

# Loose-Limbed

## 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.**

Sophie Duval, a leading ballerina with the Paris Opera Ballet is found strangled in her apartment. The case falls into the hands of captain Franck Guerin, temporarily reassigned from national security matters to the city's major crimes unit (the *Brigade Criminelle*) due to a botched anti-terrorist operation in Corsica two years previously.

With her death, Sophie's secrets begin to spill out. She had been sleeping with Serge Morin, a veteran of the Opera Ballet who is still dancing at 49, known for his unflappable good humour and capacity to charm its ballerinas into his bed. She had plotted against her best friend within the company, Lisa Roux, to obtain the leading role in a new ballet commissioned from the choreographer Piet van Roon, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary dance. But all that is overshadowed by the discovery of a stash of performance-enhancing drugs in her lodge. When Anne-Laure Favennec, the imperious director of the Opera Ballet, learns of this her anger knows no bounds. She accuses Sophie of having betraying the company's ideals and endangered its reputation as a temple of classical ballet.

The drug trail leads Franck to Léon Abkarian, known in cycling circles as the "witch doctor" for his ability to give an illicit helping hand to competitors in the Tour de France. Abkarian, a wily rogue, seems to enjoy nimbly avoiding Franck's questions – but he proves unable to elude the killer, who despatches him in exactly the same fashion as Sophie.

The potentially explosive doping scandal seems the obvious explanation for the killings. But when a third victim is found strangled Franck's attention switches to *Diana and Acteon*, van Roon's new ballet, a tale of violent instincts and forbidden knowledge. The young ballerina propelled into the leading role by the murders – the ambitious and determined Clara Santoni – turns out to be related to the Corsican terrorist behind Franck's exile in the *Brigade Criminelle*. Just how closely they are linked becomes a matter of urgent concern when the terrorists carry out a high-profile murder in the heart of Paris.

The truth will not come to the surface until the evening of the première of *Diana and Acteon*, thanks to the attentive eye of a young ballet fan. As the long-awaited performance plays out, Franck finally understands the significance of the evidence that has been in his hands since the start of the investigation. But does he have enough time to see that justice is done?

### **About the author**

David Barrie is a Scot who has lived in contented exile 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. *Loose-Limbed* is his third novel featuring Franck Guerin, a character introduced in the previously published *Night-Scented* and *Wasp-Waisted*.

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### **A short interview with the author**

**Unlike your previous books, which ranged all over Paris, the action in *Loose-Limbed* takes place almost entirely in a single location. Why?**

Well, it's not any old location. It's the Opera. And I mean THE Opera – not the Bastille Opera, a hulking modern monstrosity thrown up under Mitterrand, but the Opera Garnier, the nineteenth century palace created by the architect Charles Garnier. The Opera Garnier is a wondrous place, and a world unto itself. Its public areas are extravagantly dimensioned and lavishly decorated while backstage a mysterious realm of workshops and lodges and rehearsal rooms is hidden away. Since I wanted to give the reader a taste of all its nooks and crannies, there really wasn't time to take in any other sights. And, quite frankly, any other locations would have paled in comparison. There is nowhere quite like it in Paris – and, to the best of my knowledge, very few elsewhere.

***Loose-Limbed* isn't just about the Opera building. Above all else it's about the workings of the Opera Ballet. Are you a big ballet fan?**

Not at all. When I started writing the book, I was in the same position as Franck Guerin – I'd seen the odd ballet, I had a weak spot for tutus, and I knew a few names, like Nureyev or Balanchine. The rest I had to learn as I went along – just like Franck. And that, after all, is one of the things that characterises all the Franck Guerin books – he's thrown into a world he barely understands, and he and the reader learn to decipher it together.

That said, after a year mulling over and writing *Loose-Limbed*, I can't claim any expertise in ballet, but I've certainly become an admirer. It's an astonishing art form – amongst other reasons because it's one of the very few in which virtuosity is both cultivated and kept in check. Every single dancer in the Opera Ballet, from the *étoiles* to the *corps de ballet*, is capable of breathtaking feats, but in the end they all serve whatever ballet it is they're dancing, and not their own desire for glory and applause.

**You've been criticised in the past for keeping Franck Guerin close to your chest, revealing as little as possible about the man to the reader. Does Franck's romance with Noémie Berger in *Loose-Limbed* indicate that you're finally loosening your grip?**

Probably not. I think Franck deserves a little discretion, and his life shouldn't be needlessly exposed to public view. The tale of his involvement with Noémie may seem a little gratuitous at first, but not by the time you've got to the end.

I'm wary of the way in which fictional detectives become bigger than their enquiries. I know it's a time-honoured tradition, but sometimes it seems that an author lavishes more time on his hero's quirks than on the plotting of his tale, which seems to me a cardinal sin.

**You have a fair number of recurring characters. Are you too lazy to invent new ones?**

No more so than the writers of *Coronation Street*. Or J.K. Rowling, for that matter. If you're trying to create a fictional world which will snare a reader in its web, then recurring characters are one of the best ways to do it. Look at Neville Longbottom in Harry Potter – who didn't feel a slight quickening of the heart as he popped up in book after book and the conviction grew that great things would come from him? Who knows, maybe Sonia Delemazure will surprise us.

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### Suggested topics for discussion

- If you were a ballet fan before reading the book, how well do you think it portrays the workings of the Opera Ballet and the professional lives of its performers? If you weren't, has the book heightened your interest in the world of ballet?
- Did you work out the identity of the killer before the end? If so, what information or clues did you use to do so?
- To what extent is the tale of Diana and Acteon – the subject of van Roon's new ballet – symbolically important for the rest of the book?
- Since ballet is not a competitive sport, should the use of performance-enhancing drugs be condemned?
- Having read the book, how keen would you be to visit the Opera building? Do you think you could find your way around, based on what you've learned from the book?
- Do you think Franck Guerin will ever be allowed to go back to his old job in national security? How much do you think he wants to?
- How did you feel about the murder committed in the Hotel Bristol? Was your reaction to it different from your reaction to the other killings in the book?
- Is Georges Sternberg's daughter the unsung heroine of the book?
- If the ballet *Diana and Acteon* existed, would you go to see it?
- *Her feet were wrong.* The first thing we meet in the book are Sophie Duval's feet. Do they simply illustrate one of the perils of the ballerina's profession, or do they mean something more in the context of all that follows?