Contemporary French crime fiction – a search for the hidden
with particular reference to Sous les vents de Neptune
by Fred Vargas

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In this article, I would like to consider the hidden and visible in contemporary crime fiction, and to look more closely at the work of Fred Vargas and how she plays with the hidden and the visible in her latest novel, Sous les vents de Neptune. Before discussing her work in more detail, I will give an overview of the genre as everyone may not be familiar with it. After this, I will consider how French crime fiction differs from the dominant American and British variants. I can then elaborate what Vargas does in her novels (that she labels as rompols, a variation on the general French term, romans policiers) and how she uses the hidden and visible to create what Sara Poole calls ‘mini proto-mythes’.¹

Before going further I should point out that labelling the genre is generally regarded as problematic with critics, often unable to agree on any one term. I shall here be using the accepted English global term ‘crime fiction’ to refer to it. This term is widely used by important critics writing in English, such as Stephen Knight, Julian Symons and T J Binyon.² However, in France, although writers and critics acknowledge the influences of both American and British crime fiction writing, there is no precise equivalent and a plethora of different labels exist for various subgenres. This may in part reflect the fact that publishing in France tends to group certain types of crime fiction narrative under certain imprints – presumably to aid readers to find similar narratives. Thus a knowledgeable reader would expect a novel published in the Série Noire imprint to be more violent, feature more gratuitous sex and be more likely to have a male author. It may also reflect the amazing diversity of contemporary crime fiction writing.

One of the most significant elements of crime fiction that anyone unfamiliar with it needs to be aware of is that it is a game that the author engages in with the reader; all crime writers are aware that they have to involve the reader in the game from the outset. Added to this, there is a tacit understanding between writers and readers regarding their joint awareness of the accepted generic rules or codes as well as past generic variations and experiments. Thus an aficionado will understand that if a Chinese character is the criminal, the writer is effectively poking fun at a rule invented in the twenties that forbids this. So before you begin the game, you have to be armed with knowledge and understanding to be able to appreciate the subtleties of writing and to interpret the invisible or hidden meanings in the texts. The other important element of crime fiction is that it is a quest to uncover the hidden, whether that is a mystery, the identity of a criminal, or to unveil the truth about an individual himself.

To these elements I would like to add the importance of the marginality of the genre. Critics admit that until very recently crime fiction was regarded as marginal and non-literary, suffering from being labelled pulp fiction, a reference to just one of its early 20th century forms. Certainly the wide variation in the quality of crime fiction writing - much of it being low calibre - helped the literary establishment to ignore any quality writing that might have appeared within the genre. Mass popularity may also have fuelled the view that crime fiction was not worthy of analysis. Taken as a whole, this lack of critical interest may have benefited the development of the genre in the shadowy margins between genre writing and literature. In France particularly it is only since the mid nineties that newspapers and publications like *Le magazine littéraire*, *Les temps modernes* and *La quinzaine littéraire* have devoted whole issues to the genre, and brought hidden treasures to the notice of a wider readership.

In his essay *Typologie du roman policier* Todorov suggested that to fit within the crime genre, writing should obey the accepted rules, such as having a victim, a detective and a criminal. Not following rules means that the writing has moved into the realm of literature. However, it is significant that his essay was written in 1966, at a time when French crime fiction writing was in the doldrums and other critics Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac were predicting its demise. Although Todorov’s view is dated and developments have moved the genre in diverse directions since then, some critics still cite it in order to either agree with or challenge it, so that what he said remains significant.

His main point was that traditional crime fiction narratives paradoxically contain two stories – one is the murder itself that is over before the second story, the unravelling of the murder, begins. His view was that the balance between these two stories varies over time and generic variations. Thus, in the classic narrative, which was the accepted norm until the 1920s and 1930s, we have a detective (or a thinking machine) observed by a colleague unravelling the mystery of the crime. Usually narrated in the third person, the figure of the detective was above the law and solved the puzzle while the reader watched admiringly. The antithesis of this is the modern roman noir that became popular in France after the Second World War. The works of American hard-boiled detective fiction writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler appeared for the first time in translation in the Série Noire. Their narratives, usually in the first person from the viewpoint of the main character featured lone, alienated individuals in an industrial landscape, who become personally involved in events surrounding the crime they are trying to solve. They were often at risk of becoming victims themselves and were not above the law. Often narrated in the present tense in a non-linear way, the reader was held in a state of tension as to what might happen, rather than one of detached curiosity as to what did occur and the answer to a mystery. These narratives tended to foreground a criminal milieu, the particular types found there and their violent way of life, and sought the answers as to why crimes are committed rather than being concerned with finding out (and bringing to justice) whoever was responsible for committing them.

In contemporary crime fiction the influence of the visual media, particular the cinema, is obvious with its cutting from one scene to another without a narrative link, leaving the reader to interpret the text and find his own implied meanings. Writers effectively hide in the

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3 The essay was written in 1966 but only published in 1971 in *La Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971).
margins between literature and the genre to create texts that push the boundaries and manipulate the balance of the main elements such as the mystery, the milieu described and suspense precisely in order to produce new and exciting works with clarity in their crime fiction. Léo Malet is credited with creating the first French ‘roman noir’ (120 rue de la Gare was published in 1943 and preceeded the Série Noire) but his development of a particulary French interpretation of the roman noir was eclipsed by Anglo-Saxon writers.\(^5\) In this novel his lone private detective, Nestor Burma, is in the mean streets of Paris and Lyon when France was still only partially occupied. The depiction of the corruption in all areas of life, and the difficulties of living under the occupying forces at a time when you could not tell who to trust are vividly portrayed in a language reminiscent of Hammett and Chandler.

What then is the function of crime fiction for the reader? Introducing a special issue of French Cultural Studies on narratives of order and disorder, Margaret Atack suggests, ‘discourses of crime and punishment play a central role in social and cultural life and history’.\(^6\) Historically the genre first appeared in the mid nineteenth century when newspaper and book production methods became cheaper, and there was a readership eager for narratives containing suspense, excitement and sensation. More wide-spread education led to more readers, mechanisation of work led to more leisure time and developments in transport led to more people travelling. This desire for entertainment was satisfied by writers of crime fiction stories that appeared as ‘feuilletons’ in newspapers or weekly magazines. Each episode ended with a cliffhanger to ensure that the reader would purchase the following week’s copy to find out what happened next. Even today, writers often use tension at the end of chapters in order to offer release in the next one as is the case with Ruth Rendell. Crime fiction narratives gave readers an insight into the hidden private lives of individuals and the motives of lawbreakers. This effective unveiling of what individuals prefer to keep from the public eye gave readers a voyeuristic, if guilty, pleasure.

By showing the reader the ordinary, everyday lives of people, the narratives offered relief in suggesting that criminals were normal people who were placed in exceptional circumstances that might cause anyone to commit a similar crime. Effectively suggesting that there but for the grace of God go I. In crime fiction the criminal superficially appears to be a respectable person, but the detective gradually unmasks him and shows him to be the personification of evil hidden beneath this veneer. By identifying the evil in society and removing it, the detective is attempting to make it safe for everyone else. However, as Julian Symons points out in his study, Bloody Murder, because society now has a reduced sense of sin, removing the sinner will not create the essential catharsis sought by the reader. Other critics, like Jacques Dubois in Le roman policier ou la modernité, suggest that crime fiction poses questions about identity, especially regarding what is hidden and what is visible to the individual himself and to outsiders. Assessing the significance of the genre, Dubois suggests ‘la thématic enquêtrice’ offers ‘une syntaxe narrative efficace ainsi qu’un climat de tension et de suspens, comme si le crime et l’enquête étaient les derniers à proposer désormais des sujets racontables : l’un et l’autre répondent à la demande contemporaine d’une catharsis fondée sur la libération de ressorts au préalable violemment tendus.’\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Boileau-Narcejac (2) p.108/9.


\(^7\) Jacques Dubois, Le roman policier ou la modernité. (Paris: Nathan, 1992)
Contemporary crime fiction does not frequently offer the reader easy answers, as the reality of crime today is that it is often not premeditated but rather more erratic, spontaneous and therefore inexplicable. Thus the narrative closure offered by traditional crime narratives, where the criminal was brought to justice, and suitably punished, now seems unrealistic and is not acceptable to readers. In addition, until the removal of the death penalty in Europe, the detective hero effectively became responsible for a murder himself as by pointing out the criminal, he was giving him to the state to kill. Summing up the genre today, Stephen Knight suggests that: ‘Postmodern crime fiction has a special importance because …[it] can, by being less determinate and simplistic than usual in its processes and outcomes, be a means of questioning certainties about the self, the mind and indeed the ambient world.’

II

I will now highlight the particular elements that make French crime fiction recognisably different from the Anglo-Saxon strain of the genre. The memoirs of the French criminal Vidocq, published in early 19th century and read by many, set the tone for crime fiction in France. Edgar Allan Poe was inspired by these factual accounts of crime to write *The murders in the rue morgue* which was set in Paris and which is often defined as the first modern crime narrative. He was particularly interested in the detective and his investigation and explanation of the mystery. Although this work influenced Émile Gaboriau in the mid 19th century to create the first French narratives featuring professional policemen, it also marked the divergence of the two strains. Gaboriau set his narratives in an urban milieu, with picturesque characters and the coups de théâtre beloved of the feuilletons, but with a balzacian style and general view of society. At the beginning of the 20th century Gaston Leroux concentrated on developing the mystery element of the story with *Le mystère de la chambre jaune* in which a young reporter, Rouletabille, challenges the police and solves the crime while also tending to fit the clues to his interpretation of the solution.

At around the same time Maurice Leblanc developed his character, Arsène Lupin, gentleman cambrioleur, a modern-day Robin Hood, using his criminal abilities for public service. References to the significant elements of both these characters can be found in contemporary French crime writing.

We can see from even this brief sketch, that it is not the forces of law and order that are of interest to French readers but rather the shadier characters that challenge authority. With the advent of Georges Simenon’s Maigret in the 1930s we have a policeman whose role is to solve crimes but who certainly does not follow the rules, as he is more interested in understanding rather than explaining. Rather than logic, he uses intuition to understand the psychological crisis of an individual that has led to a crime being committed. Simenon wrote over two separate periods and his first books were more about police work and less interested in the psychological dimension than the later ones.

After the 2nd world war, the genre was greatly influenced by American hard-boiled fiction, and French authors were encouraged to write in a similar style and even to use American pseudonyms. The private detectives working for justice but not averse to breaking the rules to do so, appealed to the anti-authority view that French readers enjoyed. As

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mentioned above, Léo Malet created his detective Nestor Burma at this time and some would say that the enthusiasm for American fiction in translation meant that he did not receive the critical recognition he deserved. After this time the genre diversified and subgenres became a common way to define different writers – ‘le polar’, ‘le néo-polar’ and so on. Although there were some generic experiments by various literary writers at the time of the nouveau roman, the genre suffered a decline in the 60s and 70s. Starting in the early 80s, some writers began to use the genre to criticise social injustices and political corruption as well as to challenge received ideas about France’s history, particularly regarding the 2nd World War. Uncovering the secret histories of individuals and bringing them to a wider audience through crime fiction is just one significant modern strand of the genre, with a writer like Didier Daeninckx doing it more overtly than someone like Vargas. In conclusion the basic premise of the genre is a search for truth, justice, and identity, and writers weave various layers of meaning within their narratives for the active reader to uncover in their exploration of the text. Just what the hidden or visible messages are is open to individual interpretation, but the best crime fiction, like good films, requires multiple readings to achieve the full meaning.

What is incontestable is the fact that the genre is so popular in France that 20% of all fiction bought is crime fiction, and many films and TV programmes have crime and its solution as a central theme. It has even become such a significant part of the culture that there are numerous festivals and exhibitions for both adults and children, and educational books have recently been published to show teachers how to encourage an appreciation of crime fiction writing in primary school children.

III

Now let us look at the work of Fred Vargas and consider the hidden and the visible in her latest novel, Sous les vents de Neptune. In terms of our topic it is interesting to note that even the name Fred Vargas is hiding something from the reader – it is a pseudonym for a woman writer, something that still surprises people who come to meet her at book festivals. This is perhaps indicative of the success she has had in masking her gender by her stylish writing, and the fact that her main characters tend be to male, although hidden within each narrative there are many strong female characters. Crime writing for Vargas is a pastime and not her profession, and as such she has certainly done her research well because it is clear from interviews that she has read and appreciated a wide variety of crime writers from all over the world and possibly been influenced in terms of style by good ones, Chandler for instance. Professionally she is an archaeologist who specialises in the medieval period, reconstructing lives from small pieces of evidence like bones in the same way a detective uses clues to recreate a whole story. In all her fictions, it is something insignificant that triggers a search for truth rather than a violent crime. Unlike many contemporary writers, she is very careful not to describe the gruesome or sordid details of the murders that do occur in her narratives.

One other thing that marks Vargas out is that she specifically sets her fictions in contemporary France – rather than elsewhere – and mostly in Paris. However, by doing so she effectively has to challenge the expectations of some contemporary French women crime

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9 Alain Robbe-Grillet, Les gommes (1953) and Sebastien Japrisot, Piège pour Cendrillon (1965) are particularly good examples.
10 Fred Vargas, Sous les vents de Neptune (Paris : Hamy, 2004).
writers that fiction should be used to offer a feminist view of society not normally found in the genre. As she does not agree with women carrying guns, she therefore cannot feature French women police detectives (that are not numerous in reality anyway). She would rather challenge the inherent macho norms both of the genre and of patriarchal French society in a tangential way, not ‘frontrament’. As she says: ‘discrètement, surtout pas de manière frontale, on peut parfaitement donner une vision du monde où les femmes ont une place égale, où le racisme est traité, où tel ou tel problème sont traités, mais l’air de rien.’ However, she sees her fictions as being modern fables. She regards her chosen genre as being: ‘l’héritier de la catharsis grecque, de la tragédie antique, de la fatalité, qui s’élaboré à partir d’une transgression et où tout le monde est tenu jusqu’à ce qu’il y ait résolution, que cette résolution soit heureuse ou malheureuse.’ In an article in *French Cultural Studies* in 2001, Sara Poole suggested that her stories are fables, mini proto myths which offer a ‘décalage generalisé du genre, des personages, du langage’.

Although her first novel was published in 1986, it is her recent novels featuring Commissaire Adamsberg, published since 1996 that are of particular interest to me. Her earlier novels, though good and featuring a variety of odd individual policemen, helped by non-professional investigators, were less assured than the ones with Adamsberg as the main character. Before looking at her most recent novel, it would probably be useful to give the reader an idea of the three main recurrent characters and their hidden history or backstory as this forms the background to everything else.

Commissaire Adamsberg is the ‘chef incongru et rêveur’ of the Brigade criminelle in the 13th arrondissement in Paris. He is driven by a desire to seek the truth and, unlike some policemen, follows a strict moral code. In *Sous les vents de Neptune* although he needs the help of a computer hacker, Josette, to obtain information to clear his name; he still admonishes her for some of her illegal activities. Adamsberg uses intuition as well as his other senses, like sight, to help him solve cases. He is single and prone to unsatisfactory, temporary relationships with women though he does have an odd, peripatetic emotional and physical relationship with Camille, a musician who is a plumber in her spare time. Adamsberg has a gift of being able to understand people without them explaining their problems, and has a voice that has a mysteriously calming effect on adversaries, whether they are colleagues or criminals. When puzzled, he frequently abandons his office and wanders around the streets of Paris waiting for inspiration to guide him, or he doodles on a pad on his lap. By using the free indirect style the reader knows both what Adamsberg is thinking and what others think of him. Although a loner not prone to expressing himself verbally, he does have an erudite, classically trained and logical Watsonian sidekick, Danglard, to add rationality as well as to give the reader a variety of explanations about mythology or whatever. He also acts as a moral conscience on a personal level for Adamsberg who is less capable or managing his emotional relationships. This essential pairing is a reflection of Vargas’s own life experience as a twin, which she says has encouraged her to explore in her fiction how individuals or groups function. Danglard represents the social norm – a family man – but Vargas inverses the tradition by making him a single parent with five children and a drink problem to support. She uses him to remind Adamsberg that there is an alternative to his detached bachelor life and it is Danglard who quietly maintains contact with Camille, in order to encourage Adamsberg to face the truth of the emotions he feels for

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12 Desnain interview, p.9-10 of 19.
her. However, there is always a sense that perhaps Danglard feels more for Camille, and she for him, than is overtly expressed so an element of jealousy is allowed to develop in Adamsberg. This emotional triangle and its development is a recurrent theme in the novels in which Adamsberg features.

Let us now consider in more detail her latest novel, *Sous les vents de Neptune*. Superficially, this novel deals with the everyday workings of the Brigade criminelle in Paris and their forthcoming trip to Canada to train in specialised techniques that will help them to unlock hidden information in clues found at crime scenes like DNA, sperm and hair that will ultimately be used to convict killers.

The novel opens with Adamsberg suffering nervous convulsions that disable him, creating a sense of ‘chagrin, comme un sédiment terne que la vague abandonne au reflux.’

They are triggered by an image of Neptune and his trident and this reminds Adamsberg about the loss of his brother in the distant past. He disappeared after unjustly being accused of the murder of a young girl with a three-pronged weapon. He only escaped conviction because Adamsberg removed the evidence, something that he had had to keep secret since. He had suspected a serial killer with a trident, whom he tracked for some years but stopped when the killer’s death was announced and he was buried. However this person seems to have reappeared, or else someone is copying his *modus operandi*. Adamsberg’s keenness to find this ex-judge (the murderer), Fulgence, becomes essential when Adamsberg finds himself in Canada accused of a murder that he does not remember committing as he lost his memory that night. Unfortunately for him the hard evidence such as DNA and fingerprints point to his guilt. He is removed from the police, loses his colleagues and his friends and seems set on a tragic descent into hell. Here, Vargas overtly challenges the tradition that the murderer cannot be the detective. So not only does Adamsberg have to find alternative ways to uncover the hidden truth about his brother’s ‘crime’ but also to discover what happened to himself in order to prove his own innocence and retain his sanity. Adamsberg is tormented by bouts of uncharacteristic behaviour, and a sense that he is being overwhelmed by a malevolent force beyond his control, and this leads him to doubt his own innocence. The evidence all points to his guilt as semen, blood, fingerprints and hair found at the scene all match his DNA. And as throughout the novel the reader and the main characters have been given details of just how forensic science can be used to nail criminals with certainty, it seems as if his guilt is inescapable.

On top of the incontrovertible evidence, Adamsberg has to deal with the antagonism of Danglard; his own certain belief that he has lost Camille (who at that time is living in Canada) and the possibility that he will be dismissed from the police - his main *raison d’être*. Vargas maintains a tension in the reader throughout so that one believes that Adamsberg is lost and will have to sacrifice his life in order to bring the criminal to justice. It is only in the final few pages that we understand how the devotion his godlike qualities inspire in others can save him. Danglard has interpreted Adamsberg’s final actions and words and understood the situation, so that Adamsberg does not face his possible death alone. His survival against all the odds up to this point is thanks to ‘ces “femmes magiques”, maternelles, combattantes, sibyllines, divinités propices’ who have counteracted ‘l’influence maléfique de Neptune’ (the symbolic representation of Fulgence).

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13 *Sous les Vents de Neptune*, op. cit., p.21.
Although on the surface this is a narrative about police work, and the need to uncover evidence in order to achieve a conviction, we know from the start that there are deeper meanings. Early on Adamsberg throws out a report that Danglard has written on a case because even though the evidence points to the rational answer that Danglard has arrived at, Adamsberg senses that the truth is eluding them and that if they just look at everything again with a different eye they will be able to uncover it. In the same way, Adamsberg could easily have been convicted for the murder and sentenced to life in jail if the evidence had been taken at face value, because the serial killer was clever and made sure that the police were given enough evidence to make them believe a conviction would be safe. He was assuming that their overwhelming desire to clear up a case would prevent them from thinking beyond the superficial and looking for deeper meanings. Vargas might be suggesting that the easy answer is not always the correct one. In spite of her stated non-political stance in her fiction, she may be making a covert reference here to the attitude of the French state towards the Italian request to extradite Cesare Battisti for alleged crimes in the 1970s.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that although Vargas writes crime fiction, she is not offering the reader a view of real life and a critique of it or solutions to problems found there. Her narratives are set in an imaginary version of contemporary France and are modern myths dealing with good and evil.\(^\text{15}\) What is visible is a thrilling narrative that has the reader on the edge of the seat, unsure until the end as to the outcome. Narrative closure is not achieved as the killer is not brought to justice, but we are left with a suggestion as to what might happen and we know that Fulgence is likely to have completed what he set out to do and is therefore not a danger to society in general but only to himself. The hero has been to the brink of hell and has survived, older, wiser, and perhaps more able to face his emotional life that was somehow shut down since his brother disappeared. The hidden elements are that individuals can make a difference to the lives of others in simple ways, that good or evil behaviour is not age or gender specific, that the past will always come back to haunt us and that death is but a short step from life. Vargas sometimes compares her narratives to fairy stories that are used to help individuals understand the world in general terms. She creates fear and anxiety both for the characters who are in danger and in the reader regarding the great unknown, death. As she explains, she give us ‘la figure fantômatique de la nuit, du sauvage, de ce qu’on ne peut pas contrôler. De la mort donc aussi, de tout ce qui s’oppose à la vision du jour domestiquée par notre esprit et le reste nous échappe et évidemment c’est le grand néant et c’est bien le problème de comment on lutte contre l’ogre des petits en leur racontant des histoires d’ogres et de méchants.’\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) For a fuller discussion of this see Sara Poole, ‘Rompols not of the Bailey: Fred Vargas and the polar as mini-protomythe’. FCS xii (2001) 95 – 108.
\(^{16}\) Desnain, p.12 of 19.