

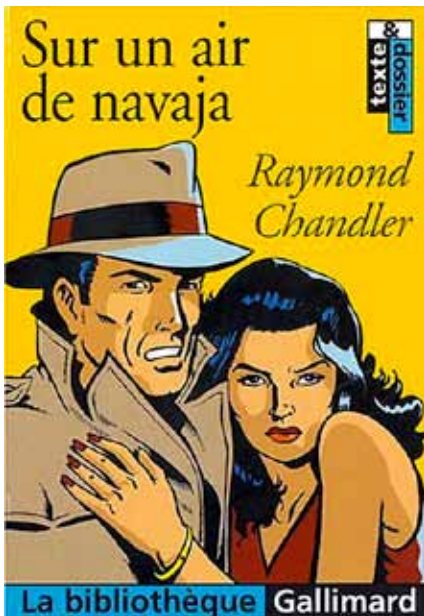


# ABRIDGED TOO FAR

No culture loves noir more than the French. So it's a shock to have one of France's most esteemed critics—**Philippe Garnier**—reveal a stunning secret: For decades French translations of American crime novels have been slicing and dicing classics of the genre.

**T**he French have always been smug about being the first to “discover” the value of noir literature, the genius of Jim Thompson, the hidden charms of David Goodis, or the stature of this or that *auteur* film director. So one might be justifiably startled to read this advertisement from Editions Gallimard, the tony French publisher of Proust and Faulkner, in its 1992 Spring list: “*Raymond Chandler’s* novel *The Long Goodbye*, now complete and unabridged for the first time in France!”

They were very coy about explaining why Gallimard, one of France's top publishers in terms of sales and prestige, waited nearly 40 years to reveal that the original “abridged version,” published in 1954 under the house's famous *Série Noire* imprint, had been missing an amazing 85 pages—more than a third of Chandler's complete manuscript.



Iconic works by Raymond Chandler and Jim Thompson were victimized by Gallimard's ax

French readers didn't fuss at having to shell out twenty-two bucks (in U.S. dollars) to finally get the whole thing, instead of receiving a much-belated refund. No critic cocked a gun, or even an eyebrow. One could suspect collective embarrassment at work—if the French were capable of such a thing—but *The Long Goodbye* snafu was actually just the most egregious example of a situation long known to bilingual noir devotees: a slew of popular American crime titles has been maimed, mangled, and often mutilated by French publishers. These chopped and crippled editions have remained in print for years.

No outfit was more instrumental in propagating—as well as disfiguring—American hard-boiled and noir fiction than Gallimard's celebrated *Série Noire*.

Because of its colorful origins (the name of the collection came from the libertarian poet Jacques Prévert, who, in the 1930s, sometimes employed founder Marcel Duhamel as an actor in his films) Gallimard was instrumental in feeding the French popular taste for the genre, but it molded it as well by constructing a conformist look for the editions that forged a recognizable identity. It also made the books acceptable to the intellectuals. California may have had its "I'd Rather Read Bukowski" bumper stickers in the '80s, but as early as 1951, Jean-Paul Sartre confessed that he'd "rather read a *Série Noire* novel than Wittgenstein, any day," and didn't mind his publisher—Gallimard—quoting this in his promotional material. The books were geared to a popular audience, but intellectuals took to them, mostly because the covers—basic yellow and white covers, sans graphics—were as uniform as the translations. They would have had an entirely different reaction if Jim Thompson's *A Hell of a Woman* had been sold, American-style, with a shapely slut on its cover, or if Horace McCoy's *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* had featured the undressed woman from the cover of the New American Library edition, complete with black bra and come-hither blurb ("Love as hot as a blow torch").

When it comes to critical acceptance of crime fiction there is no de-

nying the importance of the *Série Noire*: under often fanciful, slangy titles, Marcel Duhamel republished classic hard-boiled works from the 1920s and '30s (Hammett's novels, as well as W. R. Burnett's *Little Caesar* and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, had been brought out by Gallimard before the war), as well as publishing for the first time in France essential fare from Raymond Chandler, Paul Cain (as well as James M.), Horace McCoy, William Irish, David Goodis, Jim Thompson—all jumbled up with imitative British trash like Peter Cheney and James Hadley Chase, as well as the French homegrown variety, mostly written by ex-cons and Corsican gazonies.

Translators were instructed to "keep it snappy," using slang even where it didn't apply, and limiting the text to less than 180 pages. There was a "*Série noire* tone," a common language to the books, which had more to do with the colorful dialogues of Albert Simonin (*Touche pas au grisbi*) or Pierre Dax (author of the dubbed versions of the Marx Brothers films) than the specific styles of Hammett or Burnett. Geography was often airbrushed, and American sports was strictly banished: James M. Cain's *The Moth*, half of which deals with college football, was cut by half, leaving only the hobo chapters. The novel was passed over by the *Série Noire*, Cain's usual publisher, and released instead by Les Editions du Scorpion (presumably because it was in their nature). Such butchering was common practice at the time.

No wonder Raymond Chandler was befuddled to learn that *The Little Sister* had come out in France under the title *Fais-pas ta ros-rière* (*Don't be such a prig*), and, in one of his typical huffs, wrote a letter of complaint to Duhamel about it. Thankfully, Chandler never learned about the huge chunk missing from *Sur un air de navaja*, as *The Long Goodbye* is known in Frogland. The title is a cheeky-beyond-words pun on "dagger" and "java," a popular dance of the Parisian Apaches in the early '30s. This "dance of the long knives" may have been a tip-off to the carving job. *The Long Goodbye*, Chandler's swan song and masterpiece, was much longer than his other novels, so anything in the book not essential to the plot was removed—which in Chandler's case is always the best stuff.



Boris Vian

**THIS OBSESSION WITH CUTTING TEXT** carried over into the early 1960s, when Duhamel selected Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* to mark the *Série Noire*'s "Number 1000." For the anniversary, Duhamel de-

ecided to do the translation himself. As his English was superior (he was raised and educated in Manchester), he did a credible job of it, but for some reason couldn't resist tampering with the head count in Thompson's little Texas town. The French title, Gogol-style, was *1275 âmes* (*1275 souls*). The tweaking was so bizarre and arbitrary that for many years readers mulled the hidden reasoning behind it. Eventually, in 2000, *Série Noire* auteur Jean-Bernard Pouy wrote a very funny book about it, in which an antiquarian bookdealer takes up the trail of the missing five citizens. It was called *1280 âmes*.

Good command of the English language was encouraged among translators, but it was not always necessary. St-Germain-des-prés scenester Boris Vian's English was barely adequate enough to greet



A collection of articles on Gallimard's "Série Noire" abridgments

Miles Davis or Bud Powell at Orly, but this didn't prevent Duhamel from giving him Chandler's *La dame du lac* (*The Lady in the Lake*) to translate, as well as countless others. Vian's wife would "tell him what was going on" in the story, and he'd surf on this. Duhamel didn't mind: Vian fit in his collection, was a novelist in his own right, and had the "Série noire" tone down cold: a combination of comedy and zany poetry to which French readers had grown attached. Even today, confronted with the mistakes and the deletions, many middle-aged French readers declare a preference for the French versions.

Indeed, one could argue that David Goodis' prose was sometimes more palatable in French than in the original. François Truffaut, who in 1960 adapted Goodis' *Down There* as *Shoot the Piano Player*, claimed he had tried to make his film "not America, but not France either." The noir literature dispensed by la Série Noire was what he called "fairy tales for adults," a kind of make-believe criminal kingdom. It should come as no surprise that the collection included many titles one could consider pastiches, if not outright steals. Série Noire No. 1 was Peter Cheney's *Poison Ivy* (*La même vert-de-gris*), No. 3 James Hadley Chase's take on Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, entitled *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. In fact, Chase, a squadron commander of the RAF whose real name was Rene Brazon, was sued for plagiarism over his "homage" to James M. Cain, *In a Vain Shadow*, which Du-



Jean-Bernard Pouy

hamel published nonetheless, giving it the witty title *L'abominable pardessus* (*The Abominable Overcoat*).

Boris Vian himself translated *The Lady in the Lake* only after Duhamel turned down his own novel, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I'll Spit on Your Grave*). Vian's scant regard for this vein of American literature was on par with what this jazz-lover felt for rock'n'roll: he thought so little of it he decided to skip the translating and simply made it up himself, in French. Just as he wrote ditties like "Zorro est arrive," a pastiche of Leiber and Stoller's "Along Came Jones," he "translated" the novels of ex-pat American Vernon Sullivan, which les Editions du Scorpion published to great success. Into those colorful brews, Vian threw every cliché the French then held to be true about America: racism, miscegenation, rape, greed, etc. "Vernon Sullivan," of course, didn't exist.

We're told that in Paris publishing circles pruning books is no longer allowed. Too many young people read English, and agents and even authors can sometimes be pesky about veracity. But as late as 1981, you could still find in a James Crumley novel a topless bar translated as "a bar sans enseigne" (a bar without a "top," or a sign), and plenty of bad guys are still routinely whipping out shotguns, or weapons of even more improbable caliber, from "sous les aisselles" (under their armpits). ■