

# Silver-Tongued

## Reading group notes

### **Synopsis**

**If you haven't read *Silver-Tongued*, you should think twice before reading this synopsis, which reveals some key plot points.**

It all begins, as such tales often do, with a body. Selim Bencherif, a paparazzi known for his skill in stalking celebrities, is found battered to death under the arches of the Théâtre de l'Odéon in the centre of Paris. The images in his camera indicate that he had been tracking Bruno Kahn, a controversial psychologist and therapist who is known for his ability to worm his way into the lives, affections and wallets of the wealthy. Kahn is involved in a very public scandal centred upon Guy Larroque, former head of the privately owned Larroque Group, which is worth billions. Currently in his early 80s and suspected of suffering from progressive dementia, Guy recently retired and married a young and beautiful gold-digger named Viviane Delmas who, rumour has it, was served up to him on a dish by Bruno Kahn, one of her many former lovers. Guy's daughter, the indomitable Sabine Masson-Larroque, is convinced that Kahn is manipulating her father and has engaged a combative lawyer, Carole Fournier, in an attempt to have the marriage annulled.

Franck Guerin of the *Brigade Criminelle*, charged with the investigation into Bencherif's death, discovers that the paparazzi was working for Carole Fournier in an attempt to dig up dirt on Kahn which could help her in her case against him. He also discovers that Bencherif possessed a collection of valuable photographic prints which were recently bought by Guy Larroque for his good friend Kahn. It turns out that Bencherif had been double-dipping – pocketing not only a monthly fee from Fournier but accepting payment from Kahn to conceal comprising material he had collected on him, meaning that both sides of the Larroque feud had good reason to wish the paparazzi harm.

The way Bencherif was killed – with a very distinctive hammer – offers another possible explanation for his death, as it turns out that the murder weapon is the preferred arm of a clandestine ultra-right paramilitary group known as the Martel Brigade. As Bencherif was of Arab descent, and had recently photographed acts of violence committed by the supporters of the Front National in the run up to the ongoing presidential election, Franck begins to wonder if the murder has nothing to do with the Larroques – until it turns out that the head of security for Guy Larroque, a retired captain from the Foreign Legion called Yann Cloarec, may well be linked to the Martel Brigade. When it turns out that Sabine Masson-Larroque's son, Arnaud, is actively involved in a militant group that tracks the Martel Brigade and its misdeeds, then both the racist and dynastic hypotheses for Bencherif's death suddenly intertwine. And then there's Magali Masson-Larroque, daughter to Sabine and the ugly duckling of the Larroque clan, whose perpetual anxiety suggests that Bruno Kahn is not the only one with something to hide.

When Carole Fournier is battered to death with exactly the same type of hammer, it is revealed that she had been sleeping with Bruno Kahn with the same gusto she brought to prosecuting him through the courts, making it even harder for Franck to decide whether Kahn is the accidental focal point of the deaths or the mastermind behind them.

A third victim will clear Kahn's name, while making it all the more urgent that Franck discover not only the hand behind the hammer but why it is being used to scatter a trail of corpses around the Larroque family.

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### **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 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. *Silver-Tongued* is his sixth novel featuring Franck Guerin, a character introduced in the previously published *Tight-Lipped*, *Hard-Hearted*, *Loose-Limbed*, *Night-Scented* and *Wasp-Waisted*.

### **A brief interview with the author**

***Silver-Tongued* opens with a quote from Molière’s *Le Misanthrope* which appears to be a very despairing comment on human nature. Is that how Franck Guerin sees things?**

Curiously enough, the quote comes not from Alceste, the misanthrope of the play’s title, but from his worldly friend Philinte. It is the latter, a man at ease in all circles, who argues that you can only expect the worse from humans and that you should lower your expectations to such a point that nothing can shock or disappoint you. Alceste, on the other hand, insists on holding those around him to a higher standard. If he’s a misanthrope it’s because (like Mulder) he persists in wanting to believe. One of Franck Guerin’s strengths is that he is no cynic, despite all that he knows.

### **The Larroque feud isn’t entirely made-up, is it?**

Of course it is. Like they say on the end credits of films, any similarity to persons living or dead is completely coincidental. And yet we all know that coincidences happen – like the fact that Liliane Bettencourt, the fabulously rich widow of the man who founded L’Oréal, was at the heart of a court case that ran from 2007 to 2015 in the course of which her daughter insisted that a certain François-Marie Banier had taken advantage of her mother’s diminished mental state to extract hundreds of millions of euros from her. Banier ended up being sent to jail for his deeds.

### **So what about the Martel Brigade?**

One of the more sombre aspects of the past few years has been the rise to more-or-less respectability of the Front National, bringing with it an existential threat to *la République* and its basic credo (that all are born free and equal and must enjoy the same rights). *Silver-Tongued* takes place in 2012, when the Front National failed to make it to the second round of the presidential election (unlike in 2002 – when it was thought impossible - and in 2017 – when its short-lived success proved yet another symptom of a world gone seriously awry). A constant of Far Right movements is the embrace of – indeed, one might even say worship of – violence, so the existence of a group like the Martel Brigade would scarcely be surprising. Moreover, the way the group’s name is borrowed from the past, rewriting history in the process, is also typical of the Far Right’s *modus operandi* (look at the Front National’s obsessive attempts to repurpose Joan of Arc).

### **Where’s Gabriel?**

Ask Catherine. She’ll know.

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### Suggested topics for discussion

- “They’re the rich, Franck. They don’t play by the same rules as the rest of us.” Is this the overriding lesson of all David Barrie’s Noir Chic novels?
- Is Franck Guerin a good detective? (Orange, after all, is a very distinctive colour, just as salamander-shaped door handles are scarcely common).
- “Doctor Daniel Masson-Larroque was that rarest of things – a man of virtue, *un bonnête homme*.” Is he the only one in the book? What about Yann Cloarec?
- “Bruno Kahn’s death is a sad loss because colourful rogues are few and far between these days.” To what extent does the book’s fondness for rogues suggest that something is wrong with its moral compass?
- More than one of the female characters in the book seems to have a soft spot for Franck Guerin. Does this surprise you?