the Establishment and the wars of decolonisation intensifying, especially in Algeria, alternate narratives contrasting with the official 'resistance epic,' including those of Jewish persecution and deportation, starts to appear to the general public. These stories had been previously hidden or ignored due to marginalisation, a general lack of public awareness as to the extent of the atrocities against Jews, including those in France, in addition to lingering anti-Semitic sentiment, 'which propagated images of Jewish treason and a lack of resistance' (p. 44), though the act of resistance was a luxury for many French citizens. The desire of those survivors to put their horrible experience behind them and reintegrate into society meant that their stories were not being shared. At the end of the 1950s, these narratives start to form a 'haunting presence' (p. 44). Two novels by Léo Malet, *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* and *Des kilomètres de linceuls* (incorporating the Parisian landscape of the Marais and the Sentier respectively) reflect crimes against Jews perpetrated by other Jews, in addition to genocide. In *Rosiers*, the perpetrator, a former collaborator, assumes the identity of a Holocaust victim. In *Linceuls*, a woman is revealed to have denounced her own family because they disapproved of her non-Jewish lover. Though many stereotypes continue to be perpetrated, especially those of Jews and their relationship to commerce, the placement of those stories within the crime fiction template is remarkable. In Montheilhet's *Le retour des cendres*, a concentration camp survivor is hired to impersonate herself by those who believe her to be dead. With her diary serving as the primary narrative, we have a Jewish narrator interacting with the other Jews who betrayed her and confronting their attempts to justify their actions. In addition to the standard issues of guilt, complicity and responsibility found in the crime fiction formula, this novel addresses questions of Jewish identity, both with Elisabeth trying to reclaim her Jewish heritage and Stan trying to disavow his. With both authors, the return to Paris after the war is a 'deferral of fate' (p. 53); the Liberation does not bring happiness to all and there are 'no tidy endings and no neat resolutions' (p. 55).

Chapter three traces the evolution of the representation of wartime collaboration in light of revelations in the 1970s and early 1980s by a new generation of writers and historians. As the resistance epic became the standard narrative in the early post-war years, so did Sartre's *Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur* reflect attitudes about those who sided with the occupiers. Using social and psychological terms, Sartre envisions collaborators in terms of individual agendas, without considering groups or institutions. In his essay,

collaborators share a number of features, including a rejection of French republicanism and democracy and an attraction to foreign models of authority in addition to what Sartre calls 'un curieux mélange de masochisme et d'homosexualité' (p. 61). This weak and submissive image of the collaborator has no place in the resistance epic of heroism and was therefore further marginalised in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s, a new generation of historians and other writers had come of age and started questioning this limited view, and pushing for investigations of the Vichy régime. Their findings concluded that there was no singular profile for collaborators: individual or group, motivated by greed or fear or by naïveté. The national conversation was further stoked by the 1971 release of Marcel Orphuls's seminal documentary *Le chagrin et le pitié*, about life in occupied Clermont-Ferrand, where 'victims and heroes, could not always be easily distinguished' (p. 64). *Le mode rétro*, which openly challenged the pervasiveness of the resistance epic, was possible only after De Gaulle had retired from public life and a generational shift allowed such questions to be posed by a new generation. Meanwhile, fictional narratives began to present collaboration as a more complicated series of choices, both for individuals and groups, which affected all classes of society. Following the lead of Patrick Modiano, crime fiction authors used a 'kaleidoscopic vision of the wartime past' (p. 64), drawing on history, biography and fiction to craft their narratives. Jean Mazarin's *Collabo-Song* is notable for its female viewpoint, in the form of Laure Santenac, a collaborator who turns against her adulterous husband before taking other collaborators as lovers, and her maid, a double agent. Laure's situation is not a result of coercion or seduction, but of choices and responsibility as they intersect with pervasive anti-Semitism and victimisation. Georges-Jean Arnaud's *Maudit Blood* considers the impact of wartime activities on the collaborators' lives after the war. Louise and Étienne Marchand, complicit in murdering Jews seeking safe passage, try to reinvent themselves after the war as a respectable bourgeois couple, until their past catches up with them and the fate of their daughter ? who believes herself adopted ? is jeopardised. In this scenario, the 'non-transmission of the past can be corrosive' (p. 70) for the generations who follow. In *Meutres pour mémoire*, Didier Daeninckx considers the possibility of collaboration among civil servants: were they following orders willingly or against their better judgment? Inspector Cadin makes the connection between a historian murdered after using the Toulouse municipal archives and the death of his father a generation earlier after consulting the same dossier that revealed the banality of deportations during the occupation. Collaboration is represented as efficient and state-sanctioned. By representing wartime collaboration as multifaceted, both historians and novelists further cracked the facade of the resistance epic and increased empathy for the Jewish experience.

French crime fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with a series of significant milestones observed on worldwide scale, revolved around the testimony of the survivor-witness to persecution and extermination but also required 'contextualisation and interpretation' (p. 101) in the face of unreliable narrators. The stories told during those decades one less concerned with the guilt and responsibility of individuals or even of single nations, but with the web of complicity across Europe. As the generation that experienced the Second World War first hand began to grow old, transference of memory became increasingly urgent. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, archives in the eastern bloc previously unavailable to historians in the west opened to provide new viewpoints on previously accepted narratives. 'Delayed memories' (p. 85) have as significant an impact as those originally shared. France's reawakening of Jewish memory, prompted by external factors including American film and television, coincided with the rise of right-wing extremism in the form of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National and the phenomenon of Holocaust denial. Additionally, the high profile trials against Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity kept these horrific revelations in the public consciousness. These trials 'revealed a fundamental incompatibility between the legal context and historical record that could not be bridged without contortion of the historical evidence on the one hand and legal process on the other' (p. 87). A new generation of crime writers born with no personal memory of the war combined scholarly investigation with their narratives which tended to be more interested in the failure of the justice system as a whole than individual atrocities. The hybrid crime novels of Gérard Delteil, Thierry Jonquet, and Konop include protagonists with experience in concentration camps or in contributing to the mass persecution and extermination of Jews. In Delteil's *KZ retour vers l'enfer*, an unnamed journalist from the ?successor generation? saves Paul Liebman, a concentration camp survivor, from a racist attack, inspiring him to reveal his life as René Maillard. Revelations about how some prisoners colluded with the SS guards against other

prisoners, and how the communities surrounding camps profited from the camps' activities, undermine the standard narrative of victim and perpetrator and provokes to a reconsideration of collective guilt beyond the borders of one single country. Jonquet, in *Les Orpailleurs*, uses survivor-testimony only in fragments. A young examining judge, Nadia Lintz, herself the daughter of a war profiteer, becomes the empathetic listener to a Holocaust survivor. This narrative avoids all references to German crimes, focusing instead on both past and present-day activities in Poland and France. Jonquet also comments on the industry of Holocaust 're-presentation' (p. 96) and the post-war trafficking of Jewish possessions, not limited to any singular country. Finally Konop's *Pas de Kaddish pour Sylberstein* has a Jewish police inspector trying to solve murder in the Jewish district of Belleville on the 50th anniversary of the rafle du Vélodrome d'Hiver. The survivor-witness, Sylberstein, is revealed to be a disguised Ukrainian war criminal, Kravéniouk, who had reinvented himself in the chaos of the war's end. The inspector learns through the course of the novel of the number of former SS agents who reinvented themselves as communist leaders in the then-emerging East Germany which, combined with the unreliable narration of the survivor-witness, render moral certainties less than solid. Even within established accounts of historic events, there are more viewpoints and interpretations than previously considered.

The final chapter explores the role of children's crime fiction in forming a 'civic memory' of the Second World War. Questions of collective responsibility are addressed in the classroom but are supplemented by fictional readings. The late 1990s were marked by the official recognition by the state, most notably in a 1995 address by President Jacques Chirac where he apologized for the actions of the Vichy regime for their complicity in the persecution and extermination of Jews. With the collective aging of the remaining survivors of the war, an increasing percentage of successor generations have little to no direct family experience with war memories. Finding the appropriate way to incorporate this historical era into the French system of education has been especially challenging, but at the end of the 20th century, a sophisticated and internationalised curriculum was adopted that was 'placed in an expanded chronological frame, harnessed to a human rights discourse and inflected by debates on the legacies of war for present-day society' (p. 112). Within this curriculum, fictional accounts are used as ancillary materials to reflect moral and ethical issues. Until the 1980s, children's crime fiction in France had been limited to translations of British and American works from Arthur Conan Doyle to Caroline Keene. Founded in 1986, the *Souris Noire* series from Editions Syros has recruited celebrated authors of adult crime fiction to write mysteries for a younger audience. Robert Boudet's *Mon prof est espion*, aimed at a pre-teen audience, includes fragments of war memories as a young detective suspects that his teacher is not who he says he is. Though the teacher does have a secret to uncover, he has not committed any crime, but it is revealed that his real parents had been persecuted during the war. Instead of a story about justice, it is a story about identity and responsibility. Similarly, Mireille Szac's *Un lourd silence* has issues of identity and responsibility, but in the sense of knowing one's family history. In this story, a young boy wants to learn more about his grandfather, who is revealed to have collaborated in the same militia as Paul Touvier. Rather than keep this discovery to himself, the boy takes responsibility and tries to make right with descendants of those victims wronged by his grandfather. Romain Slocombe's *Qui se souvient de Paula*, from the *Rat Noir* collection, differs from the other two in that the protagonist/narrator is not from a successor-generation but has actual wartime experience. In this novel, a survivor wants to learn what happened to his sweetheart, believed to have died, presenting the effects of a lifetime of survivor guilt. In each of the three novels, recognition of the persecution of Jews is pivotal to understanding the period, and civic responsibility for the past carries more weight than individual efforts.

Gorrara illustrates how French writers of crime fiction have used their genre to integrate cultural and social values with the war memories of their characters to give a voice to the Second World War experience. Cultural context precedes changes seen in that period, before examples of fictional representations, with each chapter focused on one or two decades, giving a well-rounded portrait to those studying the half century following the Second World War in France.

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