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Treachery in Bordeaux

A Winemaker Detective Novel

Jean-Pierre Alaux
&
Noël Balen

Translated from French by Anne Trager

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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*“A bottle of wine contains more philosophy
than all the books in the world.”*

— Louis Pasteur

1

The morning was cool and radiant. A west wind had swept the clouds far inland to the gentle hills beyond the city of Bordeaux. Benjamin Cooker gave two whistles, one short, the other drawn out, and Bacchus appeared from the high grass on the riverbank. He had that impertinent look Irish setters get when you remind them that they are dogs. Benjamin liked this clever and deceptively disciplined attitude. He would never roam his childhood landscapes with an animal that was too docile. The Médoc was still wild, despite its well-ordered garden veneer, and it would always be that way. In the distance, a few low wisps of fog were finishing their lazy dance along the Gironde Estuary. It was nearly eleven and time to go home.

The Grangebelle's graceful shape rose among the poplar trees. The building would have seemed bulky, were it not for the elegant roof, the lightly draped pergola, the delicate sparkling of the greenhouse, and the old varnished vases set out in

the vegetation with studied negligence. Elisabeth moved silently among the copper pots in the kitchen. She shivered slightly when he kissed her neck. He poured himself a cup of Grand Yunnan tea with slow and precise movements. She knew he was tired. She was perfectly aware of his nights of poor sleep, the deleted pages, the files he relentlessly ordered and reordered, the doubts he had when he completed a tasting note, his concern for the smallest detail, and the chronic worry that he would deliver his manuscript late and disappoint his publisher. Benjamin had worked in his office until five in the morning, taking refuge in the green opaline halo of his old Empire-style lamp. Then he had slipped under the covers to join her, his body ice-cold and his breathing short.

Who could have imagined that France's most famous winemaker, the established authority who caused both grand cru estate owners and unknown young vintners to tremble, was, in fact, a man tormented by the meaning of his words, the accuracy of his judgments, and an objectivity that he brandished like a religious credo? When it came time to hand over a manuscript, his self-doubts assailed him—the man whom the entire profession thought of as entrenched in certainty and science and masterfully accomplished in the fine art of critiquing wines. Benjamin Cooker knew that everyone, without exception, would be waiting for his book to arrive in the stores. They

would be weighing his qualifiers and judging his worst and best choices. It was essential that the publication of his guide never blemish his reputation as a winemaker and a sought-after, even secret, advisor in the art of elaborating wines. He made it a point of honor and proved it with his sometimes scathing criticism of wines he himself had crafted. To him, moral integrity stemmed more often than not from this astonishing faculty of uncompromising self-judgment, even when it was forced and terribly unfair. He sometimes thought it belonged to another century, a far-away time, when self-esteem and a certain sense of honor prevailed over the desire for recognition.

He closed his eyes as he drank his tea. He knew that this moment of rest would not last long and that he should make the most of it, appreciating these slow, spread-out seconds. Elisabeth remained quiet.

“Send him to me as soon as he gets here. I need to have a few words with him before lunch,” he said, calmly setting down his cup.

Benjamin Cooker dragged himself back to the half-light of his office. He spent more than an hour examining his tasting notes for a *Premières Côtes de Blaye* and finished by persuading himself that there was nothing left to add. However, his preamble about the specific characteristics of the soil and the vineyard’s history was a little short on information, despite his in-depth knowledge

of every acre. There was nothing wrong with what he had written, but nothing really specific either. He would have to draw a more detailed picture, refine the contours, and play with an anecdote or two to clarify the text. He did not even lift his eyes from his notes when the doorbell rang out in the hallway. He was nervously scribbling some poetic lines about the Blaye citadel when Elisabeth knocked at the door. She knocked three more times before he told her to come in.

“Our guest has arrived, Benjamin.”

“Welcome, young man!” the winemaker said, pushing his glasses to his forehead.

An athletic and honest-looking young man with short hair honored him with a strong handshake that left Benjamin wondering if his fingers would still work.

So you’re Virgile Lanssien,” Benjamin said, lowering his reading glasses to the tip of his nose.

He invited the young man to sit down and observed him over the top of his lenses for a minute. His dark, pensive good looks would have been almost overwhelming, were it not for the spark of mischief in his eyes. He was dressed simply in a pair of slightly washed-out jeans, a navy blue polo shirt, and white sneakers. He was smart enough not to feign a laid-back attitude when everything about him was on edge. Benjamin appreciated people who did not posture.

“I have heard a lot about the time you spent at the wine school. Professor Dedieu was unending in his praise for your work, and I have to admit that I was rather impressed by your thesis. I have a copy of it here. The title is a little complicated, *Maceration Enzyme Preparation: Mechanism of Action and Reasonable Use*, but your reasoning was straightforward and clear, particularly the section about blind tasting an enzymatic treatment of cabernet sauvignon must. Well done, very well done! Please do excuse me for not having been part of the jury when you defended your dissertation.”

“I won’t hide my disappointment, sir.”

“In any case, my presence would not have changed the result: You greatly deserved the honors you received. I had an emergency call that day to care for some grapevines in Fronsac, and it couldn’t wait. The flowering was tricky and required quite a bit of attention.”

“I understand, sir. Did you save them at least?”

“More or less. There were enough grapes for me to offer you a bottle,” Benjamin said, smiling.

The young man settled into the armchair and relaxed a little. He knew that these formalities foreshadowed a flow of questions that he would have to answer with candor and precision. Benjamin Cooker was a master no cheating could fool. Virgile had read everything written by this man, whose reputation stretched as far as North America and South Africa. He had also

heard everything there was to know about the “flying winemaker”—all the scandal mongering and bitter words, along with the passionate commentaries and praise. Everything and its opposite were the usual lot of exceptional people, the ransom paid by those who had succeeded in imposing their singularity.

Virgile Lanssien tried to hide his apprehension and answered the sudden volley of questions that descended on him as distinctly as possible. They covered so many topics—layering, copper sulfate spraying, sulfur dioxide additions, microclimates, grand cru longevity, aging on lees, filtering and fining, gravel or limestone soils, fermentation temperatures, primary aromas, and degrees of alcohol—in such disorder, yet Virgile managed to avoid the traps with a skilled farmer’s cunning.

“Well, Virgile—I can call you Virgile, can’t I? I think that after these appetizers, we have earned the right to a meal.”

Elisabeth, wearing a checkered apron tied at her waist, welcomed them into the kitchen.

“We will eat in the kitchen, if that does not bother you, Mr. Lanssien.”

“To the contrary, ma’am. May I help with anything?”

“Why don’t you set the table. The plates are in that cupboard. The cutlery is here.”

Benjamin was surprised to see his wife accept the young man as if he were already part of the

family. But Elisabeth knew her man well enough to guess that the job interview was going well.

The winemaker grabbed three stem glasses and poured the wine he had decanted that morning, before the walk with Bacchus.

“Taste this, Virgile.”

Benjamin observed his future assistant while he cut the bread and placed the even slices in a basket. The boy knew how to taste. He used his eyes, his nose, and his palate in a natural way, with the attitude of someone who knew more than he showed.

“Wine can be so good when it’s good!”

An amused smile crossed Benjamin’s lips. The young man had a talent for finding the truth beneath the surface but also a certain guilelessness. Virgile was a cultivated ingénue with enough freshness and spontaneity to compensate for the long years he had focused entirely on his studies.

“I will not be so cruel as to subject you to a blind tasting,” Benjamin said, turning the empty bottle to display the label.

“Haut-Brion 1982!” the young man said with a note of rapture. “To tell you the truth, I’ve never tasted one of these before.”

“Enjoy it then. It’s harder and harder to grab this vintage away from the small-time speculators who are complicating our lives.”

“I made something simple,” Elisabeth interrupted, putting an old cast-iron casserole on the table.

Virgile paused, unfolded his napkin, and gave the pot an apprehensive look. Large chunks of eel floated in a thick greenish sauce filled with so many herbs, it looked like a patch of weeds.

“I know, at first glance it does not look very appetizing, but it is a recipe that deserves overcoming your first impression.”

“I think I know what it is.”

“Lamprey à la Bordelaise. It’s a classic,” said Elisabeth.

“With this dish, you should always drink the wine that was used in the cooking,” Benjamin said, dishing out generous portions. “And nothing is better with lamprey than a red Graves.”

Virgile stuck his fork into a piece of eel, dipped it in the sauce and nibbled at it.

“It is first rate, Mrs. Cooker! Excellent.”

“And now, let’s try a little of this Haut-Brion with that,” Benjamin suggested. “Just a swallow, and then tell me what you think.”

Virgile did as he was told, with a pleasure he had some trouble hiding.

“It is beautifully complex, particularly with the tannins that are very present. Rather surprising but not aggressive.”

Benjamin remained silent and savored his lamprey.

“It leaves a very smooth sensation in the mouth,” Virgile continued. “And yet it has a kind of grainy texture.”

“Very perceptive. That is typical of Haut-Brion. It is both strong and silky. And what else?”

“It’s fruity, wild fruits, with hints of berries, blackberries, and black currant fruit.”

“True enough,” Benjamin said. “You can taste cherry pits later on, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t notice, but now that you mention it.”

“Beware of what people say. Some may not find that hint of cherry pits, and they wouldn’t be wrong.”

The guest took the blow without flinching. Benjamin had no trouble pushing his interrogation further. The Pessac-Léognan grand cru loosened Virgile’s tongue, and secrets slipped out in every sentence. He recounted his childhood in Montravel, near Bergerac, where his father was a wine grower who shipped his harvest to the wine cooperative and had no ambitions for his estate.

“You’ll take over the business one day, won’t you?” Elisabeth asked.

“I don’t think so. At least not as long as my father is in charge of the property. My older brother is all they need for now to take care of the vineyards.”

“That’s too bad. Bergerac wines have come a long way and could certainly benefit from your talent,” Benjamin said.

“Perhaps one day. I rarely go back, truth be told. Mostly to see my mother, who accuses me of

deserting the nest, and my younger sister, who is the only one I can confide in.”

He talked a lot, not so much because he wanted to monopolize the conversation, but rather to satisfy his hosts’ unfeigned curiosity. To earn his future boss’s trust, he felt it was appropriate to answer the Cooker couple’s unspoken questions. The winemaker needed to know what was hidden in this excellent and dedicated student. Never had he experienced a job interview that was so informal and piecemeal. He disclosed himself without ostentation, without mystery, and without immodesty. He talked about swimming in the Dordogne River and playing for the Bergerac rugby club, but only for one season, because he preferred canoeing and kayaking. He mentioned his first medals when he joined the swim team, his years studying winemaking at La Tour Blanche, near Château d’Yquem, before he did his military service, and his studio apartment on Rue Saint-Rémi, from which you could see a little bit of the Garonne.

Between two anecdotes, Benjamin went to get a second carafe of Haut-Brion and allowed himself to share some of his own personal memories. It pleased Elisabeth to see her husband finally relaxed and able to forget the tribulations of his writing for a while. Benjamin recounted the crazy, hare-brained ideas his father, Paul William—an antique dealer in London—had

and his mother Eleonore's patience. Her maiden name was Fontenac, and she had spent her entire youth here in Grangebelle, on the banks of the Gironde, before she fell in love with that extravagant Englishman who collected old books in a shop at Notting Hill.

Virgile listened. His handsome brown eyes were wide open, and he looked like a slightly frightened child as he began to fully comprehend that this was the famous Cooker, *the Cooker*, whose books he had devoured and who was now sharing confidences. The oenologist enjoyed telling the young graduate about his chaotic career. He had studied law for a year in England, spent a year at the Paris Fine Arts Academy, worked for a year at the Wagons-Lits in train catering and sleeping-car services, and then bartended for a year at the Caveau de la Huchette in the capital before being hired at a wine shop in the fifth arrondissement in Paris, where he worked for three years while taking wine classes.

"The year I turned thirty, I started my wine consulting business," Benjamin said. "Elisabeth and I ended up moving here after my maternal grandfather, Eugène Fontenac, passed away. Since that day, I haven't been able to imagine living anywhere other than Bordeaux."

"That's an unusual career path," Virgile said.

"Yes, it is atypical. I had been around wine since I was a kid, when I visited my grandfather

in Grangebelle during summer vacations, but I needed a little time for all that to distill. I had a lot of doubts during my Paris years, and I spent a lot of time searching. I have followed a rather round-about path, but I do not regret any of the detours.”

“It’s intriguing, like the path a drop of Armagnac takes before it comes out of the alembic.”

“That’s a fine image,” Elisabeth said. “But sometimes it is better not to know all of the mysteries lying in the dark.”

“This is one area in which my wife and I differ. I believe you should always seek to uncover secrets.”

“I don’t really have an opinion on the subject,” Virgile said, studying the bottom of his empty glass.

Benjamin Cooker stood up and folded his napkin.

“My dear Virgile, from now on, consider yourself my assistant. We’ll discuss the conditions later. I hope that this wine cleared your mind, because I believe you will need all of your faculties. We have a particularly delicate mission awaiting us.”

“And when will I be starting?”

The winemaker took a last sip of Haut-Brion and set his glass down slowly. He slipped a hand into his jacket pocket, looked Virgile in the eye, and handed him a set of keys.

“Right now.”

2

A few expertly negotiated bends in the road were all it took to assure Benjamin Cooker that he had made the right choice. His new assistant handled the old Mercedes 280 SL convertible with tact. He hadn't needed much time to adjust to it. Virgile had no doubt that handing him the wheel was less a sign of trust than a test. He felt his employer eyeing his slightest moves with a distant vigilance barely masked by the drowsiness that was beginning to slow him down. As they drove through Bordeaux, Benjamin did not regret having let Virgile drive. He was beginning to feel the night of insomnia, and he let the comforting purr of the six cylinders soothe him. The accelerations were smooth, the braking soft, the turns balanced. The boy had to have some hidden fault!

As they approached the limits of Médoc, traffic slowed little by little, until it stopped entirely. The city of Bordeaux was mired in construction. The disfiguring yellow-orange signs looked like they belonged in a cheap carnival. Cranes with

empty hooks stood silent, while aggressive insect-like bulldozers lumbered all around them. The tramway—silent, shiny, and bright—would soon rise from this tangled mess. But for now, motorists could do nothing but wait. Some irritated drivers honked without any illusions of being able to move along, while others just put up with it silently.

“We’re trapped,” Benjamin grumbled. “Take the first street to the right, and let’s head to Pessac.”

“Are you sure?” asked Virgile.

“Go on. I know a shortcut.”

The driver put on his blinker and turned onto a lane lined with gray shops whose scaly facades could have used a serious facelift. The city was being transformed, but it would take much work to restore the gleam of years past. Stonework blackened by pollution would have to be cleaned, and long-neglected facades would need to be uncovered for Bordeaux to find its glory again. Only then could the city open up to the Port of the Moon once more, having shed its rags and come into its own.

Benjamin dictated directions. “Take the second street to the right, then the first left, followed by another left. Straight ahead to the sign. Watch out for the speed bump. To the right. Now, a little farther along, after the blue signs, keep right.” Bordeaux’s suburbs filed past in a confusion of cubical houses dropped there during the

happy-go-lucky nineteen fifties, ugly sheet-metal warehouses and deserted workshops, faux rustic houses with small well-kept yards and mocking gnomes, storefronts, and nineteenth-century working-class homes with stylized figures, sculpted friezes, and zinc festoons.

“We’re not far from the wine school,” Virgile said, surprised.

“Indeed, it’s nearby. At the next light, take the small road that heads downhill. We’re almost there.”

Benjamin asked his assistant to stop the convertible in the parking lot at the entrance of a large estate that was drowned in greenery and surrounded by a stone wall; shards of broken bottles lined the top to dissuade dishonest visitors. Virgile, who had not asked any questions during the trip, could not contain his curiosity any longer.

“Is this already Pessac?” he asked. “I’m a little lost.”

“Yes and no. We’re at the Château Les Moniales Haut-Brion. The estate is situated where Pessac, Mérignac, and Bordeaux meet. It is the only vineyard still found within greater Bordeaux.”

“Is that so? I thought that there weren’t any more on the registry.”

“You are quite mistaken! This is one of the intriguing facts about the Moniales Haut-Brion.”

“So, it’s the last vineyard planted *in* Bordeaux itself?”

“Or the first, depending on how you see things, Virgile,” said Benjamin. “Most important, it is owned by one of my best friends.”

Before going through the heavy wooden gate that opened to the grounds, the winemaker glanced around, and it seemed that the landscape had changed once again since his last visit some eight months earlier. The estate was locked in by suburban housing developments dating from the happy time before the first oil crisis tarnished illusions. A little farther north, blocks of white subsidized housing rose in stripes against the blue sky, insulting the eye.

Now, right in front of the main Moniales entrance, there were new two-story buildings that already looked like they would age poorly. The architects who designed this tidy, soulless complex clearly lacked taste and culture but had shown a very advanced knack for economy. It was easy to detect the second-rate developer’s stinginess in the hastily built structures. No consideration had been given to the families that would take out twenty-year mortgages on homes in this suburb, where the tiniest concrete block was accounted for, the piles of sand measured to the last grain, the woodwork negotiated at the lowest cost, and the gates put up without any grace.

Benjamin entered the estate and immediately headed toward the cellars, which were at the other end of the grounds. He felt at home. Virgile

followed three steps behind, not daring to walk beside him, still wondering what they were doing here.

A man of stature was walking in their direction. Benjamin waved at him and turned to his assistant. "Denis Maspain, the estate owner."

Maspain's steps were heavy. But his bearing was that of a natural gentleman farmer devoid of all affectation. He wore a white herringbone shirt, putty-colored pleated dress corduroys, a tweed jacket, and English shoes. Benjamin and he could have had the same tailor. Both had the elegant bearing that comes from being born into well-to-do families. Nearing the age of fifty, neither had concerns about fleeting trends. Denis was an old friend, one Benjamin did not need to see often to feel as close to as he had the day they had met. From time to time, they crossed paths, getting together with their families for an evening in Grangebelle, meeting for a long lunch, just the two of them, at Le Noailles in town, or seeing each other briefly during a tasting among experts. Luckily, Elisabeth got along well with Thérèse Maspain, the daughter of wine merchants from the Chartrons neighborhood. She too had high-born elegance and reserve.

They were a charming couple. Their children were educated, and their company was always pleasant. Benjamin was pleased that Denis had married so well. It was as if Thérèse's smile and

the pearl necklace she always wore brightened him up. He had studied to be an embryologist and had worked for a long time for a large pharmaceutical company in Castres before he took over operations at Moniales Haut-Brion, which belonged to his in-laws. Denis had finally put away his test tubes and potions to dedicate himself to presses and oak barrels. He worked hard, was blessed with a pragmatic approach, and was extremely rigorous in his winemaking. It took him only a few years to make this wine one of the most prestigious in the appellation.

“Benjamin, it’s a disaster!”

“Hello, Denis.”

“A total disaster!”

Benjamin knew his friend had an abrupt nature, but to not even greet him?

“Smell that!”

The winemaker carefully sniffed at the vial that Denis held out. He paused.

“I’m going to be very honest with you,” the winemaker said right out, wrinkling his nose. “This is the worst kind of smell. It’s a real mess, and you never know how the wine will turn out.”

“Are you thinking the same thing I am?”

“I’m afraid so,” Benjamin grumbled, moving his nose away from the flask.

“*Brettanomyces?*” the estate owner stammered with a worried look that seemed to refuse the answer that he already knew was obvious.

“I’m not going to hide anything from you. And it seems to be very advanced already.”

“I don’t understand. It happened all at once. I went to Germany for a week, and when I came back, I found four barrels like this.”

“Denis, you are not the first to be the victim of this kind of thing. But it is rather rare to find a Brett infection in a winery of your standing.”

“That’s why I called you so early this morning.”

Absorbed as he was, Denis Masepain had been oblivious to Virgile’s presence. Now he took notice and glared at him with suspicion.

“Virgile Lanssien, my new assistant,” Benjamin said to reassure his friend before going into the cellars.

“Pleased to meet you,” Denis muttered.

“The pleasure is all mine, sir,” the young man said, forcing his voice a little.

They followed the winemaker, who had already started ferreting among the barrels. The cellars, which had recently been renovated and enlarged, were kept remarkably clean. There were small one thousand- to two thousand-gallon tanks used to ferment grapes from each parcel separately. The wine was then aged in oak barrels for about eighteen months before being bottled. The small Moniales estate had long lingered in the shadows of the prestigious Château Haut-Brion and its neighbor, Mission Haut-Brion, yet

it could now easily rival the best vineyards in the Pessac-Léognan appellation.

Denis Maspain was aware of the challenges and duties the Haut-Brion name imposed on him, so he had called on the advice of experts, notably André Cazebon, an eminent researcher and dean of the Bordeaux Wine School. Benjamin had great esteem for this specialist in monitoring phenolic maturity. He had perfected a technique that made it possible to precisely determine grape maturity so that the fruit could be harvested at the optimal time. With this, the winemaking process could be adapted for each tank, and unique results could be obtained from each parcel.

“Did you tell your wizard?” asked Benjamin.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you if he had been around. I think he is in Lyon for a conference.”

“We’ll need his opinion. I’d like to talk it over with him.”

“I haven’t been able to reach him.”

“We’ll take samples from all the barrels, and we also need...”

“It’s done already,” Denis interrupted. “I prepared a sample from each barrel.”

“In that case, I’ll take everything to my lab and ask them to fast-track the tests.”

“I would like this to stay between us,” the estate owner said with a sigh.

“Who do you think we are? It seems to me that Cooker & Co. has a reputation for being more than discreet!”

“I’m sorry, Benjamin. That’s not what I meant.”

“Virgile and I will be the only ones who know. We won’t use any labels or names, so nothing will leak out. Don’t worry.”

Benjamin gave Virgile a nod, and the assistant effortlessly hoisted the crate full of numbered flasks from the small stainless steel table. Virgile followed his employer, who continued to talk with the master of the Moniales, as they left the cellars and walked up the central drive on the grounds.

“Virgile will come back tomorrow to take further samples from the barrels that are still healthy. In the meantime, you have to isolate the four contaminated barrels,” Benjamin advised. “That is a basic measure, and it needs to be done quickly. Better safe than sorry! You don’t have to walk us to the gate. I know the way.”

The two friends shook hands without saying anything further. His arms around the wooden crate, Virgile took leave of the estate owner with a nod and a smile that tried to be encouraging.

“This estate is really magnificent,” the young man said, looking around at the large trees dotting the grounds that had been designed by Michel Bonfin, the landscaper who did the Chartreuse Cemetery in Bordeaux.

Virgile did not hide his admiration. He stopped for a moment to contemplate the Moniales Haut-Brion manor house, built on a hill in front of the cellars. It was surrounded by rows of grapevines and dominated the landscape without arrogance. The château was not huge, but the balance of its slate roof, the curve of its front steps, and the proportions of its facade, with wings that had white Doric columns on both sides, gave the building elegance. A creek called the Peugue flowed at the foot of the knoll, ending among the loose moss-covered cobblestones of a fountain. A small Baroque chapel, built in the seventeenth century, with a pink marble-encrusted pediment, stood in the shade of a chestnut tree. Flocks of birds chirped in the pale April light, and leaves rustled in the breeze.

“It is hard to imagine such a place in the middle of the city.”

“It’s a small piece of paradise, my dear Virgile, with a whiff of sulfur in it.”

“I get that impression too, sir,” the assistant said, arranging the samples carefully in the trunk of the car.

Benjamin drove back. They had to move quickly. Very quickly!

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Noël Balen (left) and Jean-Pierre Alaux (right).

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Jean-Pierre Alaux and Noël Balen came up with the winemaker detective over a glass of wine, of course. Jean-Pierre Alaux is a magazine, radio, and television journalist when he is not writing novels in southwestern France. He is a genuine wine and food lover and won the Antonin Carême prize for his cookbook *La Truffe sur le Soufflé*, which he wrote with chef Alexis Péliou. He is the grandson of a winemaker and exhibits a real passion for wine and winemaking. For him, there is no greater common denominator than wine. Series coauthor Noël Balen lives in Paris, where he spends his time writing, making records, and lecturing on music. He plays bass, is a music critic, and has authored a number of books about musicians, in addition to his novel and short-story writing.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Anne Trager
(©Lebenoist)

Anne Trager has lived in France for over twenty-six years, working in translation, publishing, and communications. In 2011, she woke up one morning and said, “I just can’t stand it anymore. There are way too many good books being written in France not reaching a broader audience.” That’s when she founded Le French Book to translate some of those books into English. The company’s motto is “If we love it, we translate it,” and Anne loves crime fiction.