

The Russian sidestep
December 2018

Here I am, poised to release my seventh book, the seventh time we've accompanied my very unconventional, unusual but seemingly much loved detective. The detective who almost didn't make it past his first chapter has racked up quite a good clearance rate in only a few short years. As Christmas approaches I'm at the denouement of book eight and already deep in thought about nine and ten (they have titles and stories) as well as a special two volume story which will take us to book twelve. It still amazes me we got to seven let alone twelve.

I've spoken about the genesis of *Le cri de coeur* before and its rocky journey to completion and I'm still hopeful with time the difficult period in which it was written will ebb, replaced with those misty water-coloured memories we hope for. But as we approach release (not sure when yet, January probably) I thought it to be a good time to talk a little about the story and its creation for those interested in that sort of thing.

One of the reasons *Le cri de coeur* was problematic to finish was I inadvertently began writing two stories, originally believing they would entwine and become one with a bit of jiggery pokery (I like writing that way, see *L'imponderable* which was also, in essence, two different stories brought together). The thing with *Le cri de coeur* however was the stories were too big and too different and as I tried to bring them together the story got bigger and more complicated and I found the page count swelling. It just didn't work and I couldn't figure out why, so I did what anybody sensible would do, I went back to the beginning and began rewriting. By this point I'd grown so fed up of the whole business I thought I would just stop and begin the next book, *La Famille Lacroix*, which was ready to go and I knew the story back to front, but then as I rewrote the first chapter something strange happened - a new character emerged, somebody who hadn't appeared in the first five hundred page draft. It didn't make sense to add a brand new character to a book which was already heading to the finish line, but in the orthodox Hugo world it is what happened and Salome Duvall appeared, like a narrator appearing from the shadows to guide the story along. Suddenly with the appearance of Salome I had what I needed to bridge the two stories, one from the distant past and one in the present day. Most of my books centre on revenge, because it allows us to explore a world which isn't just reactive, murder for murder sake. We get to know the characters, their past, their histories and their desires.

Perhaps, one day when I'm dead and if anyone cares enough about the old books, the original first draft of *Le cri de coeur* may emerge. It's a good enough story, but just not one which Hugo needed to be part of. The new story is set entirely in Russia and begins in the year 2000. Of course, it being Russian set, I couldn't ignore the old Cold War rhetoric, spies, espionage, double-crossing, all those old chestnuts, but I think I've done it in a Hugo sort of way rather than the traditional Cold War dystopian novels people may be used to. Hugo is in Russia with Ben and Baptiste fulfilling a promise he made to Baptiste to try and reunite him with his childhood love, Chen Gao. Chen Gao is in Russia and now married to the Chinese Ambassador, a man of dubious character called Bai Zhang. From their first appearance in the novel, Hugo and his family are thrown into danger (their first scene is in hospital) and thus begins the chase and we're never quite sure if Hugo was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, or if he and his family are in mortal danger. Perhaps its both? A great deal of the action takes place at the Chinese Embassy when it is placed in lockdown, but we get to sample a little of the Russian ambiance, there are mysterious bars, gay pride marches, skating rinks and monasteries to contend with and not to mention the Ouija board...

I really hope *Le cri de coeur* finds its place in the world and the hearts of those who like the Hugo novels. It deserves it because it seems to me it fought to be written despite my objections. I'm sure I'll read it again one day with new eyes and enjoy it for the adventure it is, but until then I'm back to Montgenoux for a spell, and then Paris and then...

Thanks for reading, and listening!
Much love, and wishes of good health and peace of mind.
Gary