

Peril in Périgord

Martin Walker pens another hit

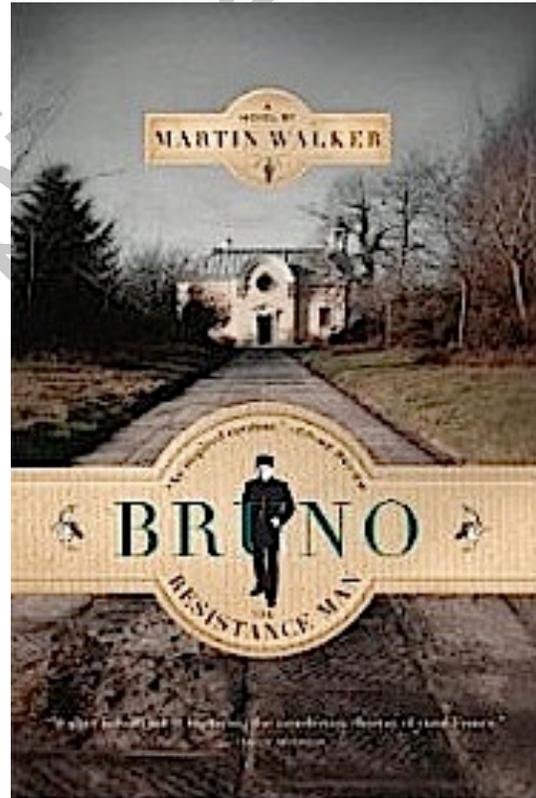
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

The latest book in Martin Walker's popular series finds the Provincial *chef de police* Benoit Courègges, known as Bruno to his friends, living a truly bucolic life on the fringes of St. Denis, a small town in the Périgord region of France for which he is the sole police presence. He is, as it opens, introducing his newly-acquired basset hound puppy, Balzac, to the other inhabitants of his modest landholding. They include a pair of geese and some chic-kens, a small orchard and a vegetable garden, and near-by, some woods that harbor white oaks and truffles. Not surprising, then, that Bruno's thoughts turn to the prospect of sharing his idyllic existence with a wife and children.

But his precious moments of tranquility are numbered, for all too soon Bruno is inundated by cases demanding his professional expertise. It seems an elderly member of the resistance from World War Two has recently died, and among his personal effects banknotes have been found dating from an unsolved train robbery

that occurred during the Vichy regime. The tale had grown into a legend involving vast sums of money, rumoured to be in the hundreds of millions, and fueled



speculation that several leaders of the Resistance had used the funds to establish impressive businesses and build grand homes for themselves in the aftermath of the war. Had the impoverished patriot

been involved in the heist, and if so, what had happened to the rest of the money?

As well, there has been a rash of local burglaries. The most recent has targeted the home of Jack Crimson, a retired former British espionage figure living in the area. He had lost vintage wine and fine furniture; an ordinary enough theft, yet the French government seems more than a little interested. Could something more sinister be involved? A separate break-in has taken place at the home of academic Jacqueline Morgan, just as she is preparing to publish a book on the French government's nuclear program. And if all that is not enough, Francis Fullerton, an English antiques dealer, has been murdered, and the leading suspect, his former lover, is nowhere to be found. Not unnaturally Bruno asks himself whether all this is merely a spate of unrelated crimes, or whether there is an underlying thread tying some – or all – of them together.

And as if solving these cases were not enough, Bruno must also decide what to make of his relationships with Pamela, an English woman he'd been seeing for several months (and who is returning to St. Denis shortly), and Isabelle, another woman who has his interest. A detective from Paris,

she shares Bruno's love of the good life but not, alas, his attraction for the countryside, and she has been ordered to take over the inquiry into the theft at the former British spymaster's house.

Bruno must somehow balance the many demands of his personal life while striving to prevent the loss of even more lives in the village, including his own. Not a simple task for a man who seldom even carries a gun. Bruno's quest will unearth secrets that put even more people at risk, and his own life will be in peril as well.

With eight books in the series and another to come out shortly, the Bruno canon is already well established, and can be enjoyed on several levels. They are of course traditional puzzle tales, and good ones at that. But there is also a depth to his tales that many readers will find appealing. Bruno is very much a man who stops to smell the flowers; I defy anyone not to become enthralled with his depiction of the beauty of the French countryside – or, for that matter, the savoury delights of French cuisine. Not last is Walker's ability to create an engaging cast of characters. All in all, then, his books are deservedly earning the author an ever-widening audience.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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