

Gatekeepers of Noir: The Paradoxical Internationalization of the French Crime Fiction Field

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The French noir tradition is supposed to dominate the French market of crime fiction, regardless of the growing success of French and non-French thrillers in France. Yet in the last two decades, the French literary crime fiction market has been marked by the arrival of non-French European authors. By combining a quantitative and qualitative approach to publishing series, translations, prizes and festivals, this article highlights the transnational dimension of the French market independently from a spontaneous methodological nationalism encouraged by the reception discourses.

Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, '*néopolar*' ('new crime novel', 'polar' being the colloquial overall label for crime fiction in French) has been the prevalent model in French crime fiction, regarded as representative of the very essence of this genre. Considered as the genre's most prestigious incarnation, it renewed the perception of its symbolic status. Less picturesque, more political and literary than its predecessors of the 1950s and 1960s, the French '*néopolar*' (Jean-Patrick Manchette, Jean Vautrin, Didier Daeninckx) contributed to legitimizing the genre and to marking it as politically engaged, giving birth from the 1980s to a French noir tradition that still inspires writers nowadays. Up to now, French Noir is supposed to dominate the French market for crime fiction, regardless of the growing success of the French thriller (Franck Thilliez, Jean-Christophe Grangé, Pierre Lemaître). Yet, in the last two decades, the French literary crime fiction market, which had long been dominated by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, has been marked by the arrival of non-French

European authors in crime fiction collections, in awards categories as well as in the line-ups of crime fiction festivals, now labelled as ‘international’: this shift is identified as the rise of a transcultural dimension and of a European shift in crime fiction (Welsch 1999). In addition, over the same period, French crime fiction appears to have renewed itself, with some publishers even sometimes using foreign crime fiction as part of their strategies to promote the French wave.

In this context, this article aims to assess the representation of French crime fiction as traditional French noir. Our study suggests that the internationalization of the French field of crime fiction is paradoxical, as the circulation of Anglo-Saxon Noir, Nordic Noir, and French Noir is counterbalanced by new strategies, simultaneously supporting non-French European crime fiction and a new wave of French crime fiction. The analysis is built on three perspectives, combining various types of data: a quantitative and qualitative survey of publishing conducted through the catalogues of publishers; an analysis of publishing and marketing strategies, based on interviews with publishers; and third, an analysis of prizes and festivals, to reconsider the belief system about French Noir.

The French ‘Glocal’ Market for Crime Fiction

Let us first consider the background of the global (and French) ‘Republic of crime letters’ – to quote Pascale Casanova’s geopolitical study, *The World Republic of Letters* (Casanova 1999). For a first overall approach, we can use as a seismograph the 1990–2018 evolution of the catalogue of specialized publishing houses, examining their ‘intranslation’ policies (Sapiro 2008) with the digital humanities tools for distant reading.¹ For this purpose, we mined the post-1990 catalogues of five major French publishers of crime/Noir fiction and thrillers (Gallimard, Le Seuil, Rivages, Métailié, Actes Sud) some of which had a collection dedicated to this genre (for instance, Gallimard’s mythical ‘Série Noire’). We also included the catalogues of three particularly active up-and-coming publishers (Le Mirobole éditions, Agullo, Les Arènes).

First observation: although the share of European crime fiction in imports has been tendentially growing since 1990 (see Figure 1), the ‘Republic’ of crime fiction is overwhelmingly dominated by USA productions. Novels translated from US English account for 40.5% of the total amalgamated catalogue – far ahead of French crime novels (26.4%), leaving just under a third for novels from all other countries, including Europe. If we add up the shares of novels by British (6.7%), Irish (1.2%), Northern Irish (0.2%), Australian (0.7%), Scottish (0.6%) and Canadian writers (0.6%), English does come out as the predominant language of crime fiction, with over half of published titles (Figure 1).

1. We refer to the distinction between ‘intranslation’ and ‘extrantranslation’ coined by Gisèle Sapiro (2008). According to this sociologist, both forms of translation – *extrantranslation*, or the exporting of French novels into another language, and *intranslation*, or the importing of foreign novels in their French translation – are products of economic and cultural competition.

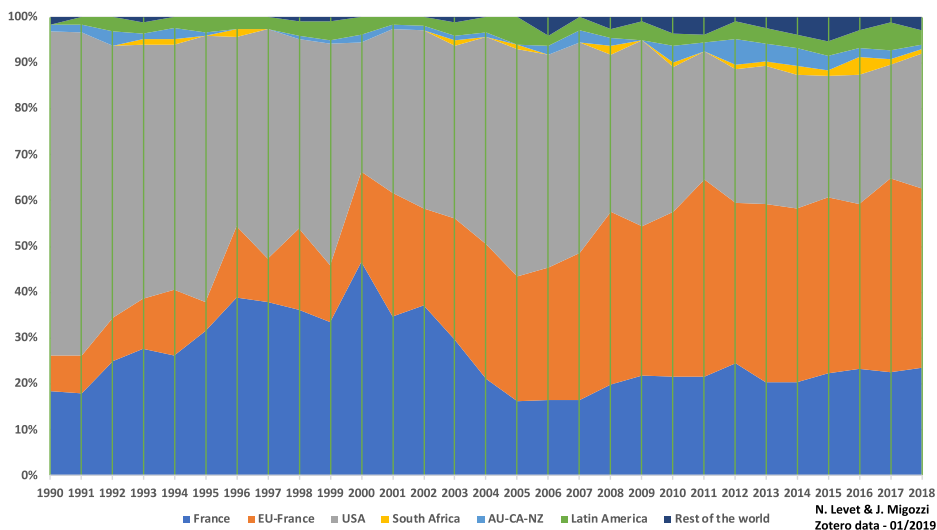


Figure 1. Percentages of geographical origin/year (to view this figure in colour please see the online version of this journal).

Second observation: the share of European crime fiction has been tendentially growing since 1990, as shown clearly by the figure. While, in 1990, only five new European crime fiction titles were translated into French, this figure reached 20 in 1998, with an average of over 25 for the past 20 years. Peaks of 30 and over were hit in 2004, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2017 and 2018, and have become increasingly frequent in the last decade.

Third, if we only consider translations from European novels (or 25.5% of the total catalogue), it appears that, since 1990, the most represented countries have been the UK (224 titles) followed by the countries associated with ‘Nordic Noir’ (178), then Italy (131) and Spain (78). However, these overall figures conceal the deep shift that appeared in the past 15 years. European literary crime fiction as a whole became more diverse, while the public was conquered by crime novels from Nordic countries. As shown in Figure 2, every year since 2009, the number of translated ‘Nordic Noir’ novels from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland has been greater than the number of British novels in translation. 1998 appears as a pivotal year: after this year, over 20 European novels were translated annually, which marked the beginning of a trend that is manifest today. Italian and Spanish crime novels (from 1998) and to a lesser extent Irish (from 2004) and Greek (from 2006) novels also carved out a new place for themselves in publishing catalogues (Figure 2).

Of course, this new editorial landscape, characterized by its diversity and by the prominence of Nordic Noir, is the product of specific choices and strategies in terms

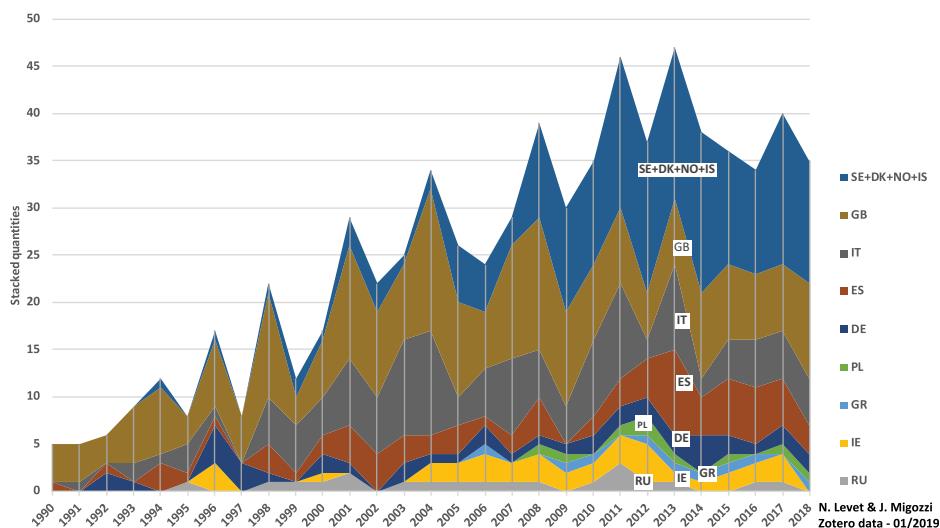


Figure 2. Editions of non-French crime fiction in the catalogues of eight French crime fiction publishers (to view this figure in colour please see the online version of this journal).

of intranlation, that differ widely between the main publishing houses,² even if all of them invest in successful series.³ Two cases are particularly spectacular. The ‘Métailié noir’ collection has built its catalogue around Italian Noir, under the impulse of its director Serge Quadrupani, himself a writer of *polars* as well as being noted Italian crime writer Andrea Camilleri’s high-profile translator. The ‘Actes Noirs’ collection was launched by Actes Sud in 2006 with the phenomenal success of *Millennium*, whose rights were acquired by the publisher before the novel was even published in Swedish. ‘Actes Noir’ became the main importer of Nordic crime fiction, thus orchestrating in part⁴ the craze for Nordic Noir in France, before also investing in the international recognition of Spanish Noir from 2012 onward.

2. See all the graphs available on line on the Atlas of the DETECT project: <https://www.detect-project.eu/portal/works/french-crime-series/>.
3. Ken Bruen and Jo Nesbø are both published by Gallimard’s ‘Série Noire’, with the *Jack Taylor* series from Ireland and the *Harry Hole* series from Norway. Le Seuil publishes Henning Mankell’s *Inspector Wallander* series from Sweden, and Petros Markaris’ *Inspector Kostas Charistos* series from Greece; Métailié publishes Arnaldur Indriðason’s series from Iceland featuring Inspector Erlendur, as well as Andrea Camilleri’s prolific series featuring Sicilian Inspector Montalbano; and Actes Sud publishes Camilla Läckberg’s novels.
4. From 2007, this phenomenon did indeed influence the editorial lines of Rivages, Gallimard and Le Seuil: between 2010 and 2015, Nordic Noir even surpassed Le Seuil’s traditional predilection for British fiction. However, Scandinavian crime fiction had already occupied a significant place in Le Seuil’s catalogue from 1998 on, probably because of Henning Mankell’s growing notoriety. Similarly, at Gallimard, from 2004, Jo Nesbø already featured as one of the headliners of the ‘Série Noire’ collection.

The various graphs on the catalogues of crime fiction publishing in France overall reveal at least two parallel phenomena, whose synchrony appears to hint at the rise of Euronoir. First, they implicitly show that the year 2005 was marked by the boom of what we could call the ‘seduction of the exotic’: in other words, a surge of interest from readers of crime fiction in novels with more diverse origins than the dominant Anglo-Saxon tradition, for novels that open up the imagination to other territories than the USA, and for a new kind of local colour. Second, since 2004, the share of French fiction has sharply dropped to an average of 20 to 24%, as opposed to the successful period between 1996 and 2002 when it accounted for at least a third of the total production: this represents a drop of approximately 50% both in absolute value (number of new translated titles) and relative value (percentages). Without a doubt, for the past 15 years, the rise of the Euronoir has provoked a dramatic reconfiguration of French Noir.

Let us now focus on some of the major changes that occurred over the same period in French crime fiction, which reveals a similar and winning appeal of diversity in location.

First, a boom of regionalist crime fiction is particularly apparent in France. In the early 1990s, regional crime fiction developed in regions or towns with a strong identity that was built in opposition to the central national authorities, such as Brittany and Marseille. These books were published by local publishers and written by local native writers. The readership was mainly local or tourism-related, and the novels were marketed locally. Then, in the late 1990s, regional crime fiction achieved national success. For instance, Jean Failler and his character Mary Lester attracted the attention of the media to made-in-Brittany crime fiction, while other writers created Noir fictions firmly rooted in the city of Marseille, but published by national publishers:⁵ this was the birth of the genre referred to as ‘*polar marseillais*’ with Jean-Claude Izzo as its symbolic flag-bearer. A third period began in the late 2000s, probably caused by changes in book sales (online bookstores, e-books, etc), ensuring easier and wider access to these texts. Although the readership seems to remain mainly local, local editors went beyond their own territory, with some accommodating various regions in their catalogues – for example Geste Éditions, based in the Deux Sèvres *département*, offers crime fiction from various districts of Western France such as the Limousin, Dordogne, Bordelais, Poitou, and so on. Today, with regional publishers based in the South-East, West and North of France, in Brittany and Corsica as well in the region of Lyon, French regionalist crime fiction can be regarded as a major success and a lasting phenomenon.

In parallel with this irresistible growth, over the past two decades several acclaimed French crime novels, many of which have received numerous awards and circulated throughout Europe in translation, have transported their readers

5. For instance Philippe Carrese first published *Trois jours d'engatse* with a local Corsica-based publishing house called Meditorial, more precisely in a collection dedicated to crime fiction, ‘Misteri’: this was in 1994. Then the novel was republished with Fleuve Noir, a major publisher dedicated to popular fiction since the 1940s. In 2002, the novel was published by ‘Pocket’, one of the most important paperback publishers in France.

far from the traditional backdrop of French Noir – far from the crime-ridden metropolises and rural locations mentioned above. Examples include Olivier Truc's *Police des rennes* trilogy (*The Reindeer Police*), initiated in 2012 with *Le Dernier lapon* (which received no less than 16 French awards, including five of the most prestigious), followed by *Le Déroit du loup* (2014) and *La Montagne rouge* (2016). The trilogy is set in the Far North, in a region located at the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish borders and mostly populated by Sami people. Another example is Ian Manook's successful trilogy with, as protagonist, a Mongolian police officer. The first eponymous novel, *Yeruldelgger* (2013), received the *Prix SNCF du polar*, the *Prix Quais du polar* and the *Grand prix des lectrices de ELLE* in 2014. The character then returned in *Les Temps sauvages* (2015), followed by *La Mort nomade* (2016). Manook then took his readers on a trip to Brazil with *Mato Grosso* (2017), and to Iceland with *Heymaey* (2019). Truc and Manook's precursor in this exploration of global territories is Caryl Ferey, whose crime fiction draws upon politically loaded investigations around the world: *Haka* (1998) and *Utu* (2004) are set in New Zealand, *Zulu*⁶ in South Africa, *Mapuche* (2012) in Argentina, and *Condor* (2016) in Chile. In parallel with this boom of French crime fiction exploring remote and antipodean regions, for 20 years French crime fiction collections have been publishing authors from sub-Saharan Africa – the most iconic of whom is Mali-born writer Moussa Konaté with his series entitled *Commissaire Habib – Enquête sur les rives du fleuve Niger*, published in turn by Série Noire, Fayard and Métailié. These crime novels are sometimes referred to as 'ethnographic' Noir: beyond delivering an element of local colour through their exotic settings, these narratives aim to render atmospheres, but also to bring the reader to understand a foreign culture in all its complexity. In a humanist and universalist perspective, these authors seek to inform the reader, providing in-depth anthropological insights on the rites and traditions of non-European or indigenous people.

In France, the concomitant success during the last 15 years of so-called Euronoir, regionalist crime fiction, and French or French-language crime novels with a global approach, should probably be scrutinized as complementary and intermixing symptoms of a long-term evolution towards transculturality at a European and global scale, combining an in-depth evolution towards more cosmopolitanism (Rumford 2008; Delanty 2006) with a strong appeal of local colour and anchoring.

Crime Fiction in France: Between Market Forces and Strategies of Distinction

Along with this glocal reconfiguration of the editorial landscape of crime fiction, editorial strategies respond to symbolic and economic necessities. Between 1990 and 2018, many series and publishing houses, some of them specialized in crime

6. *Zulu*, Paris, Éd. Gallimard, coll. 'Série noire', 2008. Grand prix de littérature policière 2008, Prix du roman noir Nouvel Obs 2009, Grand prix des lectrices de ELLE 2009, Prix Jean Amila-Meckert 2010, Prix des lecteurs QDP 2009, Grand prix du roman noir français 2009, Prix mystère de la critique 2009.

fiction, were born, both following and encouraging the success of this genre. In particular, small companies such as Rivages Noir emerged alongside larger and older publishing houses such as Gallimard *Série noire*. This reconfiguration of the market encouraged a change in editorial strategies. Two major trends can be distinguished: one of them consists of accompanying or following the market; the other consists of cultivating one's specificity and looking for symbolic distinction. In both cases however, editorial choices are linked to economic necessities and are reconfiguring the landscape of crime fiction towards more glocalism.

Since the 1980s, crime fiction has been a highly competitive market. New or up-and-coming publishing houses and series are being forced into a diversification-or-differentiation strategy. The challenge is to get noticed and identified for a specific line of work.

In some cases, the collection or publishing house is guided by the publisher's personality. Pierre Fourniaud incorporated the catalogue of Éditions Écorce, founded by Cyril Herry, and thus created French rural Noir independently from any regional considerations. By taking over this catalogue, under the 'Territori' collection, Fourniaud brought a rural identity to his publishing house, La Manufacture de Livres. He also spotlights political writers, because he considers that 'in Noir fiction, there is a need for political engagement':⁷ this is perceptible in novels by Jérôme Leroy, François Médéline or Patrick K. Dewdney. His own discourse is influenced by his political views – 'And here I go again with a Marxist analysis!', he declares. Fourniaud is aware that this is not a predominant trend: 'Crime fiction is supposed to be entertaining, and I realize that, politically speaking, Noir fiction today is in no way controversial [...]. Maxime Chattam's or Bernard Minier's readers are anything but punks.' Fourniaud can afford to publish non-conventional or untrendy Noir fiction because La Manufacture de Livres is a small publishing house:

It's possible for me because I'm very small, and paradoxically, small publishing houses take risks although big publishers should be doing it more than us. But we are able to do it because we can launch a book with the intention of selling 300 copies, while a publisher employed by a big company can't do that. This is one of the most exciting things for me about working in publishing.

The imprint of the publisher's personality is also perceptible in Aurélien Masson's collections, *Série Noire* (Gallimard, from 2004 to 2017) and *Equinox* (Les Arènes, since 2018). In both collections, Masson aims to publish mostly French writers; he wants to be a discoverer and to develop projects with the authors. He wants to keep *Equinox*, his current collection, predominantly French: 'Yes, that's truly deliberate. It's about the here and now, it's concrete. I'm not here to publish what has already been published, but to help somebody to exist and then stand on their own two feet'.⁸ Masson talks about a writer and his project: 'We've been working on it for 4 years,

7. Interview with Pierre Fourniaud, publisher and founder of La Manufacture de Livres, Limoges, 2019, 29 April. The same for all quotes by P. Fourniaud.

8. Interview with Aurélien Masson, publisher and founder of *Equinox*, Paris, 12 June 2019. The same for all quotes by A. Masson.

because the guy doesn't come from the literary world, he's kind of a prole and we've been working a lot.' So Aurélien Masson is not only a discoverer but a sort of co-worker, helping writers to emerge. Furthermore, Masson defines himself as 'a bit of a punk' (and not as a Marxist!) and as a non-conformist personality. He wants to break with the tradition of politically critical French Noir inherited from the '*néopolar*', without denying the genre's critical side: 'Yes, Noir fiction is political fiction, it's critical, and anyway, all the novels I loved deliver a social critique.' Yet Masson wants to renew the genre and bring forward 'new issues and perspectives, beyond just Leftism versus capitalism'.

As mentioned above about Métailié, a publisher's professional path can also have a major influence on editorial choices. This can be observed with Nadège Agullo, founder of Agullo publishing. Her appetite for new territories in crime fiction stems from her career. Previously, she worked for an English publisher and was prospecting in various territories around Europe: Scandinavian countries at first, then Central and Eastern Europe, which she sees as a real breakthrough. Most importantly, she built a professional network. Polish, Romanian and Slovak Noir novels thus joined the Agullo catalogue.

Some editorial strategies are also related to the necessity of being noticed and identified as a specific and original collection, in order to fill a niche. After the success of Millennium and Nordic Noir, for which Actes Noirs was created in 2006, this collection was soon identified as cosmopolitan, much more so than Rivages Noir whose catalogue remains dominated by English language fiction. Actes Noirs brought a new wave of Spanish writers to the French public (Victor Del Arbol, Carlos Salem, Andreu Martín), as well as Hungarian and Japanese writers, although editor Manuel Tricoteaux claims not to pay any attention to the origin of the books he publishes. However, some smaller, recently founded publishing houses do highlight the international dimension of their catalogue. This is apparent with Agullo, whose motto is: 'Abolish borders'. In addition to its original graphic design, which reinvents the codes of crime fiction publishing, Agullo aspires to be international, exploring 'here and elsewhere', off the beaten track. Similarly, L'Aube noire, the crime fiction collection of Éditions de L'Aube, intends to be 'a Noir and cosmopolitan collection', whose 'writers take you on a trip around the dark side of the world', while publishing house Asphalte offers 'literature from all around the world', with its 'Asphalte noir' collection presenting collections of short stories set in a specific city (from Beirut to Barcelona or Brussels). In recent years, Asphalte published some remarkable Noir fiction from Spain and South America.

Beyond the diversity of their catalogues, all these publishers assume a pioneering ethos: whether their aim is to showcase French talent or new foreign authors, all of them claim to not follow the trends or the laws of the market. There are two discernible tendencies: the intention to fill a niche, especially in relation with territorial anchorage, and the unconventional approach of French Noir fiction. However, they do not forget economic rules, which contribute to shaping their editorial choices.

Two economic facts currently impact these choices: publication costs, especially copyright purchase, and public subsidies, wherever they come from. The diversification noted above corresponds to the generalization of large format books (as opposed to the tradition of printing the first edition directly in paperback). Large format is more costly, yet more profitable. Actes Noirs was created to help cover the costs of the translation of *Millennium*, while Rivages created the large-format collection Rivages Thriller to host James Ellroy. On the contrary, some publishers focus on French titles, not only for literary reasons or because of a certain view of their role as a publisher, but because they cannot afford many translations, or some translations in particular. In 2017, Aurélien Masson told us he was not interested in publishing North American writers anymore because of copyright purchase. Another decisive factor for him was the fact that the French market for crime fiction was not regulated by literary agents. Masson says he published Nico Cherry with Equinox after meeting his agent at the Frankfurt Book Fair but added: ‘When a book is too expensive, it’s less beautiful for me. Things have become crazy, especially all this stuff with neo-rural post-Noir US fiction. [. . .] The agents take advantage of the situation.’

Further, some publishers use public subsidies to publish foreign crime fiction, the translation costs of which are important. The CNL (*Centre National du Livre*), a French State institution, is the main source of funding. But some French translations are also supported by national grants from public or private institutions. For instance, the Nordic Noir phenomenon is partly due to the determination and perseverance of Nordic funders. According to some publishers, some private agencies, especially in Sweden, propose to cover translation costs, but also some of the promotional costs in the host country. This comes as a compensation for the increasing cost of copyright purchase. Some public institutions in Iceland or Poland help promote their national output abroad. These subsidies are crucial for small publishing houses such as Agullo or Le Mirole, and also shape their editorial choices. Agullo obtained a European grant: the Creative Europe programme aims to help publishers translate European literature, and in the case of Agullo, with a particular focus on rare languages. Since then, Agullo has assumed a European identity with its collection Agullo Noir. Only a few titles are published by Agullo or Le Mirole without any subsidy: this economic necessity for small companies operating in a highly competitive market is then reinterpreted and embraced in the form of editorial choices.

Crime fiction is still subjected to market forces, particularly for collections that belong to a major publishing group. This explains why the output is still dominated by English-language productions, which account for over half of published titles. The crime fiction publications of Presses de la Cité or Albin Michel are emblematic of this phenomenon: these publishers have no specialist crime fiction collection (except for ‘Spécial Suspense’ at Albin Michel, hosting some US best-sellers), but a division, within their fiction department, between French and foreign fiction. Albin Michel’s foreign catalogue is symptomatic of an economic strategy based on market law and profitability. The publication of major North American hits such as Stephen

King or Lisa Gardner, or Swedish writers such as Viveca Sten or Søren Sveistrup, can all be related to the success of the thriller genre. The appeal of local colour is perceptible in Viveca Sten's series – *The Sandhamn Murders*, after the Swedish town – but also in the success of *Agatha Raisin*, M.C. Beaton's series of quaint English mystery novels, or in the exotic fiction of Ian Manook, whose French novels are set in Mongolia or Iceland. These two publishing houses mostly publish French or foreign thrillers, especially English-language and Nordic thrillers, in line with the trend. According to Sophie Lajeunesse, publisher at Presses de la Cité, Nordic Noir created an opportunity: 'So it wasn't just an Anglo-Saxon affair, with a few French here and there. There was a sense of emulation, it was rather exciting.'⁹ However, these series remain dominated by English language fiction.

Even in a prestigious publishing house such as Le Seuil, economic pressure is now important. Le Seuil was acquired in 2004 by the La Martinière group, and in turn by Media Participations, a media concern, in 2018. Since then, Cadre Noir, Le Seuil's collection of crime fiction, has been governed by the demand for each title to be profitable. This economic pressure has consequences on editorial choices: less risk and lower costs (no translation costs if possible). Strong as the personality of Gwenaëlle Desnoyers (director of Cadre Noir) may be, some of her choices are necessarily dictated by this economic constraint. Cadre Noir intends to publish more French writers than before, and most of its latest hits were crime comedies that are accessible to a wide audience: Jacky Schwartzmann, Sophie Chabanel or Franz Bartlet. Furthermore, Cadre Noir also publishes 'rural Noir', with Cyril Herry or Jean-Yves Martinez, or glocal Noir, with Japanese, Greek or more recently Tasmanian noir fiction. The website claims: 'Opening up the genre's boundaries, Cadre Noir, replacing Seuil Policiers, pursues a key literary ambition: providing a new platform for French and foreign writers who travel lost territories, whether urban or rural, and create sweeping narratives rooted in the modern world and its vicissitudes'.¹⁰

For large or medium-sized companies, territorial and genre diversification is a must. Most crime fiction collections are expected to be profitable on an annual basis. For Equinox, as was the case for the Série Noire in the past, Aurélien Masson can afford to publish what he calls 'outsiders', marginal books, because he balances the collection's accounts. He claims to love diversity and to publish 'popular books' by choice, not by necessity, but he also says:

I want to sell books, I'm not a poet. [...] I balance the accounts on an annual basis, and I want my boss to say: 'Oh good, anyway, we made some money last year'. I always did this: very accessible stories I can give to anybody, and also more personal things, darker and more desperate.

9. Interview with Sophie Lajeunesse, publisher at Presses de la Cité, Paris, 13 June 2019.

10. 'S'ouvrant aux frontières du genre, "Cadre noir", qui succède à "Seuil Policiers", a d'abord une ambition littéraire : accueillir dans un nouvel écrivain ces auteurs qui, étrangers autant que français, arpègent les territoires perdus, urbains ou ruraux, et y composent des fresques attentives aux vicissitudes du monde contemporain.www.seuil.com/collection/collection-3734.

Similarly, Manuel Tricoteaux from Actes Noirs, has developed a catalogue that ‘combines very different things, really literary noir fiction, traditional crime fiction, and very commercial novels’.¹¹

The appeal of exotic crime fiction and more diverse generic codes reconfigured the French crime fiction landscape between 1990 and 2018. This diversification is also affecting another link between publishers and readers: festivals and prizes.

Prizes and Festivals: Marketing Crime Fiction, between Diversification and Proximity

The study of the emerging crime culture scene from the late 1990s onwards confirms the interest of the French Noir scene in foreign literature. Since the late 1980s, the French literary field has been notably affected by the boom of cultural associations and institutions aimed at promoting crime literature. This movement had begun in the early second half of the twentieth century with the creation of Gallimard’s *Série Noire* collection (1945), later followed by the creation of the ‘Grand prix de littérature policière’ or GPLP¹² (1948) by columnist and publisher Maurice-Bernard Endrèbe, to make crime writing visible in France. These institutions were mainly involved in the promotion of North American Noir, and gradually became dedicated to the development of the French Noir, as reflected in the proliferation of crime fiction prizes and festivals in the 1980s and 1990s.

More recently, these promotion bodies appear to have taken on a new international turn, this time aimed at opening up to more diverse regions of the world. Whereas the two oldest French crime fiction prizes, the GPLP (‘Grand prix de littérature policière’) and the ‘Prix mystère de la critique’ (PMC),¹³ created in 1972, which had included a foreign novel category from their birth, have been characterized by the overwhelming dominance of US literature – 16 North American writers out of 24 foreign authors awarded by the PMC between 1972 and 2000 – writers from other origins than the US or the UK gradually ceased to be rarities in these categories.¹⁴ Nordic Noir made a remarkable entrance in the rankings in the 2000s, when Arnaldur Indriðason was awarded both prizes in 2007–2008. Henning Mankell was the 2000 PMC winner and Camilla Läckberg the 2008 GPLP winner. Their emergence is supplemented by the appearance of other European authors, especially in the PMC rankings, such as Andrea Camilleri (Italy, 1999), Boris Akounine (Russia, 2002), or Francisco Gonzalès Ledesma (Spain, 2007).

11. Interview with Manuel Tricoteaux, publisher at Actes noirs, Arles, 4 April 2019.

12. ‘Great prize of crime literature’.

13. ‘Mystery Prize of Reviewers’.

14. Two interviews were conducted with Pierre Lebedel, retired journalist and senior member of the ‘Grand prix de littérature policière’, Paris, 6 February 2019, and with Georges Rieben, retired journalist and founder and director of the Prix Mystère de la Critique, Paris, 1 April 2019.

Simultaneously, the 1990s and 2000s were marked by the proliferation of ‘foreign novel’ or ‘European novel’ categories in more recent crime fiction prizes. In 1994, the association ‘813’ followed the example set by the GPLP by reorganizing its categories from generic distinctions into national categories, one of which is dedicated to foreign novels. One decade later, respectively in 2003 and 2004, the magazine *Le Point* and the French railway company SNCF created two distinct ‘Prix du polar européen’,¹⁵ consecrating the term ‘European’ as a valid label for a prize or a prize category. The European category of the SNCF Prize has now merged with the French, but the ‘Prix Point du polar européen’ has become quite famous for its association with the very successful Quais du Polar festival, which has hosted the awards ceremony every year since 2007.

This movement responds to the intranlation trend in the French publishing market. According to a senior member of the GPLP, Pierre Lebedel, it follows the evolution of the editorial landscape, ‘very naturally, based on our readings’.¹⁶ However, considering that most of these prizes are old and informal institutions – the GPLP and the PMC are not even registered as associations – with small juries that rarely comprise eminent personalities from the field, and whose selections result from informal discussions between jury members, we can wonder if this cultural opening may not also act as compensation for the narrowness of these circles. As a matter of fact, the GPLP as an institution has no written policy: it was not until its founder died, in 2004, that the jury decided to write the GPLP’s first statutes. Whereas ‘there is no rule’¹⁷ as to establishing the annual selection for this prize, one of its only restrictive criteria is the ineligibility of past prize winners, to ensure that discovery and variety remain fundamental principles. Furthermore, the visit of the ambassador of Iceland for Arnaldur Indriðason’s awarding ceremony, described at length by Pierre Lebedel as a prestigious event, highlights the symbolic power that may be brought by such markers of internationalization for a small and informal institution. Displaying an open spirit, showing interest in unknown foreign writers but also in minority-background Francophone writers and female crime writers, may thus be a way for these very national and traditional bodies to remain legitimate in the contemporary French market.

The French crime fiction festival scene, which has notably expanded since the 1990s, can be analysed as another symptom of the internationalization of the French literary Noir market, especially at a European scale. The mid-2000s saw the emergence of an international trend, with several new crime writing festivals taking on the ‘international’ label: the FIRN in Frontignan¹⁸ (1998), the Quais du Polar International Festival in Lyon (2005), the ‘Festival Polar’¹⁹ in Villeneuve (2005) or the ‘Toulouse Polar du Sud’ International Festival (2009). Faced with the proliferation of such events, festival organizers, mainly cultural

15. European crime novel prize.

16. Interview with Pierre Lebedel, 2019.

17. *Ibid.*

18. International Festival of Noir novel.

19. Originally *Festival du polar méditerranéen*, ‘Mediterranean crime novel festival’.

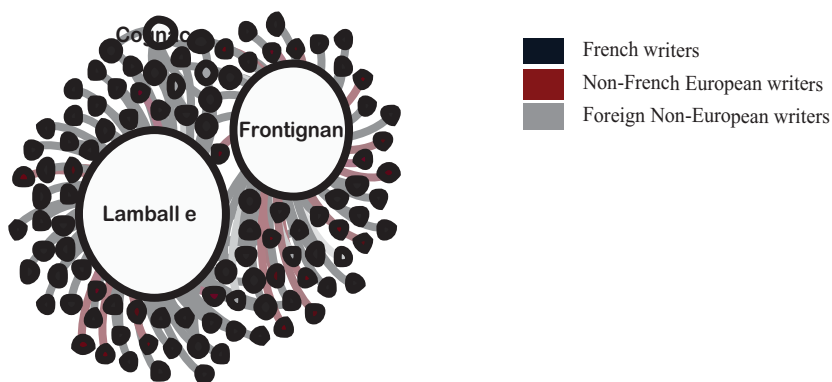


Figure 3. Guests of Frontignan, Lamballe and Cognac festivals (1999–2004). (To view this figure in colour please see the online version of this journal.)

associations and small municipalities, appear to have been encouraged to increase the number of foreign guest authors in their programmes. The evolution of the programmes from the late twentieth century onwards provides evidence of this process. The comparison of the line-ups of seven contemporary French festivals over two different periods, 1999–2004 (from the beginnings of the FIRN and the Lamballe festivals to the creation of Quais du Polar), and 2010–2015 (after the creation of the young Toulouse festival), shows the increasing circulation of writers in French festivals, which is to be associated with the increasing presence of foreign writers (represented by red and grey dots), and among them, European writers in particular (red dots) (see Figures 3 and 4).²⁰

Furthermore, this comparison highlights the fact that the increased circulation of authors from European countries is related to the growth of the festivals that were born in the mid-2000s, such as Lyon or Villeneuve. Both have an explicit transnational ambition with a budget to match, unlike first-generation French festivals such as Lamballe's 'Noir sur la Ville' for instance. As a matter of fact, these festivals emerged in the context of a municipal cultural policy, were strongly supported by local authority funding, and developed a professionalized approach to event delivery, far from the informality of volunteer-led festivals. This approach drove some of these festivals away from the formerly predominant French Noir and in any case encouraged their opening up to the new generation of French crime fiction – the first edition of 'Quais du Polar' rewarded Franck Thilliez, one of the main French thriller writers – but also to foreign crime fiction, beyond US Noir.

However, as shown by the festivals' expansion on the graph, French authors remain a majority in festivals. A closer look at the line-ups shows that the share of foreign authors never exceeds one-third of the total list of guests. The organizers of the FIRN, who have from the lately 1990s tried to make the festival stand out

20. A large portion of the digital archives of the programmes are available on the festivals' official websites. The graphs, based on the harvested lists of guests of each festival from their creation, have been produced with *Gephi*, the main software to visualize networks.

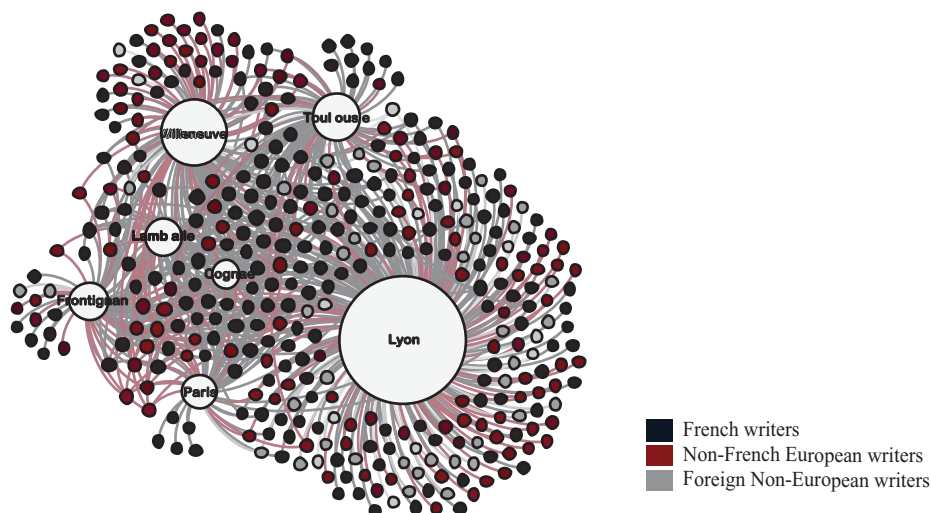


Figure 4. Guests of seven contemporary festivals (2010–2014). (To view this figure in colour please see the online version of this journal.)

as an international event, and consistently placed the focus on foreign authors (30–40% of guests), insist on the costs attached to an international programme, and on how hard it is to become both an important festival and an international festival.²¹ Inviting more than 15 foreign writers seems to remain a challenge for the majority of organization committees. A synthetic and synchronic graph (Figure 5), representing only the distribution of foreign guests in the same French festivals from their creation onwards, highlights the fact that the internationalization of festivals is partly the result of solidarities developed on a regional scale, between specific festivals and a small number of authors coming from a nearby region or country.

We can for instance notice the proximity of Polar du Sud in Toulouse with Spanish or Spanish-speaking writers such as Carlos Salem or Victor del Arbol, and the general proximity between the Villeneuve festival and Mediterranean writers. In contrast, Quais du Polar, which features a large selection of writers who do not attend any other festival in France, has built up a very international programme. However, although this festival now attracts many more foreign authors than others, French writers still accounted for 80% of guests in 2019 (30 foreign writers out of 140 guests).

Beyond the economic constraint, inviting French authors and European authors from neighbouring countries can sometimes be simpler and more successful from the festival organizers' point of view. 'The problem with Spanish authors is that there are only very few who are iconic here', 'Italians are very complicated to contact', and North American writers require their fee to be shared with the teams of other

21. Interview with Yves Jaumain, Cabinet director of the city of Frontignan, main municipal interlocutor for the FIRN team, Frontignan, 6 April 2019.

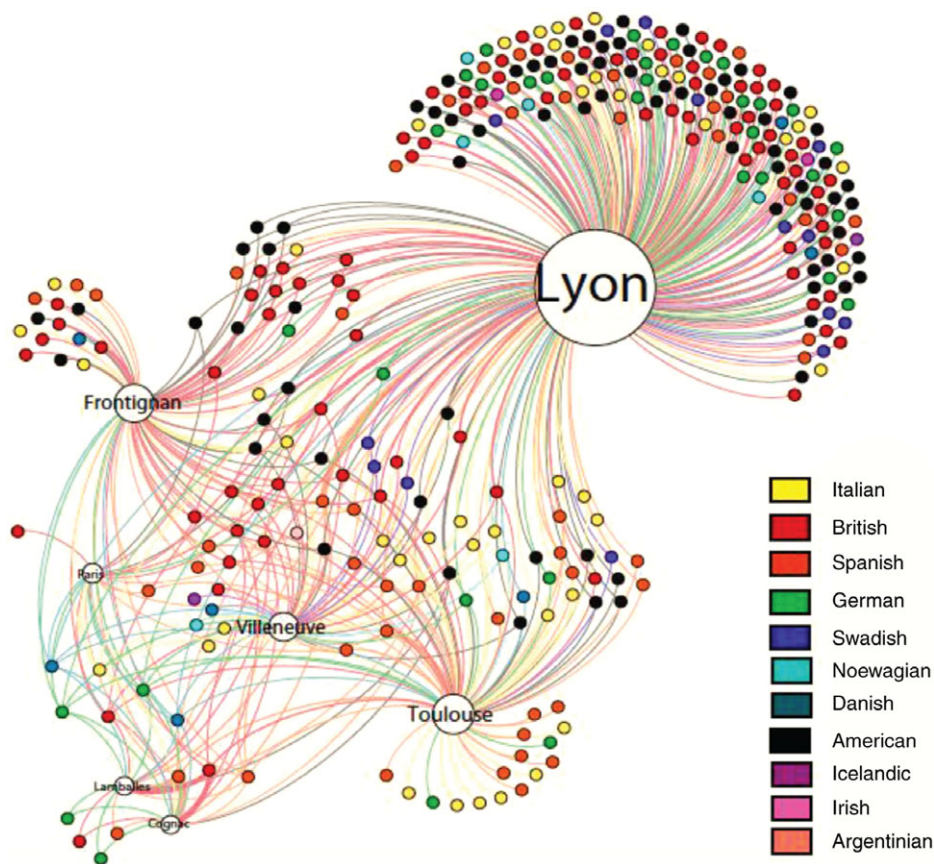


Figure 5. Foreign guests in French festivals (1999–2019). (To view this figure in colour please see the online version of this journal.)

festivals, reports the town councillor responsible for the Villeneuve-Lèz-Avignon festival, who stressed the challenges posed by international coordination, over the financial constraints associated with internationalization.²² In addition, the festival manager in the municipality of Frontignan suggests that ‘French readers are more likely to buy a novel by a non-professional author who lives in the next town’.²³ The promotion of Noir fiction through festivals is also based on the image of approachable authors and on the opportunity to meet them easily. This notion, based on the idea that proximity acts as a major channel in the circulation of this genre, is an argument in favour of the community of French writers, who are known for their approachability, and perhaps a limit to the internationalization process. It may explain the overwhelming presence of French authors at Quais du Polar, whose team

22. Interview with Corinne Tonelli, town councillor for the municipality of Villeneuve-Lez-Avignon, responsible for Events, main organizer of the Crime fiction festival of Villeneuve, Villeneuve-Lèz-Avignon, 30 April 2019.

23. Interview with Yves Jaumain, 2019.

has from the outset chosen, in spite of the festival's international ambition, to restrict its special Readers' Prize to a French-language novel, in order to 'support a new emerging generation of French authors' (DOA in 2005, Franck Thilliez in 2006).²⁴ It is therefore unclear whether the festival's actual policy is more about opening up the French scene to foreign literature, or rather about creating an international showcase for French literature and 'acting as a syndicate and export platform for French crime fiction'. The internationalization of festivals is therefore a process that should be nuanced. While diversity seems to have become a strong argument in promoting the genre, proximity may remain an important principle in the concrete circulation of books and readers, still encouraging the French scene above all. Nevertheless, the very limits that make internationalization a challenge also explain why it appears easier to open up to the European space, as opposed to the US and other remote countries. This paradox does not suffice to make the French festival scene fully transnational, but it sets the conditions for the existence of transcultural areas, connecting territories that share common geographical and cultural features.

France is said to be the first translator of foreign fiction in the world. Quantitative reports highlight the constant growth of the share of translations in national book production, especially in literature (Piault, 2018). Yet, in spite of this significant overall percentage of translated foreign literature in the French publishing market, the historical weight of the French Noir in literary criticism has indeed tended to overshadow the growing internationalization of the field and its manifest opening up to non-French European crime narratives from the mid-2000s onwards. An external and distant overview of the genre (through its production and promotion) presents the advantage of highlighting the transnational dimension of the market independently from the spontaneous 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 2006, 24) encouraged by French discourses on reception. In addition, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches also allows us to remain cautious when qualifying these evolutions in terms of cosmopolitanism and transculturality, by revealing the strategic and economic dimension of internationalization, and by recontextualizing it in relation to issues that still mainly play out at a national scale.

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24. Interview with François Pirola, president of the Quais du Polar international festival, Lyon, 25 January 2019.

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