

# Wasp-Waisted

## 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.**

Laure Sarraute, a young model soon to be the face of a distinguished fashion house, features on the cover of *Exposé*, the country's top scandal-sheet, posed seductively in some of the most expensive lingerie money can buy. Room service in a luxurious Left Bank hotel stumbles upon the original: her corpse, exactly as captured in the photo, sent to *Exposé* by the murderer.

The case is assigned to Franck Guerin, a national security specialist seconded to homicide duty under the eye of a maverick magistrate, Yves de Chaumont. Used to a harder, darker world, Franck finds himself following the victim's exquisite underwear to its manufacturer – Luc du Bellay, whose sales are pushed through the roof by the sudden publicity – and to *Wasp-Waisted*, a subscriber-only magazine dedicated to images of young women in erotic lingerie whose visual universe seems to echo that of the *Exposé* photo. An interview with the magazine's editor, an imperious young Iranian woman named Maryam Sehati, reveals that Laure Sarraute had posed for its inaugural issue.

A second victim is added to the series – killed in the same fashion, draped in Du Bellay, the subject of a stunning photo supplied anonymously to *Exposé* – but snatched from a different world. Rachida Tazi, an illegal immigrant, supplemented her job as a stripper in Pigalle with work as a life model in the Beaux Arts, Paris' celebrated art school, and had recently made her first foray into pornography. Following the Beaux Arts connection, Franck makes the acquaintance of Anne Subrini, a painting and drawing professor who used Tazi as a model. She helps him with the iconography of the death photos, looking to establish the murderer's artistic fingerprint. Franck also finds himself invited to dinner by Maryam Sehati to receive a hands-on education about lingerie and its many forms.

Other victims follow. Under the discreet and cool-headed direction of Yves de Chaumont, Franck attempts to reconstruct the ties that bound victims and suspects in a universe of desire, deceit, beauty and profit. What he does not know is that someone is following him, photographing his every move, preparing to add him to a collection of images.

The investigation takes Franck all across Paris: from the luxury hotels of the Left and Right Banks to seedy lodgings on the city's outer fringe; from the clustered skyscrapers of La Défense to the bohemian disorder of the Ecole des Beaux Arts; from the designer boutiques of the Avenue Montaigne to the strip clubs of Pigalle. When he finally realises who is behind the killer's lens another victim has already been dressed to die.

A final, fatal photograph will make its way to the cover of *Exposé*.

### **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. *Wasp-Waisted* is his first published novel.

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

#### **Why set the book in Paris?**

Apart from the fact that I live there and like to think I know the city well? Cities play a crucial role in most detective fiction. When you read Ian Rankin, you're not only worrying about Rebus' appalling diet but you're wondering about how on earth Edinburgh maintains a reputation for being so posh when it's so seedy. When you read Michael Connolly, you don't just hope that Harry Bosch will one day find peace, you're also acutely aware of the fact that LA is just a series of oases linked by congested roads. When you think of Donna Leon, you think of Venice, and so on.

Paris is scarcely virgin territory from this point of view. Simenon's Inspector Maigret set his stamp on it a long time ago, and Fred Vargas has done a marvellous job of dusting it off with her quirky tales of Inspector Adamsberg. But there's room for more. Like most capital cities, Paris contains many universes, which makes it ideal for crime fiction.

Above and beyond all that, it's an irresistible place. Maybe that's the real answer to your question.

#### **Where did the inspiration for *Wasp-Waisted* come from?**

To get from my apartment to the nearest metro station I have to walk down a street that is full of shops. It's a microcosm of Parisian commerce: bakers, cheese shops, butchers, wine shops, clothes shops, you name it. There are two or three of everything. But there are seven – yes, seven – shops selling lingerie. If you walk past that many lingerie displays every day, you either learn to avert your eyes or you begin to take a potentially unhealthy interest in the subject. You can tell what happened to me.

#### **On the whole, the women in your book seem more powerful and determined than the men. Want to comment on that?**

Sure. It's called realism.

To be fair to my long-suffering detective, Franck is not a weak man, he's just adrift. And he can always look up to Yves de Chaumont, who seems pretty unflappable to me.

That said, strong women are definitely a Parisian phenomenon. In my working life over here, I've come into contact with an awful lot of intelligent, powerful, attractive and well-dressed women. What's more, it's probably not even specific to Paris. The same must be true of London and New York and big cities the world over.

#### **Wasn't it a bit condescending to put a glossary at the end of the book?**

I hope not. Nobody's obliged to read it. There's no shame in not catching the meaning of something you stumble across in a book. It happens to me all the time. I've read books that I would have found a lot less frustrating with a glossary.

#### **What did Franck and Maryam have for dessert?**

Good question. Got another one?

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### Suggested topics for discussion

- Does it matter that the story takes place in Paris? Could it just as easily have been set in another major capital (London, New York, Tokyo, ...)?
- How good a detective does Franck Guerin turn out to be? Would he be best advised to go back to his old job in the DST?
- “We have never been so assailed by images, captain. We hold onto very few of them, otherwise we probably could not continue to function.” (Anne Subrini) Is Anne’s observation borne out by the book?
- Are Yves de Chaumont, the *juge d’instruction*, and Catherine Vautrin, his former section head from the DST, fighting for Franck’s soul?
- What did Franck and Maryam Sehati have for dessert?
- At what point does it become obvious who is the killer? How many false suspects did you identify and discard on the way?
- Which, if any, of the book’s main characters would you like to:

	Get to know better	Work for	Have dinner with
Franck Guerin			
Maryam Sehati			
Anne Subrini			
Yves de Chaumont			
Sonia Delemazure			
Sylvie Thomas			
Luc du Bellay			
Catherine Vautrin			

- Why is the book prefaced with an extract from John Keat’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*?
- “On the whole, the women in your book seem more powerful and determined than the men.” Discuss.