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Claire Gorrara, *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: Past Crimes, Present Memories*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012. vii-viii + 151 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7190-8265-8.

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The once-contested literary mode termed “French cultural studies”—defined by Lawrence D. Kritzman as a method that rejects the myth of a singular, reified object of knowledge called “France” in favor of multiple truths about and fluid approaches toward the national origin called “French”—has acquired legitimacy over the past two decades.[1] Early on, the broad interdisciplinarity of cultural studies raised eyebrows in the same way feminist and postcolonial theories did in the 1970s and 1980s. One could argue French cultural studies were especially troubled, since they were—and still are—elaborated primarily by Anglophone literary scholars bringing together works of French fiction with highly specialized French sources in history, sociology, and philosophy, but not literature. As cultural studies have matured, two notable strands have emerged: the development of more refined sub-fields (e.g., trauma and memory studies), and increased attention to popular art forms, rather than high culture. It is in this context of highly nuanced cross-disciplinary readings and a focus on more vernacular genres, in this case, crime fiction, that Claire Gorrara’s impressive study can be situated.

Gorrara’s previous books, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture* and the edited collection, *French Crime Fiction*, turned to well-known detective novels for innovative ways this minor literary genre has represented cultural realities.[2] In *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War*, she examines less familiar crime authors and also deepens her earlier engagement with the much-researched period of World War II and the Occupation. The result is a contribution that is fresh in relation both to the writings of the historians and sociologists who influenced her and to other literary investigations of this crucial era. The book’s presiding thinker is Henry Rousso, whose *Le syndrome de Vichy* launched the idea of “the Vichy syndrome” as a metaphor for France’s post-war obsession with its collaborationist past, a fixation that sought to debunk the *résistancialiste* myth perpetrated by de Gaulle and his followers.[3] Two more muted but significant influences are Maurice Halbwachs’s *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, which pioneered the notion that individual memory is structured by social arrangements, and Pierre Nora’s important archeological work on French identity and places of national memory, *Les lieux de mémoire*. [4] An earlier literary study, Margaret Atack’s *Literature and the French Resistance*, looked at representations of the war in fictions by canonical authors, including Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, using the more schematic framework of collaboration versus resistance.[5] A more recent publication, Margaret-Anne Hutton’s *French Crime Fiction, 1945-2005: Investigating World War II*, examines depictions of the war itself in French crime novels from this sixty-year span.[6]

Gorrara’s aim is different, and more ambitious. Rather than fictional portrayals of the war, she is concerned with the “resonance” between crime novels and France’s changing cultural conception of the Second World War (p. 12). More precisely, examining how historical memory of that era has been constructed and reconstructed in France since the late 1940s, she reads crime fictions contemporaneous with each revised memory as counter-narratives to the prevailing representation of the war. For Gorrara, French crime fiction has been a privileged “agent of memory” (p. 133), since its stories “exploit

connections between war and crime, guilt and responsibility, justice and resolution, all couplings that have marked collective understandings of the war years in France” (p. 1). Further, “the generic conventions of crime fiction”(p. 10)—its narrative mode of investigation, its use of unpredictability, its ambiguous moral universe—lend themselves especially well to illuminating the competing ideas of France’s wartime experience that have appeared over the past seventy years.

French Crime Fiction is densely written, for which reason its superb organization is all the more welcome. Gorrara lays out carefully in each chapter the points she will go on to discuss. The introduction is especially concise in its presentation of “the conceptual, historical and literary-critical foundations on which this study is built” (p. 2). It is grounded, first, in memory studies, specifically, the concept of cultural memory, which highlights “*the past-present relation*” (p. 2, Gorrara’s emphasis), or the reformulation of the past in each different present. Memory is, above all, dynamic; continually constituted at the intersections of political, social, and cultural forces, it both shapes and is shaped by visual and textual artifacts and practices. The second base of this study is historical re-evaluations of World War II France that use multi-faceted methods to “re-vision” “individual, collective, and national experiences” of it (pp. 6-7). Gorrara acknowledges the value of Rousso’s “psychoanalytical model” in *Le syndrome de Vichy* (p. 8), at the same time noting that the memory phases it delineates are too broad to render “a more fine-grained cultural history of war memories” (p. 9), precisely the kind of refined analysis *French Crime Fiction* undertakes. The third cornerstone is the appositeness of crime fiction for understanding cultural memory. Along with its apt literary conventions, the crime novel (especially the *roman noir*) puts forth a “cultural politics” that is inherently contested and never fully resolved, thereby making it a signally useful “memory text” for World War II France (pp. 12, 14). Lastly, explaining her choice of corpus and method, Gorrara establishes her contextual approach to reading selected crime fictions from the late 1940s to the 2000s that resist “dominant histories of the past” (p. 15). In contrast to the common view that popular culture is socially and aesthetically conservative, she holds that detective novels often embrace transformative strategies that put received social ideas into question. Although, given the complexity of the theoretical underpinnings it posits, the introduction would have benefited from more spacious development, it nonetheless consistently rewards the reader’s efforts.

The first chapter focuses on the immediate post-war era, when “the resistance epic of national heroism was being consecrated as the dominant war memory” (p. 15). At the same time, crime fiction was contesting that epic by highlighting the moral uncertainty of the war experience and drawing “protagonists estranged from the national narrative of common struggle” (p. 23). After identifying the principal feature of the “resistance epic”—its insistence on the collective masculine prowess that fought the occupier from both within and outside France—Gorrara points to coeval counter-narratives that emphasized wartime suffering, especially those that adopted the new *roman noir* form. The themes of societal malaise and urban violence, as well as the anti-heroes whom French crime novels imported from American and British *noir* fiction, provided the authors Jean Meckert, André Hélène, and Gilles Morris with literary strategies to contest *résistancialiste* shibboleths by showing internecine conflicts within the Resistance and the ruling elites that issued from it to debunk the notion of political harmony; depicting moral corruption in post-war France as an extension of immorality within the Resistance itself; and portraying individual resisters as contradictory outsiders, rather than monolithic saviors.[7] While the crime novels discussed mobilize these strategies differently, they shared the goal of subverting the illusion of national unity at the core of the resistance myth. Gorrara ends the chapter with further insightful connections between 1950s crime fiction and the Cold War climate of political divisions that was settling in at the time.

Gorrara goes on to examine the “apparent forgetting of the negative national legacies of the war years, such as French collaboration and the persecution of the Jews” (p. 16), that prevailed during the late 1950s and 1960s. Centering on novels by Léo Malet and Hubert Monteilhet [8] that explore “questions of individual and collective guilt and responsibility” (p. 42) in regard to anti-Semitic cruelty, the chapter traces the underlying reasons for France’s willed amnesia during this period: the need to consolidate the

resistance epic under the pressure of decolonization struggles; lingering anti-Jewish sentiment; and a subdued response on the part of Jews themselves. It then addresses the tactics of “disclosure and displacement” (p. 44) by which crime authors embedded Jewish wartime experiences in their stories, thereby echoing larger tensions between recognition and denial of France’s culpability. Lastly, the problem of self-identity Gorrara locates in Malet and Monteilhet’s Jewish characters makes visible “national debates and traumas” about French moral accountability over all (p. 55).

Chapter three takes up the simultaneous resurgence of collaboration in crime fiction of the 1970s and 1980s (it had been addressed by Sartre thirty years before [9]) and the appearance of historical studies (e.g., those of Robert Paxton and Pascal Ory [10]) that revealed France’s complicity during World War II. Critiquing Sartre’s view of collaboration as “individual pathology” (p. 61), Gorrara sees subsequent crime novels—specifically, those of Jean Mazarin, Georges-Jean Arnaud, and Didier Daeninckx [11]—as adopting the historians’ collective perspective. She also finds the novels’ “interventions in memory” unusually “emotionally and ethically charge[d]” because they raised questions of “intergenerational” responsibility for transmitting the truth (p. 65). Gorrara’s readings in this chapter are especially strong: by making connections between creative works, historical reassessments, and noteworthy political events (e.g., the Klaus Barbie and Maurice Papon trials), she evokes the complexity of collaboration and its traumatic legacy.

The transformations of cultural memory that marked the 1980s opened the way for the “survivor stories” treated in the next chapter. The 1990s “memory boom” (p. 84), evident in public commemorations as well as in witness testimonies of wartime persecution (and also in the screeds of Holocaust deniers), signaled the urgency of capturing the past. Yet, Gorrara makes the argument that the increased historical and judicial attention to France’s participation in the *Shoah* made for a more systemic, abstract understanding of it, a framework to which, ironically, personal narratives were ill-suited. Similarly, the decade’s crime novels (those of Gérard Delteil, Thierry Jonquet, and Konop [12]) recount legal investigations of the wartime past and present the figure of the concentration camp survivor whose story cannot be easily integrated “into broader considerations of guilt, responsibility and justice” (p. 84). Gorrara astutely suggests that these narrative strains prompted the use of hybrid generic forms and the introduction of transnational characters in the era’s crime fiction.

French Crime Fiction ends on an optimistic note with a discussion of recent children’s crime fiction as evidence of both intergenerational communication and France’s embrace of “an ethics of responsibility” (p. 114) in remembering its past. In the context of an unambiguous state condemnation of Vichy, greater acknowledgment of the country’s failed colonial wars, and awareness of social violence abroad, the importance of developing “civic memory” (p. 108) has been underscored. Thus, French school curricula now attend to the diversity of war experiences, and at the same time, crime novels for young readers (those of Robert Boudet, Murielle Szac, and Romain Slocombe [13]) reframe those experiences in ways that “generate a broader reflection on racism, discrimination and persecution” (p. 115). Adolescent crime fiction, for Gorrara, is a particularly effective tool of memory because an active youth is at the moral center of its “questing structure” (p. 115).

French Crime Fiction deserved better editing, as there are several mistakes in French grammar and a number of typographical errors. But, this is my only quibble with an otherwise important book—important not just for its refreshing insights, but also for the critical method it deploys. Rather than prioritizing extensive textual analysis (although the brief explications are excellent), Gorrara gives precedence to locating places where historical memory and crime fiction cross, an approach that can be fruitfully applied to other transdisciplinary and diachronic studies. Further, she makes a good case for the significance of “the infra-ordinary of literary production” (p. 16), borrowing from Georges Perec’s influential essay defending “the banal, the quotidian, the obvious” by which Gorrara refers to less celebrated creative works such as popular novels.[14] And, while her use of terms like “encounters,” “vectors,” “interactions,” and “circuits of memory” makes the book somewhat elusive in spots, the arc of

the convergences between collective remembrance and crime novels in France is clear. Starting with the post-war resistance myth and leading up to the current regard for human rights more generally, these connections have been at the core of both cultural and literary discourses about the Second World War in France. Gorrara's overriding concern is our ethical responsibility in the present to be conscious of how we represent the past, and *French Crime Fiction* provides an extremely useful way to do that.

NOTES

[1] Lawrence D. Kritzman, "France, Culture, and the Idea of the Nation," in Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand eds., *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 11-27.

[2] Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Claire Gorrara, ed., *French Crime Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009).

[3] Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy: 1944-1987* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

[4] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925), and Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

[5] Margaret Atack, *Literature and the French Resistance: Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms, 1940-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

[6] Margaret-Anne Hutton, *French Crime Fiction, 1945-2005: Investigating World War II* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2013).

[7] The novels discussed are Jean Meckert, *Nous avons les mains rouges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); Meckert, *Nous sommes tous des assassins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952); André Hélène's diptych, *Les salauds ont la vie dure!* (Paris: Editions World Press, 1949) and *Le festival des macchabées* (Paris: A. Fleury, 1951); and Gilles Morris, *Assassin mon frère* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1954).

[8] Léo Mallet, *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1958); Mallet, *Des kilomètres de linceuls* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1955); and Hubert Monteilhet, *Le retour des cendres* (Paris: Denoël, 1961).

[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?," *La République française* (August 1945) (reprinted in his *Situations III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 43-61).

[10] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), and Pascal Ory, *Les collaborateurs 1940-1945* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).

[11] Jean Mazarin, *Collabo-Song* (Paris: Editions Fleuve noir, 1981); Georges-Jean Arnaud, *Maudit Blood* (Paris: Ed. du Rocher, 1998). First published under the name Georges Murey (Ed. Encre, 1985); and Didier Daeninckx, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

[12] Gérard Delteil, *KZ retour vers l'enfer* (Paris: Carrère, 1987); Thierry Jonquet, *Les orpailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); and Konop, *Pas de kaddish pour Sylberstein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

[13] Robert Boudet, *Mon prof est un espion* (Paris: Casterman, 1991); Murielle Szac, *Un lourd silence* (Paris: Seuil Jeunesse, 1999); and Romain Slocombe, *Qui se souvient de Paula?* (Paris: Syros, 2008).

[14] Georges Perec, "Approches de quoi?," *Cause Commune* (February 1973):3-4. Translation taken from Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1964) and reproduced at <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/Gustafson/FILM162.W10/readings/perec.approaches.pdf>. Web. 13 June 2013.

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