

Hard-Hearted

Reading group notes

Synopsis

If you haven't read the book, you should think twice before reading this synopsis, which reveals some key plot points.

An elegantly dressed murder victim is found in the streets surrounding the Monceau park, one of the city's most upscale neighbourhoods. Stabbed through the heart, the only thing she is carrying is an original edition of an 18th century collection of fairy tales. Captain Franck Guerin catches the case, now four years into his supposedly temporary reassignment to the city's major crimes unit (the *Brigade Criminelle*) from his former post in national security.

The victim is identified as Sandrine Nestel, the Sorbonne's youngest professor and a rising star in 17th century literary studies. The book too soon gives up its secrets, as it is discovered that it was stolen from the jealously-guarded reserve of the Institut de France. Both pieces of information come from Annick Payet, a lowly lecturer in a provincial university, whose jaundiced view of Nestel's career suggests that the victim's success had attracted more than a little professional jealousy amongst her peers.

Not to mention more than a little interest in other, more surprising, quarters – for it turns out that Nestel was dating Mathieu Devaux, the playboy head of a hedge fund whose aggressive trading practices seem to be threatening the survival of one of the nation's principal banks. Nestel's death had occurred just after she walked out of Devaux' sumptuous mansion following a lovers' tiff.

Franck Guerin finds himself confronted with two apparently conflicting universes, each with its own cast of potential suspects. On one side, Nestel's disapproving colleagues and the roguish thief who charmed his way into the Institut de France in order to relieve it of a collection of fairy tales. On the other, Devaux' trading partner, the severely handicapped Alain Mangin who openly declares himself at war with the kind of beauty with which Nestel had been blessed, and the gold-digging serial seductress Mélanie Tessier, who slips into Devaux' bed with alarming speed now that Nestel is out of the way.

To make matters worse, Franck's former boss from national security, the shady and cynical Catherine Vautrin, seems to be taking all too close an interest in the case – not in order to identify the guilty party, but to use it to bring Devaux' hedge fund to its knees in order to protect a state-backed bank which it had been targeting.

The discovery of second victim linked to the hedge fund seems to indicate that the world of high finance rather than that of obscure academic toil lies behind the murders. Until, that is, Franck realises the true significance of the book Nestel had been carrying, and finally figures out that at the heart of his enquiry lies a love story

About the author

David Barrie is a Scot who has lived in contented exile in Paris since 1992. Having dragged out studenthood for as long as he could (commencing and abandoning two PhDs on the way), he eventually stumbled into management consulting. Thus began a twenty-year career in the UK and France that allowed him to become a partner in a mildly prestigious international audit and consulting group. He ended up founding his own consulting firm (neither prestigious nor international) in Paris and trying his hand at writing. *Hard-Hearted* is his fourth novel featuring Franck Guerin, a character introduced in the previously published *Loose-Limbed*, *Night-Scented* and *Wasp-Waisted*.

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A short interview with the author

***Hard-Hearted* yokes together two worlds – high finance and academia – that normally live on completely separate planes. How did that come about?**

After the financial crisis (assuming it's now safe to talk about "after" – about which I'm far from sure), I really wanted to use it as the background to a story. Which meant I had to deal with the super-rich, and one of the things that characterises them is their relentless search for the most exclusive of possessions that can set them apart from their peers. Well, once you've exhausted the Ferrari catalogue and bought a roomful of marine creatures pickled in formaldehyde, what's left? How about the world of intellectual endeavour, where cash (at least in theory) counts for nothing? Erudition is the ultimate rare good.

It could be said that your previous books were all meditations on beauty. *Hard-Hearted*, for the first time, dwells upon its opposite. A new direction?

Not really. One of the things that brought *Wasp-Waisted* into being was the difficulty I'd always had with Keats' verse "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", for in real life beauty is often anything but true and ugliness rarely a lie. None of us is immune to the call of physical beauty (Franck Guerin least of all – if he was, he might get into less trouble), and few of us voluntarily go out of our way to contemplate its opposite. And yet we all know that surface appearance tells us nothing of what lies beneath. From that point of view, *Hard-Hearted* is just another chapter in the ongoing investigation of the "noir" that lies inside the "chic".

Little by little, you're revealing a little more about Franck Guerin. This time around we get to meet his father and learn the origins of the briefcase that has dogged his footsteps since the first book. Are there more revelations to come?

The day we know everything about Franck, we'll lose interest in him. Isn't that always the case? Luckily for us – and him – the details of his cases keep getting in the way.

Is madame de Villeneuve's version of *Beauty and the Beast* worth reading?

It's a very strange version. The Beast – much to madame de Villeneuve's credit – is truly bestial – more Elephant Man than Lion King. But it has a really long, complicated ending which you just have to trudge through. Franck doesn't know how lucky he was to be confronted with the volume of her collected *Tales* that only has the opening of the story.

How well do you know the Parisian locations used in the story?

With one exception I've been in every location I used – for instance, I've worked in both the Villa Labrouste and the Ariane Tower (and I never felt comfortable with the latter's lifts). The exception, unfortunately, is the Hôtel Menier, which is now split up into private residences and impossible to get into. I had to rely on Emile Zola for an idea of what it might be like inside.

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Suggested topics for discussion

- *Dangerous things, books.* Does the story bear Franck out, or do books prove themselves less dangerous than their readers?
- How comfortable were you in the company of Alain Mangin?
- To what extent do the *noir chic* novels ignore the dark underbelly of Paris?
- The same cast of characters have been popping up in all the Franck Guerin books. This time around we don't get to meet Gabriel Agostini and we only catch a distant glimpse of Sonia Delemazure. Did you miss them?
- If *Hard-Hearted* is a reworking of Beauty and the Beast, is the character of Annick Payet a less fortunate Cinderella?
- How believable is the notion that a hedge fund like Fusion – a group of no more than half a dozen people – could stalk a major national bank almost to its death?
- In the end of the day, who are the most hard-hearted characters in the book?