

Lucky Thirteen

Crime writer Cara Black dispels jinx

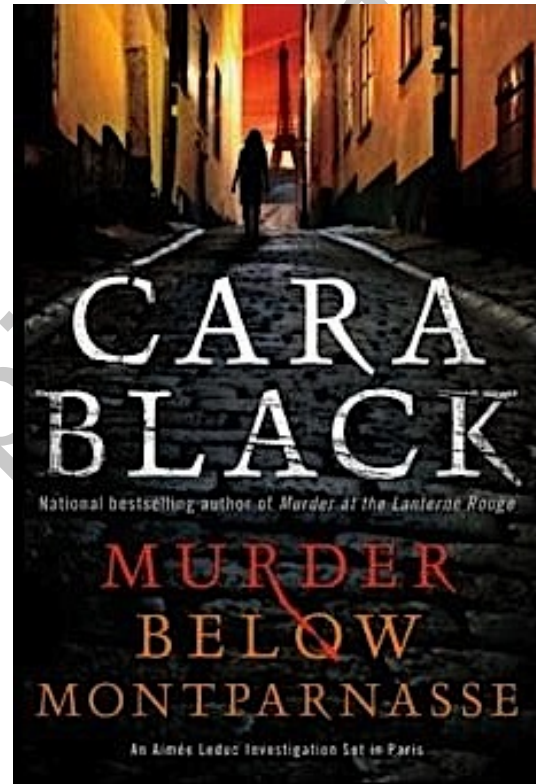
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Since 1999 Cara Black has been entertaining readers with a colourful and fast-paced crime series based on the exploits of Aimée Leduc, the third generation of her family to run a PI agency based in Paris. In the rough-and-tumble world of private investigators Aimée is something of an anachronism: although she works with others, often she finds herself on her own and forced to fend for herself. But the sharp-witted sleuth is no mere damsel-in-distress, and somehow she always manages to prevail over her very formidable adversaries. It's sometimes said that setting is character, and a hallmark of Black's novels is that each of her tales is set in a different district, or arrondissement, of Paris, lending her stories a distinctive atmosphere that holds her readers' interest.

Black's novels have earned her the praise of *The New York Times Book Review* and the *Washington Post Book World*, as well as growing numbers of fans. Now she is out with the thirteenth in her series about a missing painting, a long-lost mother with a shadowy past, and a gaggle of menacing thugs and shysters sufficient to make any PI re-think their choice of profession. With enough plot

twists to satisfy even the most jaded crime buff, it's a corker.



Cara Black,
Murder Below Montparnasse
(Soho Press, March 2013)

PARIS, FEBRUARY 1998. Aimée Leduc has had better days. First, her long-time business partner René Friant has left the firm for the golden fields of Silicon Valley, California; a dot-com startup very much wants his skills, and is prepared to pay the diminutive computer expert a six-figure salary, along with a fancy title and stock

options that will make him a multi-millionaire in short order — something Aimee simply can't match. René has arranged for a young computer geek to take his place, but Aimee is doubtful that he's up to the task. It is a potentially crippling blow to her PI firm, which specializes in corporate security and computer forensics.

Night is descending, and not far from Aimee's office, in a quartier near Montparnesse, a Serbian burglar waits patiently in the shadows for an elderly Russian named Yuri Volodya to leave his home. When he does, the Serb enters the house, looking for a painting. He doesn't find it — but someone finds him. Their encounter will set in motion a deadly tempest with Aimee very much in the eye of the storm.

BUT THAT'S ONLY THE BEGINNING of Aimee's troubles. Earlier that day Yuri had left a note with a bundle of bank notes at Aimee's office, indicating he wanted to hire her. She is disinclined to take the job until she learns that the old man claimed he had known her mother, a woman on an international terrorist watch list — who had deserted the family when Aimee was a child, and whom her father had always refused to talk about. That tilts the scales. With her associate Saj driving, they head for the address on the Russian's business card. But just as they arrive someone emerges from the darkness, directly in the path of their car. There is no time for them to avoid hitting him, and a passing nurse confirms that he is dead. When the police arrive and

investigate Saj is arrested, and faces charges of involuntary homicide.

When Yuri is later found tortured to death and Aimee is spotted at the crime scene she is considered a material witness, and sought by the police. Used to taking on difficult cases, this time Aimee finds herself in well over her head: she has to try to get Saj's manslaughter charge dropped while clearing herself of Yuri's death; that means investigating the rumour of an unknown painting by Modigliani, while not forgetting the vexing issue of her missing mother's involvement with the old man. Just when she thought things couldn't get worse Aimee learns that another Serb is hot on her trail, holding her responsible for his brother's death.

Cara Black expertly weaves an engrossing tale involving a missing painting, a ruthless Serb seeking revenge, a mysterious Russian with ambitions to play with the apparatchiks, and the mysterious mother whom Aimee hasn't seen for twenty years — and who's on a global terrorist watch list. Things aren't all roses for René either: he's up to his thumb drive in a computer scam that could make others millions — and send him to prison for a very long time.

WITH AN ECLECTIC CAST OF CHARACTERS that includes a protagonist who navigates the streets of Paris on a pink Vespa, a dwarf for a partner, and a Bichon Frise named Miles Davis, and more plot wrinkles than the proverbial cheap suit, *Murder Below Montparnesse* is easily Cara Black's strongest work to date. The tale is

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topical, the pace is breathtaking, the suspense sustained, and Black's trademark feel for the atmosphere of Paris's colourful *arrondissements* is up to her usual high standards. Her

latest work could well prove to be the author's lucky thirteenth in a series that already counts fans around the world.

A slightly shorter version of this review was originally published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, March 31, 2013.

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, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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