

Cara Black: Passion for Paris

In her setting-centric novels, bestselling mystery author Cara Black shows the seamier side of the City of Light.

BY SHARON MCDONNELL

In her 18 mysteries starring female detective Aimée Leduc, a private investigator who owns a computer security firm, Cara Black tackles Paris one neighborhood at a time. Jam-packed with delicious insider details about each *arrondissement* (administrative district), her travelogue-like novels—a delight for Francophiles—explore themes that range from Vichy France to Balkan War criminals, from human trafficking to, in her June release, *Murder on the Left Bank*, Cambodian Khmer Rouge refugees.

The New York Times bestselling author has a knack for teasing out local stories, from police officers to café owners. Each book in her catalog is based on a real-life account she's either heard or read. "People tell me things and I think, *What if?* Once I hear a nugget, I probe," says Black, who cites curiosity as her best trait.

For example, Black's first book

was inspired by a French friend who showed her a house in the historic Jewish quarter where her mother, at age 14, lived alone after her family was deported to a concentration camp. The building concierge had helped the teenage girl with food and coal for heating, while the concierge's policeman son didn't turn the girl in, even though French police were rounding up Jews for the Nazis. A decade after Black visited the house, she started writing her debut, *Murder in the Marais*, published in 1999 after almost four years of writing. In the book, scenes toggle between modern-day Paris (where an elderly Jewish woman is murdered and Neo-Nazis are active) and the midst of World War II.

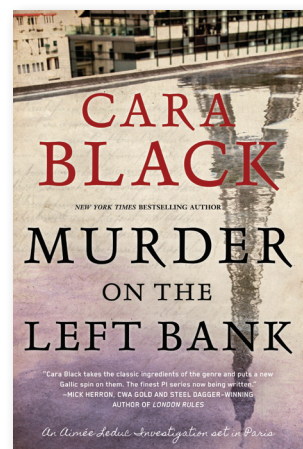
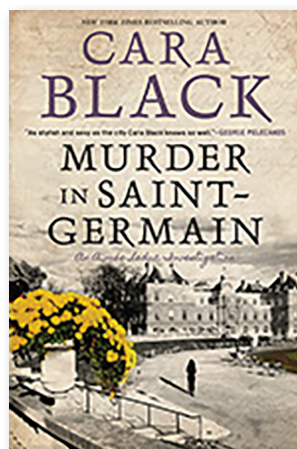
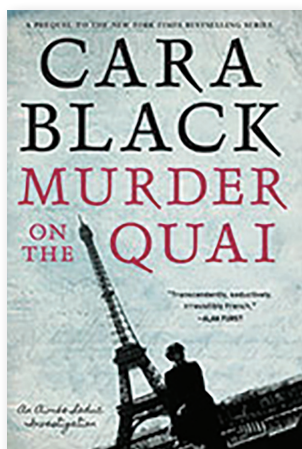
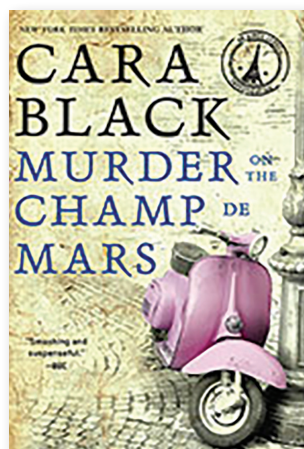
Why did it take her 10 years to carry out the tale? Her mindset changed: "In 1984, I had no children. [Then] in the 90s, I had a young son. As a mother, I felt differently, and wondered

what I would do to protect him and survive"—a theme reflected in the novel.

At the time she was writing her debut, computers were not yet the research-friendly resources we know today. Black had to learn about the neighborhood she was portraying by writing letters in French and awaiting replies by mail, and later by contacting the press office for the Paris police.

When she began writing about Leduc—her sardonic, fashion-conscious young detective who zooms around on a pink Vespa scooter—there were only three licensed female private investigators in all of Paris, Black says. So Black interviewed one, as well as a female American computer security consultant she'd read about in a local newspaper, back when few such firms existed.

Black starts each novel by picking an *arrondissement*, and then a crime



that reflects the type of people who live and work there. Thus art theft is the primary crime in *Murder Below Montparnasse*, which depicts the arty neighborhood in which Picasso and Gauguin once had studios. The Bastille has a history of artisan woodworking, which is why a main character in *Murder in the Bastille* is a carpenter. The setting itself becomes a character, as each *arrondissement* has a different flavor. “Something [in a location] appeals to me,” she says, “and I think about what crime would be organic there.”

Black has no journalism or law enforcement background, but the affable ex-nursery school teacher—who visits Paris twice a year for several weeks—has superb listening skills.

Much of her research is hands-on, getting into places because she “knows someone who knows someone.” This genial nature has allowed her access to parts of the city that most tourists don’t get to experience—such as going down into the underground quarries and sewers, roaming Sainte-Chapelle at night with a fireman after closing, or visiting a police firing range after having coffee with a policeman. To round out her research, Black also joins local historical societies (invaluable for their wealth of materials and documents about their district), attends symposiums, reads books by Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola (as well as historical accounts of people who lived in each *arrondissement*), and visits the Police Archives and Bibliothèque Mazarine, a magnificent 17th-century public library.

After a musician friend urged her to write about Django Reinhardt, the famous Gypsy jazz guitarist who

lived in Paris, Black was inspired to pen *Murder on the Champ de Mars*, in which a French Roma falls in love with someone from the posh 7th *arrondissement*, the city’s most elegant neighborhood. Says Black: “They’re both closed societies who don’t let people in, so it fit.”

To conduct research, she joined a Roma cultural center in Paris, where she immersed herself in the population, and managed to talk to some of Reinhardt’s descendants. She even visited a community just outside of Paris where many Roma live in camps. Because the group is typically afraid of outsiders, Black had to take her time, easing her way in through connections and demonstrating good will.

“It’s about working every angle,” she says. The ever-curious Black once asked a cop why he talked to her. His reply: “Because you bring good wine and I want you to get it right.”

While Black speaks French (she attended a French Catholic school in the Bay Area, where a homework assignment to read *Elle* in French accounts for her vast knowledge of French pop culture trivia, which never fails to impress her sources), she says, “My schoolgirl French didn’t cut it in modern French argot, so I’ve had to re-learn to understand Parisians who speak bullet-fast with lots of slang. I read it much better.”

To further emphasize the role setting plays in her stories, Black engages with readers during her regular trips to Paris by offering tours of the city (which you can learn more about at carablack.com/events). Travelers visit murder locations from Black’s novels, along with the Duluc Detective



Agency—a real, female-owned firm where the fictional Leduc agency is headquartered in her books. Every night, fans meet up with Black to hear about her favorite Paris finds.

The idea for novel-centric tours began when a Washington, D.C., bookstore, Politics and Prose—which leads regular author tours of Europe—asked Black to host one. Now that it has become a regular endeavor, she co-sponsors trips with a Paris resident. Black has even offered sweepstakes to bring lucky readers to France with her.

Despite her knowledge of Paris, she admits: “I’m always an outsider. Which in a way is good, because I’m attuned to details that wouldn’t strike a Parisian who sees them everyday.”

Her mysteries reveal the noir side of the City of Light. But what else would you expect from an author named Black? **WD**

Sharon McDonnell is a San Francisco-based freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, *Fodors.com*, *Napa Valley Register*, *Dallas Morning News* and in-flight publications.