

A huge swashbuckling French bestseller is finally appearing in English

FICTION

David Mills

HERETIC DAWN Fortunes of France 3
by **ROBERT MERLE**
translated by **T Jefferson Kline**
Pushkin £9.99 pp605

Robert Merle's 13-volume historical saga, *Fortunes of France*, set during the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, is so popular in France that it can be found in supermarkets jostling for shelf space alongside the contemporary crime fiction of Pierre Lemaitre and Fred Vargas and translations of Jo Nesbo, Stieg Larsson, George RR Martin and EL James. This is remarkable, not least because the series is quite old: the first volume appeared in 1977, the last in 2003.

Yet while more than 5m copies have been sold in France, it is only recently that an English version has begun to appear. The first novel, translated as *The Brethren*, came out in 2014. Now, after last year's *City of Wisdom and Blood*, the third, *Heretic Dawn*, has arrived and it is the best so far.

The whole saga, told in

the first person, is the story of Pierre de Siorac, the second son of Baron Jean de Siorac, a Huguenot ennobled by Francis I for his military service. Opening in 1545, *The Brethren* recounts Jean's return from the wars to his native Périgord with his close friend Jean de Sauveterre and how the two establish Chateau Mespech as a flourishing Huguenot household in the midst of growing religious and economic chaos. In *City of Wisdom and Blood*, Pierre has grown into a headstrong young man who is sent by his father to train as a doctor in Montpellier. Into the adventures of a hot-blooded student in a city riven by religious tension between Catholics and Huguenots, Merle weaves an account of 16th-century medical training.

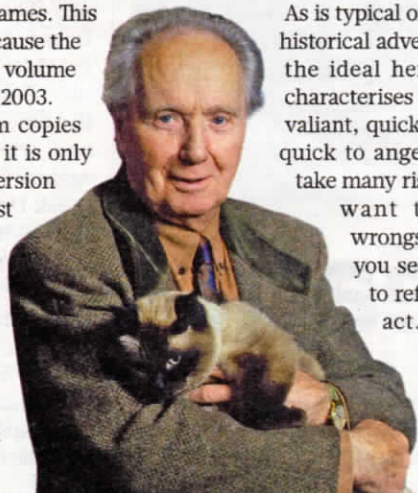
As is typical of these kinds of historical adventure, Pierre is the ideal hero. His father characterises him as "lively, valiant, quick to forgive and quick to anger as well. You take many risks. You always want to right any wrongs you witness... you seem not always to reflect before you act." The perfect

Merle Like
Montaigne, was
fond of cats

type of character then to hang a series of adventure novels on, and thus this could also be a description of Patrick O'Brian's Captain Jack Aubrey. Like that series of novels, Merle's, too, is about a tight knit little band of men of different attributes as Pierre gathers around him a devoted valet, a bastard half-brother and a mysterious Italian master-of-arms. Where O'Brian's derring-do is interspersed with early 19th-century medicine and zoology, so Merle takes in late 16th-century medicine and theology.

Apart from the period, the biggest difference from O'Brian is the amount of sex. Every chambermaid is fair game and usually "ferociously proud" to have been tugged by this "lively, valiant, etc" young nobleman, and aristocratic ladies leap from their corsets with enthusiasm. Perhaps this is a fair reflection of the mores of the period, or perhaps it's just because they're French.

Heretic Dawn begins in 1567 and Pierre is graduating as a doctor. The ceremony is an entertaining narrative, yet it is again stuffed with historical learning as he takes us through the speeches in French, Latin, Greek, German, Italian and even Hebrew, the petty bribes expected of graduates to minor officials, payments to bell-ringers, and the lavish banquet the student was required to fund. This is typical of the way Merle slips in period detail, everything



Danger ahead
Isabelle Adjani
as Margaret of
Valois in *La
Reine Margot*
(1994)

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLERS

Lists prepared by and data supplied by and copyright to Nielsen BookScan, taken from the TCM for the week ending 23/01/16. Figures shown are estimated sales for the seven-day period followed (in brackets) by the estimated total sale since BookScan records began in 1998. *Includes sales of more than one edition in the same format and at the same RRP. Titles available at Bookshop prices (inc p&p) on 0845 271 2135



GENERAL | hardbacks

		Last week	Weeks in top 10
1	HOW IT WORKS: THE HUSBAND /Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Ladybird-like parody about husbands, with text and illustrations 4,740 (252,600)	2	13
2	HOW IT WORKS: THE WIFE /Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Children's book-style satire on the subject of wives 3,855 (225,215)	4	12
3	THE LADYBIRD BOOK OF THE MIDLIFE CRISIS Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Humorous take on middle-aged angst 3,490 (151,660)	5	10
4	THE LADYBIRD BOOK OF THE HANGOVER Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) All about the morning after, with classic artwork 3,480 (191,870)	3	13
5	THE LADYBIRD BOOK OF MINDFULNESS Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Mindfulness spoof for grown-ups 3,305 (167,585)	6	11
6	A MINDFULNESS GUIDE FOR THE FRAZZLED Ruby Wax (Penguin £14.99) Comedian draws on personal experience showing how to live a happier life 3,260 (14,745)	1	3
7	THE LADYBIRD BOOK OF THE SHED Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Why men love sheds; a tongue-in-cheek guide 2,140 (134,570)	7	9
8	THE ROAD TO LITTLE DRIBBLING /Bill Bryson (Doubleday £20) Author embarks on a trip around Britain with his first travel book for 15 years 2,030 (285,825)	8	16
9	THE LADYBIRD BOOK OF DATING /Jason Hazeley & Joel Morris (M Joseph £6.99) Ladybird book highlighting the comical world of courting 1,910 (105,250)	9	7
10	GUY MARTIN: WHEN YOU DEAD, YOU DEAD /Guy Martin (Virgin £20) Television presenter and motorcycle racer takes us on a year of extreme adventure 1,585 (233,255)	10	14



GENERAL | paperbacks

		Last week	Weeks in top 10
1	REASONS TO STAY ALIVE /Matt Haig (Canongate £7.99) How one man came through crisis triumphed over illness and learnt to live again 7,745 (100,000)	1	1
2	THE LADY IN THE VAN /Alan Bennett (Profile £6.99) Story of the homeless woman who set up her decrepit van in Bennett's garden 2,675 (100,000)	2	1
3	SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED /Jon Ronson (Picador £8.99) The torrent of humiliation that can online from just one misguided comment 2,170 (100,000)	3	1
4	THE ESTABLISHMENT /Owen Jones (Penguin £9.99) How institutional power informs the sociopolitical aspects of democracy 2,000 (184,440)	4	1
5	INSIDE ALCATRAZ /Jim Quillen (Arrow £7.99) One man's searing account of life inside the notoriously tough prison 1,855 (20,985)	5	1
6	THE PROFESSION OF VIOLENCE /John Pearson (Wm Collins £8.99) Biography recounting the rise and fall of the infamous Kray twins 1,750 (95,960)	6	1
7	TORN /Rosie Lewis (Harper Element £7.99) Foster carer battles to uncover dark secret that is tearing a family apart 1,555 (23,000)	7	1
8	GUT /Giulia Enders (Scribe £14.99) Informative guide to the inner workings of a vital part of our anatomy 1,245 (57,945)	8	1
9	SAPIENS /Yuval Noah Harari (Vintage £9.99) A history of humankind and our cognitive developmental breakthroughs 1,240 (97,025)	9	1
10	IN THE HEART OF THE SEA /Nathaniel Philbrick (Wm Collins £8.99) The story of one of the most dramatic maritime disasters of the 19th century 1,235 (13,300)	10	1

from the regulations governing the display of restaurant prices in Paris to how people behaved in bath houses, and from how tennis balls were made to how the fashionable dressed and made up their faces (men and women).

Around this historical detail swirls a narrative packed with adventure, brutal incident and heroic derring-do. The period was bloodily violent, as Montaigne wrote at the time: "Other wars are external: this one also gnaws at itself and destroys itself with its own poison." No journey can be undertaken without an ambush, houses are assaulted by plundering bands of brigands and armed militias clash in city streets. None of this is far-fetched. Montaigne himself found the "civil disturbances" pressing upon him with the enemy at his gates and marauders abroad, and once he was attacked on the road and briefly held for ransom by a group of masked men.

Merle steeped himself in memoirs and journals from the period, and writes in a style that reflects the French of the time in vocabulary and phrasing without being pastiche. He also uses lots of Occitan to reflect the Provençal background of his main characters. French editions often come with a glossary of "mots anciens"; the English translation does not really attempt to re-create this, though it does pick up the occasional anachronism, such as "débraguet" translated as "unzipped", with which Merle peppers up his prose.

Merle's acute awareness of language is



Ladies leap from their corsets with enthusiasm

in his background. Born in 1908 in French Algeria, he was the son of an interpreter, and eventually became an English literature professor at the Sorbonne. He served as an interpreter with the British Expeditionary Force when war broke out in 1939. His capture by the Germans at Dunkirk became the basis of his first novel, *Week-end at Zuydcoote* (1949). This won the Prix Goncourt and was filmed with Jean-Paul Belmondo in 1964. After the war, Merle returned to academia, married three times, had six children, briefly joined the Communist party, wrote other novels and translated *Gulliver's Travels* into French, but the *Fortunes of France* series is regarded as his main achievement. He died in 2004.

It has been suggested that his wartime experience influenced the attitude to conflict in *Fortunes of France*, but just as important is the debt to the robust tolerant rationality of Montaigne who wrote "only fools are certain". Pierre similarly looks back and writes "we arrive at the end of our path without ever having resolved,

in our intimate struggles, where truth lies."

Montaigne is not just a guiding spirit, he actually appears in the narrative when Pierre seeks his advice. Although this fictional meeting takes place some 10 years before he first published his *Essays*, Merle deftly references Montaigne's work most obviously when the philosopher sits playing with his cat in homage to his most famous essay. Other contemporary figures appear, such as the protestant humanist Pierre de la Ramée and the pioneering surgeon Ambroise Paré, with whom Pierre has dinner.

By this time it is August 1572 and Pierre is in Paris for the wedding of Margaret of Valois and Henry of Navarre. We know exactly what's coming — the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, when the Catholic population of Paris turned on the Huguenots, many of whom had gathered in the city for the wedding, and slaughtered them. Pierre is right at the centre of events, from playing tennis with the petulant, mother-dominated Charles IX to treating the Huguenot nobleman Coligny after the attempt on his life that presages the massacre. Rather than compromising the excitement of the narrative, the awareness of what is going to happen only ratchets up the tension, as we know appalling slaughter is going to break out: where will Pierre be and who will survive?

Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £9.49 (inc p&p) on 0845 271 2135

FICTION | hardbacks

		Last week	Weeks in top 10
1	THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN/Paula Hawkins (Doubleday £12.99) A commuter's fascination with a married couple she passes every day turns deadly 5,250 (563,765)	2	54
2	THE WIDOW/Fiona Barton (Bantam Press £12.99) Psychological thriller about a widow who married a man accused of a terrible crime 4,490 (8,435)	3	2
3	IN THE COLD DARK GROUND/Stuart MacBride (HarperCollins £16.99) A body is found in the woods, it's up to Sergeant Logan MacRae to reveal its secrets 4,395 (10,300)	1	2
4	NYPD RED 4/James Patterson (Century £20) The elite task force is back to tackle a case involving the rich, famous and connected 3,070 (6,015)	5	2
5	COFFIN ROAD/Peter May (Quercus £18.99) Mysterious thriller following three perilous journeys towards the Outer Hebrides 2,455 (5,020)	6	2
6	STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS/Alan Dean Foster (Century £19.99) The official novelisation of the blockbuster film 2,420 (13,845)	4	4
7	INVADER/Simon Scarrow & TJ Andrews (Headline £18.99) Action-packed adventure with a Roman officer in the heart of first-century Britannia 1,680 (3,130)	8	2
8	THE QUEEN'S CHOICE/Anne O'Brien (Mira £12.99) France 1399, Joanna of Navarre has to make a decision that will alter the course of history 1,425 (2,360)	19	1
9	DEATHLIST/Chris Ryan (Coronet £16.99) Gunmen massacre soldiers on an SAS selection course. John Porter hunts the killers 1,350 (2,565)	12	1
10	THE PHARAOH'S SECRET/Clive Cussler & Graham Brown (M Joseph £18.99) Kurt Austin is called after a ship releases a deadly poison 1,185 (9,125)	7	4



FICTION | paperbacks

		Last week	Weeks in top 10
1	A GOD IN RUINS/Kate Atkinson (Black Swan £7.99) Sequel to <i>Life After Life</i> takes up the story during and after the Second World War 16,705 (58,175)	1	14
2	PRIVATE SYDNEY/James Patterson (Arrow £7.99) The team at Private Sydney investigates the disappearance of a high-profile businessman 12,175 (27,730)	4	2
3	THE REVENANT/Michael Punke (Borough £7.99) An expert tracker's quest for retribution, now an award-winning film 12,005* (15,720*)	3	2
4	NOT QUITE NICE/Celia Imrie (Bloomsbury £7.99) Forced into retirement, a woman moves to what seems like a perfect town near Nice 10,480 (17,115)	7	2
5	DISCLAIMER/Renee Knight (Black Swan £7.99) A novel appears on a woman's bedside table, one that will reveal her darkest secret 10,355 (45,705)	2	4
6	ROOM/Emma Donoghue (Picador £8.99) The story of a mother and her five-year-old son held captive for seven years; now a film 8,460* (513,990*)	16	16
7	THE DOLLMAKER'S DAUGHTERS/Dilly Court (Arrow £5.99) Love, jealousy and ambition will divide two sisters hoping to escape the East End slums 7,300 (12,090)	15	1
8	THE VERSIONS OF US/Laura Barnett (Weidenfeld £7.99) Love story about two students with three different versions of their future 6,925 (31,520)	6	4
9	STRICTLY BETWEEN US/Jane Fallon (Penguin £7.99) A woman wants to catch her friend's husband having an affair, but not all is as it seems 6,910 (12,945)	9	2
10	THE MOTH CATCHER/Ann Cleeves (Pan £7.99) Two bodies are found in a quiet community. Both victims had a strange fascination for moths 6,890 (11,695)	17	1

CHILDREN'S

		Last week	Weeks in top 10
1	OLD SCHOOL/Jeff Kinney (Puffin £12.99) Greg must survive when his town unplugs and goes electronics-free 6,400 (423,425)	1	12
2	GRANDPA'S GREAT ESCAPE/David Walliams (HarperCollins £12.99) The story of the bond between a small boy and his beloved grandfather 5,300 (633,090)	2	18
3	STICK MAN/Julia Donaldson (Allison Green £6.99) Will Stick Man ever be able to get back to his family tree? 3,310 (736,340)	8	16
4	GIRL ONLINE/ON TOUR/Zoe Sugg (Penguin £12.99) Sequel to <i>Girl Online</i> from the internet superstar 3,265 (273,700)	4	14
5	BILLIONAIRE BOY/David Walliams (HarperCollins £6.99) Joe has everything a boy could want, but what he really needs is a friend 3,010 (831,510)	5	56