

Sylvie Granotier

The Paris Lawyer

Translated from French by Anne Trager

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Praise for *The Paris Lawyer*

The Paris Lawyer won the Grand Prix Sang d'Encre crime fiction award in 2011.

“Sylvie Granotier's *The Paris Lawyer* is a beautifully written and elegantly structured novel of a woman's attempt to solve the central mystery of her life, along with several other mysteries along the way. It captures the reader from the first page, and never lets go.”

— Thomas H. Cook, winner of the Martin Beck Award, Barry Award for Best Novel, Edgar Award for Best Novel

“Sylvie Granotier's book, *The Paris Lawyer*, has a compelling heroine in Catherine Monsigny. She is a young attorney, working on a fascinating, mysterious case. But she is also a woman haunted by a tragic event in her own past, the murder of her mother. Sylvie Granotier interweaves the past and present with a sure hand, and her characters have a psychological depth that is rare in crime fiction today. This is a complex tale, skillfully told, that will keep you in suspense to the very end.”

— Patricia MacDonald, Edgar-award nominee

“Full of surprises and twists that will keep you reading late into the night.”

— *Cosmopolitan*

“This is a suspense novel with an absolutely perfect atmosphere. The writing is subtle, racy, controlled. It is written with great art!”

— RTL.be

“Everything in this book—the plot, the atmosphere, the characters, and the style—is perfectly mastered from beginning to end.”

— *L'Echo*

“The author has a distinctive style and an unsurpassed talent for delving deep into her characters' minds. It is a disturbing read.”

— *Madame Figaro*

“Reading this is like having a fever. The author takes the reader from dark humor to cold anxiety at a diabolic pace.”

— *Notre temps*

One early afternoon, in all other ways like any other afternoon, her mother takes her out in her stroller, soothing her with a laughing mom's voice. She tells her about the wind that sings and then softens among the branches and the swallows that compete in skill to skim the pond for a few refreshing drops of water before flying off again in perfect circles into the clouds.

The little girl does not understand every word, but she follows her mother's fingers as they imitate birds gliding through the air down to her face.

Then they will go home for snack followed by a nap.

It is a reassuring life, where nothing unexpected happens.

They stop at the edge of the woods, in the shade of the trees. The little girl plays with the light, squinting to change the intensity of the rays.

Before the screaming starts, before her mother's distant terror terrorizes her in turn, before the panicked shrill pierces her ears, and the little girl takes refuge in sleep to bury an anxiety far too great for her to bear, her mother gives her a generous and warm hug, leaving her with the sight of the entire sky, and says, "I'll be right back." A final broken promise. Sitting as she is, the child cannot see the body, or what is left of it, sprawled on the ground, beaten to a pulp. Yet that moment of abandonment remains forever engraved in her adult memory.

The sky is calm and clear above the Seine River in Paris, where traffic is nervous and gray along the banks. Catherine Monsigny cannot figure out what links this fleeting moment with that fixed point in her past, that fuzzy, probably reconstructed memory that usually is tactful enough to leave her alone. She has even tried to convince herself that it has stopped broadcasting from that faraway land of her childhood.

She crosses the Pont Neuf, parking her scooter at the Place Dauphine. She shakes her head, hurting her ears as she yanks off her helmet, which she stows in her top box, and grabs her briefcase and large bag.

She walks quickly toward the courthouse, cursing her short legs, slipping into her court robe as she climbs the steps, and by habit she automatically replaces those old uninvited images with a quick summary of the case she is about to defend.

Her client—what's his name again? Ah, yes, Cedric Devers—is accused of assault and battery. He admits using force and justifies it by blaming the harassment that preceded it. According to him, he met a woman—Monique Lemaire, fifty-six years old—in a bar, took her back to his place for a short session between consenting adults. *Ciao*, no see you next time, because there won't be one.

Monique did not see things the same way, harassed him by phone, and one night too many, she took to ringing her seducer's doorbell until he reacted. He opened the door. That was a fatal

error. Stubborn with drink, she wouldn't take no for an answer and tried to force her way in. He had to stop the noise and ended up pushing her. She fell, which resulted in a few bruises and three days' disability leave.

Catherine has not yet met her client. They have spoken on the phone. She glances around to see that he is even later than she is. She pokes her head into the courtroom to check the proceedings.

The pending case is not yet over.

Just as well. Her client will have the time he needs to arrive.

Too bad for him. She does not like waiting.

She paces.

"Maître Monsigny?"

She senses fingers lightly brush her shoulder, spins around and looks into the deepest gray—or perhaps green—eyes she has ever seen. She feels as though she's falling into them. She grasps for something to catch her balance, and her professional composure kicks in, winning every time as it does. She throws him a sharp look and spits out, "Cedric Devers? You're late."

The thirtyish teenager, classy despite the jeans and sweatshirt he has tossed on, stares right into her eyes, unbothered, like a child, without blinking.

Would he never stop looking at her?

The lawyer turns away and walks toward the courtroom, because it is high time to do so and because she wants to escape his embarrassing look.

She sharpens the professional tone in her voice now that Cedric Devers has thrown her off. What an uncharacteristic sensation.

"I asked you to wear a suit. You are performing here. The first thing the judge will see is your attitude and your clothing, and the judge's impression counts."

"So you're a woman?" He bites his lip to crush a smug lady's-man smile. Too late. The very tone of his question says he's taking up the challenge. Women are his preferred prey.

Male crudeness can become a woman's weapon. Even as she says to herself that he really does have beautiful eyes, Catherine's reflex is to lash out. "Studs don't turn me on. All I'm interested in is supporting women's causes. Yep, I'm a feminist bitch. Come on."

"We've got a little time, don't we?"

"There's no way to know, and arriving late always plays against a defendant. That's not so hard to guess."

"There was a huge line to get in."

"You should have read your summons."

"Reassure me. You're my lawyer, right? I mean, you *are* here to defend me?"

"That's right. And I won't wear kid gloves. Nobody will. You might as well get used to that."

For an instant, a crack appears in Cedric Devers' display of self-assurance. He's just another poser. He opens his arms in front of him and in an uncertain voice says, "Should I, uh, explain?"

She taps the case file under her arm, letting him know that it is all in there and that she does not need any additional explanations.

He stops at the door. “Is Monsigny your maiden name?”

“It’s my name. Period,” she hisses her counter-attack, tightening her lips. She has no intention of doing him the favor of explaining that she is single, and fossilizing. He would take that as an invitation.

He gets the message, aware that he has just skillfully cut off the branch he had yet to sit on: She thinks he’s an idiot.

The truth is, Catherine is working. She has gotten a quick portrait of Cedric Devers: forty years old despite looking younger, a graphic artist who manages his own agency, a good income, clean cut. Now she has to discover the other Cedric, the victim, because appearances have a huge impact, despite the professional neutrality members of the legal system display.

“Once we are in the courtroom, point out Mrs. Lemaire.”

He nods and says nothing.

She will defend him as best she can. That is her job.

They are still in the entryway when she stops him with her hand and gives him an approving look.

“Stay in this state of mind: a little worried, a little fragile, not so sure of yourself. It will help you more than posing as a small-time lady’s man.”

She does not wait for an answer and enters the courtroom.

The ordinary trial clientele—the scared, the disconcerted, the regulars—are on the public benches. On the defense benches, people in black robes, some with ermine trim and some without, are preparing to represent their clients. Some indifferent colleagues have the bored look of professionals who have more important things to do elsewhere. Others are reading the paper or whispering among themselves.

Devers sits down at the end of a row and with his chin points out a stocky woman.

Monique Lemaire works in a bar, a job that doesn’t play in her favor, implying that she has certain life experience. She won’t be able to act like an innocent maiden. Yet she is smart enough to be careful about her looks. No jewelry, no makeup, dark pants, an impeccable white shirt buttoned up high under a modest jacket. Still, she’s built like an old kettle. Catherine can’t help wondering what he saw in her.

Lemaire turns to her attorney, and Catherine notices that the shirt, as plain as it is, looks like it is going to burst from the pressure of her heavy, plump breasts.

OK, the lady exudes sex. Some women are just like that. Their bodies speak for them. In this case, it speaks for the defense.

Catherine greets the colleague she is facing. He’s nicknamed Tsetse because he has a genius for monotonous, never-ending sentences.

He is the good news of the day.

The bad news lies in the prosecutor-judge duo, a twosome fed up with seeing couples who stay together only because they are poor and who hit each other because they don't have enough space. So separate! But where would they go?

This scenario is being played out once again in the case before Catherine's. The couple lives together; they are repeat offenders, have problems with alcohol, misunderstandings, three kids. The two of them together earn only 1,500 euros a month, which is not enough to pay two rents.

For a change, Cedric Devers offers the court someone who is well off, which could lean the balance to the wrong side.

Catherine, forgetting that she herself was late, throws a vengeful look at her client before pushing him to the front of the court. They had been five minutes away from missing the hearing.

As was foreseeable, an attentive court questions the plaintiff, going easy on her.

Mrs. Lemaire is upset. Her story is reasonably confused. She is determined to accuse her passing fling and vehemently emphasizes that he went to bed with her on the first date, which was also the last, something she neglects to mention. Everything indicates that she was perfectly consenting. She had thought he was nice. He threw her out early in the morning with the excuse that he had to go to work, even though she needed to sleep because she worked at night. He just as well could have called her a thief while he was at it.

Devers proves to be a quick learner. He listens attentively and respectfully, answers questions directly, without any flourishes. Humbly.

The barmaid plays up the emotions, and her act rings more of loneliness and being ready to grab onto the first ship that passes. He states the facts and says with dignity that he too was distraught that night. He is sorry about how this misunderstanding, for which he is most certainly responsible, has turned out. One lonely night he felt for a woman in distress. She hoped for more than he could give. He is annoyed with himself for this mistake, for which he is clearly the only person responsible.

The waitress's lawyer gesticulates. He gets excited, cannot imagine an excuse for the unjustifiable behavior of a man guilty of taking advantage of the naïve trust of a worthy woman. He embellishes his clichés. His words flow one after the other without any meaningful conclusion.

The prosecutor stares at the woodwork, looking like she's mentally writing down her shopping list. The presiding judge's tired hand fiddles with the case file.

For Catherine, it is time to wake everyone up.

She stands and from the top of her five-foot-five and a quarter-inch frame she raises a soft yet clear voice, using short, sharp sentences to describe a well-established man with no history of violence, as demonstrated by his attempt to reason with an out-of-control woman who was banging on his door in the middle of the night. Out of compassion and fearing a public scandal, he had opened that door. There was no actual act of violence, but rather a clumsy movement resulting from his exasperation with the stubbornness of a woman who was under the influence

of alcohol, an idiotic gesture that was understandable and whose consequences he regrets, as he himself had said.

She asks that he be acquitted and sits down, whispering to him that they would have the decision at the end of the session.

When the judge leaves with her mountain of case files under her arm, they also leave, and Catherine abandons her client to call her office.

She goes out to the courtyard for a smoke, where she watches Devers' agitation from the corner of her eye. He isn't acting like a smartass any more. He even comes and asks her what she thinks, like a worried child whose mischief has proven worse than expected. He has a certain charm when he stops playing the tough guy, and Catherine experiences some pleasure in stripping him of the vestiges of his protective armor.

She doesn't really know. With a court like that anything is possible, and it is impossible to tell what side it will come down on.

He congratulates her on her closing arguments, looking for some comforting sign. He notes that she was brief, showing regard for the number of cases that followed; that could have appeased the court. No, he's not dumb.

From time to time, the look in his eyes changes. He no longer appears to be grasping the information that the person in front of him is sending him silently, absorbed as he is in a contemplation that glazes over his eyes and makes them bigger.

It is disconcerting.

She says, "It's true that your girlfriend did not start out with a good deal. Life is unfair."

Cedric Devers closes his eyes. "Can you say that again?"

"Life is unfair. It's a platitude."

She frowns slightly. He's strange.

After being so clearly worried, he doesn't pay particular attention to the verdict.

She expected a week of public service. He is acquitted.

She holds out her hand to her client. She is expected elsewhere. She is in a hurry; she lets him know.

He opens his mouth, changes his mind to speak and closes it again, which is just as well, as she has no intention of raising a glass to their victory with him.

She puts her robe back in her bag, intending to drop it off at the drycleaner. His eyes take in the thin figure that her tight skirt and fitted jacket highlight. He can't resist devouring her in his mind's eye, where he lifts her blond hair into a chignon, revealing her graceful neck. He exaggerates her thin waist with a red leather belt, imagines a flowered dress swirling around her thighs. When she has disappeared, he stills sees her going up a step, her dress opening, showing her frail legs. The summer-colored fabric falls to the floor, her breasts appear, small and round.

He turns around. He should get to work.

Catherine finds her scooter, checks the time and decides she can make a detour to the Goutte d'Or.

The building is run-down. Poverty and time have left deep scars in its façade. The structure looks like it will collapse at any minute, and like the grassroots association it houses, it remains standing more out of steadfastness than soundness.

Catherine climbs the shaky staircase, enduring the leprous walls, the rancid odors and the broken glass that mark the path to a door that announces RIGHTS FOR ALL.

She has already tried to get the distressed building's owner to renovate, but he is skilled at making regulations work in his favor. Her efforts have been in vain. The deterioration continues, as unyielding as the despair of the undocumented immigrants the lawyer volunteers her time to defend.

She has not yet said her last word. In either area.

The door to the two-room apartment that serves as an office stays shut only when it is locked, so it is continually open, a powerful symbol for the association's chairman, Daniel, who persists in seeing half-full glasses, even when they are empty.

Inside, all the furniture comes from the neighborhood streets, where each step made in economic advancement rejects the preceding one. It is the IKEA syndrome: replacing a two-seat sofa with a three-seater, the basic office chair with the ergonomic model. Daniel has had to stop the association's volunteers in their enthusiastic nightly retrieval of treasures brought to the office at all hours.

A toilet flushes.

It has been fixed, Catherine notes with satisfaction.

Daniel exits the bathroom, buttoning up. He's wearing his bad-day look, his eyebrows knotted up like his hair and his eyes outlined with dark circles, like his nails.

"If you have bad news, just forget about telling me, please. Souad got pulled in after jumping a subway turnstile at La Chapelle, where it's crawling with ticket inspectors. Mimi is back on the streets, and Ali is in solitary again. He thinks he's clever, but in all likelihood, he'll be deported. For three grams of hash. But how are *you*?"

"I'll let you know in two hours, after I see my boss."

"And after, I'll invite you to dinner to celebrate."

"It's not a good day for that."

"Yesterday wasn't good, tomorrow won't be any better, right? Let me guess. You came to pick up Myriam's file."

She smiles. Yes. He turns, looking sullen, and runs his fingers through his hair without any notable effect. It's still the same tousled, uncontrollable mop. He reaches for the drawer, opens it and removes a folder. He holds it out to Catherine and goes to his computer to sulk.

He is hypersensitive, as weak people tend to be, and his activism protects him from life, two bad points in Catherine's mind.

For her, the association is a steppingstone, and her volunteer work a learning process. She is sure that she is ten times more useful and efficient than Daniel, who is burdened by his kindness. And today, she has won the jackpot. That is, if her boss will allow her to take on the case of Myriam Villetteix, née N'Bissi, who wants Catherine to defend her in criminal court next spring. Just in time for her birthday, an eminently favorable sign, Catherine has decided.

"Old goat seeks young chick for rural ecstasy."

This faux personal ad, written with Daniel's typical humor and stuck on the folder she is holding, accompanies the photo of a sixty-some man in a wool polo shirt buttoned all the way up. He has smooth gray hair, clear and gentle eyes and a soft frozen smile. Gaston Villetteix, the victim.

Gaston was a kind husband. He had happiness to catch up on, and I helped him with that. Why shouldn't I enjoy what he had now? I thought the people here liked me, but they're all spitting at me. And prison is horrible. Especially when you haven't done anything. I cry all the time now. He liked my cooking. It never made him sick. If someone put poison in it, it wasn't me, that's all. My cousin said Daniel never left anyone in trouble and that's where I am. Thanks for what you can do. Myriam

Catherine still can't differentiate the sincerity from the cunning in Myriam's letter. She looks at her comrade's stoic straight back and says, "Sorry to disturb you, Daniel. Is there an address for the cousin?"

"Where do *you* live? Cousin, that's like brother or buddy. It's not her second cousin. In this case, it's the girl who gave her our address. On that infamous September 11, 2001. You should have seen it, the ten of us staring at the television. Then, knock, knock."

"You already told me the story a hundred times, Daniel."

"Excuse me for still finding it crazy. She's a really nice girl. She works in a hair salon on the boulevard near Barbès, next to the Barracuda shoe store. Do you know where that is? Her name is, um, Tania. Tania, uh, Tania. Just say Tania. Everyone knows her."

When Catherine pokes his shoulder to say goodbye, Daniel nods without getting up, totally absorbed in his screen.

Actually, Catherine is attracted to older men, and Daniel does not realize that his teenage behavior is counterproductive. Damning, in fact. Perhaps Myriam also needed the maturity of an older partner to reassure her.

Provided that Renaud accepts. Accept, Renaud.

It's her first real case, her first major felony. And an unusual case. The press could run with it if she were to handle it with some skill.

She pulls the door shut, but it veers open again, and then she presses the time switch, which provides exactly two seconds of light before the bulb burns out. Total darkness. Better not think about what is crawling under her feet.

Not scared! Her father measured the degree of her childhood terrors by the frenetic intensity with which she repeated, “Not scared.”

She starts singing, “Stand by me, no I won’t be afraid...”

Her father had been a poor orphan who had worked hard to finish medical school. He was thirty in the 1970s, and Catherine has no idea what kind of music he listened to.

Is life ever anything like a John Lennon song? Certainly not her father’s life, admirable man that he is, a man whom she is incapable of admiring.

At the Barbès intersection, a market of poverty and destitution is in full meaningless swing. Old clothes are being exchanged, illicit cigarette sellers block the subway turnstiles, and the sidewalks are littered with uninviting business cards for local witch doctors.

Catherine adjusts her earpiece under her helmet, keeping an eye on four-wheeled enemies, and calls her office.

“Sophie, it’s Catherine. I’ll be right there. Is Maître Renaud there? Did I get any calls?”

Then she listens to her messages.

Cedric Devers: “I did not have an opportunity to thank you, but you were very good. Thank you very much.”

She raises an eyebrow just long enough to make a face at the ambiguity of the “you were very good.” It is rare that a client ever takes the time for a thank you, so it’s worth accepting, particularly when he has such green eyes. Or were they gray? Changing. Right there, the graphic artist is listed in the “imaginable” column among those worth keeping an eye on.

Stephanie would like to know if the flabby lawyer intended to let her soft fleshy padding win the war, or if they would meet at the gym.

In my dreams, Catherine says to herself.

She’ll text her, because with Stephanie you know when a conversation begins—sometimes even before you lift the phone to call—but when it will end is quite another story.

Felix: “We’re starting to prep the New Year’s party with karaoke and all. The whole class will be there. Would you, oh great star of the courts and the tortes, deign to join our humble troupe of organizers?”

What an asshole! They had all been jealous when Renaud, her first choice of potential employers, hired her after a single interview.

She calls back and leaves a message: “Dear answering machine, kindly transmit to the ordinary legal galley slave that a genetic miracle has allowed me to remain simple and that, despite joint invitations from the chancellery and the presidency, it will be my pleasure and my preference to come mingle with the court proletariat, if only to measure the distance that now separates us. I heard about a rental that’s not too expensive and has a basement for dancing. I’ll find out more. Hugs.”

Catherine thinks they are planning really early before she realizes that it is almost December. She drives down the Avenue de l'Opéra, which is so familiar to her, she hasn't really looked at it in a long time, and parks in her usual spot, under the windows of Renaud's law firm, where she can check regularly to make sure some zit-faced delinquent is not sawing through her lock.

In the lift, she checks her hair, brushes it so it falls smoothly onto her shoulders and then puffs it up a bit. Maître Renaud does not appreciate carelessness or casualness.

She tosses her things into the wilds of her office, making no notable change in the scenery. Experience proves that once disorder reaches a certain level it gets no worse.

She says a quick hello to Sophie, who holds up crossed fingers.

She knocks.

"Come in."

She loves Maître Renaud's rugged bass voice, with its barely perceptible accent that stresses incongruous syllables. He doesn't have the sharp phrasing of Parisians. Neither does she, but she is always afraid that her drawn voice will dissipate all over the place, as it tends to, while Maître Renaud's powerful, sensual voice emanates from deep in his diaphragm.

She is always awed by her boss's office, with its chalk-white walls, olive-colored soft leather armchairs that are wide and sensual and the arrogant sheen of a 1920s desk. The whole is gently impressive. A huge photo fills the left wall, perfectly lit by the French window in front of it. Your eye has to settle on it for a long, calm moment in order to discern that the monochrome black vibrates with the barely perceptible movement of the sea, which extends into a deep night sky.

There are never any papers on the boss's desk, because the mind of a great man contains all the information it needs. And Maître Renaud never pretends to be busy with some other task you would be interrupting, because a great man has nothing to prove.

His beauty is equal to his IQ, and he has the charm of someone who has never thought to be bothered by his appearance: He is stout without being soft and has intense, indecipherable black eyes and well-defined lips.

Despite his reputation for being an old lion who likes young flesh, he has never tried anything with Catherine. He would only have to open his arms for her to fall right into them, which would be a perfectly huge catastrophe. For her. Be that as it may, she thinks about it every time they meet one on one.

She uses a neutral tone to announce the acquittal. There is no need to show off. Renaud says that in his firm excellence is the minimum sentence.

He takes note without any comment and says without any transition, "You will be facing the most repressive felony court in France."

Catherine forces herself to remain impassive while a two-drummer rock band rips through her chest.

"You have a lot to lose and quite a bit to gain, which generally go hand in hand. The case will not exempt you from your duties here at the firm. You can work on the train. The firm will pay your expenses until, as we hope, your client becomes creditworthy again."

“Thank you, sir.”

“It will be a tough fight. I trust you will prevail. One word of advice: Double check the marriage story. Otherwise, no investigating. We are not in the United States here. The inquiry is over, the facts are in the file. Do not give in to your storybook imagination.”

She shows appropriate restraint and thanks him one time only, simply.

Renaud hates emotional effusion, which he likens to water on the knee, with its invisible and pernicious effects.

She leaves, remaining calm and dignified, but immediately outside the door, she leaps over to Sophie’s desk, lifts her arms and sways.

Sophie does not react. Catherine follows her eyes to the boss’s door, which has not been fully closed and has swung open again, giving the elder attorney a perfect view of the young employee’s enthusiastic display.

Catherine stammers her excuses and goes back to close the door while Sophie covers up a smile with a heavy file that must have seen quite a few more.

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