November 29, 2004

THE EMPIRE OF THE WOLVES
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE GRANGÉ, TRANS. FROM THE FRENCH BY IAN MONK. ECCO, $24.95 (384P) ISBN 0-06-057365-1

French reporter turned author Grangé (The Stone Council; Blood-Red Rivers) produces another grisly, Paris-set suspense novel, one that should help build his stateside audience. Chocolate shop worker Anna Heymes, 31, suffers horrifying nightmares and periods of extreme confusion ("memory gaps") so great that she's barely able to recognize her own husband, Laurent. Psychologists are stumped until Anna discovers scars on her scalp and is convinced that her face has been reconstructed—but by whom? For what reason? Meanwhile, silver-haired, divorced top cop Paul Nerteaux investigates the murder of three female Turkish illegal immigrants, each of their bodies hideously mutilated beyond recognition. To aid in the bizarre case, Paul resurrects retired, ultra-shady "father of all cops" Jean-Louis Schiffer. Using heavy-handed tactics, Paul and Jean-Louis scour the Turkish quarter and infiltrate the Grey Wolves, a deadly right-wing political organization bent on finding the now unrecognizable Anna (aka Sema Gokalp, presurgery) since she's the sole witness to a kidnapping in a Parisian sweatshop. Unbeknownst to her, Anna was also an imprisoned "laboratory rat" for the Morpho project, a radical psychic conditioning experiment, but her questionable past is soon exposed. Grangé's gloomy, gray-hued Paris makes an apt backdrop for this gruesome thriller. The complicated scientific scenario shouldn't dissuade readers from enjoying this murky morsel. (Jan. 7)

THE MOTIVE

In the latest installment of the Glitsky-Hardy crime-solving series (The 13th Juror; The Second Chair; etc.), San Francisco–based Lescroart again demonstrates his mastery of how things work in the city by the bay. Arson investigators at a Victorian townhouse fire do not call in Abe Glitsky or Dismas Hardy when they discover two bodies believed to be the remains of influential businessman Paul Hanover and his girlfriend, Missy D'Amiens. Glitsky, now deputy chief of inspectors, doesn't handle individual cases, and attorney Dismas Hardy has long since left the police force. Sgt. Dan Cuneo takes charge, quickly jumping to conclusions and slowly rekindling his grudge against the detecting duo. Unhappy with Cuneo's approach, the mayor puts Glitsky on the job, while Hardy is hired by Hanover's daughter-in-law, who was also Hardy's college sweetheart and is now a murder defendant with no alibi but plenty of motive. Parallel inquiries uncover contradictory evidence as well as loose ends: at the time of his death, Hanover was up for a federal appointment, his company was up for a city contract and his girlfriend has a mysterious past. Lescroart draws the reader in with a step-by-step description of the fire, mesmerizes with an account of the intricacies of the auto-towing business and winds up with a disturbing parallel of intrigue abroad, adding the wistful touch of a new baby in the Glitsky household. Lescroart may be testing the waters for fiction with an international flavor. For now, the winningly iron-ic author remains more credible on urban and legal ground than spy craft, but his authentic voice, methodical presentation and ability to juggle red herrings until all pieces fall into place will keep fans following wherever his cop-lawyer friends-heroes lead. Agent, Barney Karpfinger. Mystery Guild main selection; Literary Guild, BOMC, Doubleday Book Club featured alternates. (Jan.)

IMPROBABLE
ADAM FAWER. HARPERCOLLINS, $24.95 (416P) ISBN 0-06-073677-1

As Sherlock Holmes once said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Or as fourth-year Columbia statistics Ph.D. student David Caine tells his class in this science-driven, action-packed thriller, "[W]hen the chances of being wrong are minuscule, you have probably discovered the truth." Caine, a compulsive gambler, has just seen his sure-thing poker hand go bad, leaving him deep in debt to a Russian gangster. He can't skip town because he's started an experimental treatment for his temporal lobe epilepsy—a treatment that allows him to tap into the collective unconscious, a parallel universe known as the everyday, where innumerable futures exist for him to choose from. Needless to say, this makes Caine a valuable commodity, and he's soon on the run from a number of government agencies, none having his best interests at heart. His schizophrenic twin brother, Jasper, aids him in his flight, as does tough female rogue CIA agent Nava Vaner. It's difficult to keep the competing bad guys straight, and discussions of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Einstein's theory of relativity, Schrödinger's cat, Laplace's demon and probability theory tend to slow things down. But the success of The Rule of Four and The Da Vinci Code have shown that plenty of readers enjoy their science, as long as there's a compelling plot en-circling it, which there is here. Agent, Ann Rittenberg. (On sale Jan. 18)

DARK EYE
WILLIAM BERNHARDT. BALLANTINE, $25.95 (480P) ISBN 0-345-47015-X

An alcoholic Sin City police profiler goes in hot pursuit of a demented serial killer with an unusual fixation in Bernhardt's (Hate Crime) lengthy, serpentine thriller. Intuitive cop Susan Pulaski emerges from six days in rehab to find herself fired from the force, her house foreclosed and her niece, Rachel, moved to a foster home. Not even best friend Lisa can prevent Susan from booze binges, but news of heinous local murders sobers her up enough to beg for another chance with the force. Las Vegas PD Chief O'Bannon knows Susan's abilities and temporarily re-employs her, and Darcy, the chief's autistic 26-year-old son, insinuates himself onto the case as well, since the killer leaves behind cryptic notes that only Darcy can decipher. The killer, who believes himself a combination of Edgar Allan Poe and Jesus Christ, poses his victims in scenes from Poe stories, just waiting for some revelatory Judgment Day. After more graphically violent murders, the psycho pivots his dark interest toward Susan in increasingly apocalyptic visions. Once he captures her, she will save the day? As Bernhardt's grisly, unruly plot spirals along, the book's length and its weary, co-dependent heroine drag it down. There are plenty of terrific suspense scenes, but the novel doesn't stand up to Bernhardt's Ben Kincaid/courtroom drama predecessors. Agent, Dan Stone. (Jan.)

MY JIM
NANCY RAWLES. CROWN, $19.95 (176P) ISBN 1-4000-5400-1

In her spare, moving retelling of the story of escaped slave Jim from Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Rawles shifts the focus to Jim's wife, Sadie, whose uncomplicated sojourn settles the tone for Jim's flight. Trained as a healer, Sadie helps bring Jim into the world when she herself is "no higher than a barrel." As they grow up together on Mas Watson's Missouri plantation, Jim only has eyes for Sadie, and after an informal marriage following their daughter Lizbeth's birth, they consider fleeing together. Their plans change when Mas Watson dies, and Sadie is taken by a hateful neighbor while Jim is kept on by Mas Watson's daughter. Jim finally escapes on his own, but is presumed dead when his hat is found floating in the Mississippi. After countless tribulations, Sadie meets up again with Jim, who has ventured down the Mississippi with Huck Finn in the meantime, but the pair are not reunited. Further disappointment comes after emancipation, when Sadie learns that freedom looks an awful lot like slavery. Writing in sonorous slave dialect, Rawles creates a memorable protagonist in Sadie and builds on Twain's portrayal...
al of Jim while remaining true to the original. 

Agent, Victoria Sanders. (Jan.) 

Forecast: Like Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea, Rawles sketches an impressionistic portrait of a secondary 19th-century fictional character. This is a skillful addition to a small subcategory and may find a place on some high school reading lists.

THE STAR OF ALGIERS


A young contemporary singer is caught in the political crossfire when a repressive Islamic regime seizes power in Algeria in Chouaki’s first novel to be translated into English. Moussa Massy is the stage name of the talented first-person narrator, who dreams of stardom, his music a blend of Islamic melodies, African traditions and American pop influences. Moussa’s dream comes true when his band begins climbing the local club ladder, and one of his songs hits the local charts and begins getting radio airplay. But darkly parallel to Moussa’s rise is the ascent of the FIS, a Taliban-like Muslim party that uses brutality to enforce religious conformity. The effects are instantly deadly to Moussa’s ambitions, as the thrilling local club scene goes sour and the singer’s creative friends scramble to get visas and leave the country. Chouaki’s staccato, rapid-fire prose style works perfectly in the scenes designed to convey Moussa’s frustration as his musical career stalls, his girlfriend leaves him for an arranged marriage and he struggles desperately to emigrate to France. But that same style seems too brisk in the final chapters as Chouaki splinters through Moussa’s descent into drugs and alcohol and reveals his shaking final fate. Still, the novel’s gripping narrative and political relevance make this a revelatory read. Agent, Cecile Dutheil de la Roche at Editions Balland. (Jan.)

LIBERATION ROAD: A Novel of World War II and the Red Ball Express


In his latest WWII novel, Robbins powerfully integrates the theme of racial bigotry from Scared Earth with the successful formula of his previous three combat novels (The End of War, etc.). The 688th Truck Battalion is part of the famed Red Ball Express, which struggles to supply the fast-moving combat following D-Day as American forces fight through the French hedgerows and villages toward Paris. In recounting the battalion’s heroic saga, Robbins’s tale unfolds from several perspectives—

PW Talks with Stella Rimington

PW: For the American reader, would you clarify the difference between MI5 and MI6? Is it like the FBI and CIA?

Dame Stella Rimington: MI5 is our domestic security service, charged with protecting the country, while MI6 gathers foreign intelligence. So they’re broadly parallel to the FBI and CIA, except that MI5 is strictly civilian—it has no police powers. It’s up to the police to take action.

PW: And that figures in your plot.

SR: Yes. The inter-service and interpersonal relations are never simple, but they’re very important. A lot of people like to pretend that everyone’s always at each other’s throats, and, really, it’s not like that. Of course you get individuals who rub each other the wrong way, as happens with some of my characters.

PW: How did you make the transition from Director General of MI5 to author of a thriller?

SR: I’d always wanted to write a novel, I had lots of plots of my head, and whenever I went on holiday, I said “This time I’ll do it.” But there was never time. Then I wrote my autobiography [Open Secret, published in Britain in 2001], and that was the first step.

PW: At the end of At Risk [reviewed on p. 24], you acknowledge that you had help with the writing—how so?

SR: When I started the novel, I realized it was a separate skill I hadn’t immediately got at my fingertips. It was easy to contrive the characters and work out what I wanted to have happen; the difficulty lay in keeping the threads together. I needed help in pulling the subplots along a consistent route through to a conclusion.

PW: What authors have inspired you?

SR: I’m a chronic reader of thrillers. When I was in India in the ‘60s, I read Kipling’s Kim, about the Great Game of espionage, and that got me started. John Buchan created brilliant chases; someone’s being pursued, something has to be prevented from happening, who’s going to get there first? Then Dorothy SAYERS, Margery Allingham, and of course John LE CARRÉ, who I think is absolutely brilliant.

PW: Any hints about the plot?

SR: This time instead of working against terrorism she’s working against nuclear proliferation. That’s all I’m telling you.

PW: You seem to like keeping secrets.

SR: Well, I should be quite good at determining what ought to be kept secret!

PW: You think about such scary things. How do you sleep at night?

SR: It’s different in Britain. We’ve been living with terrorism for many years. We had the IRA setting off bombs in the streets of London. You didn’t have the experience of it until the hideous events of 9/11. So we’re more able to absorb these experiences and get on with it. Of course one of the more alarming aspects is that nowadays any kind of attack is possible because we’re dealing with people who are willing to commit suicide. In the old days, they wanted to escape, so there were some things they wouldn’t do. That does introduce a great degree of stress and anxiety. Nonetheless, one is far more likely to get killed in a road accident than by terrorism. Besides, I know my former colleagues are very good at their jobs, so I probably sleep better in my bed than most people.