

La Famille Lacroix
or Grief by any other name

September 2018

The idea for *'La Famille Lacroix'* came to me in the oddest of places. Oh wait, who am I kidding? They ALWAYS come to me in the oddest of places and at the oddest of times. But this particular story came to me fully formed and ready to be written. We were on one of our overnight trips to Paris and as well as doing at least one touristy thing we always make sure I get to spend time wandering around a Paris cemetery. Seriously, I know it's a bit maudlin but French graveyards are some of the most beautiful, moving and peaceful places I have ever been to. I feel as at home there as I do walking on a beach (my other favourite pastime). Each tomb is different, the effort expended is often breathtaking and you can feel the love and loss in the air.

Anyway, on this particular visit I was still on a high from the Julien Doré concert the previous evening so was just ambling along when I came across one particular tomb which changed it all. And in that instant, I saw the characters who inhabited *'The Famille Lacroix.'* I took a photograph (not something I ever do inside the graveyards and I won't share it here out of respect) because I wanted to remember it. The grave contained an entire family who all died on the same day. I don't know why and I haven't tried to find out, because that's none of my business. But it did ignite a spark and I was reminded I had seen another grave similar to this one many years ago in the UK. I couldn't stop thinking about it and by the time I left the cemetery the story was plotted. By the time we made it back to London that evening, I'd designed the cover and within a week the artist I work with had drawn it. *'La Famille Lacroix'* was off and running.

As is often the case, months passed before I jotted down the first lines but when I started writing something struck me, something which had never really occurred to me that afternoon when I stumbled upon the original grave. In my story eleven people - men, women, children and babies, all from the same family die in a fire in Montgenoux. *Eleven.* When we lose someone in our day to day lives it is often a consuming, horrific event, and it wasn't until I began this book I realised how difficult it must be to get your head around such a monumental loss. In the book, Hugo and the rest of Montgenoux are dazed by the enormity of the death of eleven people. It's almost as if it's too hard to process, to comprehend the loss of an entire family, the space they used to inhabit, now to be empty. If you are left behind, what do you do? Do you grieve for them all, or are you more sad about some than others relating to how close you were to them? It is worse if the person is very old or very young. Or does it make no difference whatsoever? And then it struck me, grief is personal, intensely personal and different for everyone. It has to be, that's how we cope. When someone we know loses someone we hope to do the best for them, to be there for them in their time of need, but invariably there comes a point when we stop asking how they are, maybe because we don't want to upset them when we keep mentioning it, but also because we believe there has to come a point when it is time to move on. After all, we're told the dead wouldn't want us to be sad once they are gone. But anyone who has grieved knows how difficult it is to accept that. How they come to you in the dark of night when sleep won't.

Time to move on. Those are words I hate to type because I don't believe them, but I see them every day and I understand them. In the book, a man is devastated by the loss of his brother, is it because he is hiding something? A woman mourns her daughter, is it guilt because she never really liked her? A woman cries over the loss of her friend, but is her grief amplified by the fact she feels relief to be free of her prettier, cleverer friend? That's why grief is personal and extreme. We can be saddened by the loss of a relative, and devastated by the death of a pet and we have to accept that both are fine and never judge someone's personal journey. Hugo encounters that in the book, because it's a little amplified. Why is so-and-so moving on so quickly? Did they not care? Or why is so-and-so apparently over the top in their grief, so much so it almost feels forced or fake. The truth is, our emotions are often out of our control at such times and there's no doubt we can become a slave to them. They can consume us one day and set us free another. But the one thing we shouldn't feel is shame, no matter how someone makes us feel about how we deal with loss or how one loss devastates us while another touches us for a time and then moves to our memories. We should not judge, we should talk and we

should ask that they are okay. Reminding someone of a loss isn't the wrong thing to do, it will always be right, even if it stabs the slowly healing wound. That's what I'm learning from this book. Anyone who knows me probably knows my last few years have been marred by these particular emotions but it doesn't make me an expert, quite the contrary in fact because when you're in the eye of the storm the last thing you care about is worrying why you're there, it's about making sure it doesn't drag you down.

All of this being said, *La Famille Lacroix*, is shaping up to be one of my favourite Hugo books. After the difficult *Le cri de Coeur*, it's a joy to be back in Montgenoux and the story is exciting and interesting for me. I hope you'll feel the same, there are even a splattering of light hearted moments in there too, and I guarantee by the end of it you'll be desperate to make sure Hugo finally makes his appointment with the optician!

Until next time,
much love and wishes of good health and peace of mind.

Gary