

A Man of Impeccable Taste

R. Brooke Jeffrey

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A Man of Impeccable Taste is an engrossing mystery novel in which a detective reflects on a past case—and on French cuisine.

A philosophical detective leads R. Brooke Jeffrey's nostalgic mystery novel, *A Man of Impeccable Taste*.

During a Parisian summer in 1957, Inspector Maillot, a gourmand, takes advantage of the city's lull in crime to reflect on one of his previous cases, dubbed the Crucifixion in Saint-Alban, which first came to his attention while he was dining. Now, Maillot recounts the savage crucifixion of a gardener at an archbishop's home, riffing on it to result in a far-reaching exploration of the past.

The case is covered in retrospect, and the question of why it left a lasting impression on Maillot bolsters the book's sense of suspense. But Maillot is the book's main force; his cerebral preambles include curious details about French culinary history, memories of the Second World War, and thoughts on his colleagues, like a deceased fellow detective and mentor whose maxims punctuate the book. Maillot also muses over human psychology and what drives individuals to murder.

The narration is immediate, confident, and discursive, but the actual facts of the case are doled out as small morsels. The book's staggered pacing mirrors Maillot's persnickety nature. Questions about who the victim was, and why he was left at the archbishop's door in such a visceral spectacle, arise. With few details to gather from the crime scene, and a surprising twist uncovered through forensics, Maillot follows a long tradition of detectives who must solve their cases through intellect.

Among the book's supporting characters, a talented chef whom Maillot befriends in Toulouse stands out. Her interactions with the detective, which begin over their shared love of food, draw out tender facets of his own character. Light humor about gender and relationships is also introduced: there's a difference between what Maillot thinks when she asks him pointed questions, and how he actually responds. Their interactions contribute to the book's warm conclusion; they also help to temper the dark, post-war pains experienced by others.

But the narrative relies on occasional and large leaps of instinct to propel itself forward, as with hunches about a local hospital's founder, finances, and ties to stolen Jewish art and Nazi collaborators in France. Maillot's conversations with locals are convenient and informative. Much of the case's development occurs through the off-page expertise of contacts, who dig out and confirm background details for Maillot, whose ultimate involvement in arriving at a solution is less than direct.

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KAREN RIGBY (June 10, 2021)

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