



The Three Evangelists

By Fred Vargas

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The opera singer Sophia Siméonidis wakes up one morning to discover that a tree has appeared overnight in the garden of her Paris house. Intrigued and unnerved, she turns to her neighbours: Vandoosler, an ex-cop, and three impecunious historians, Mathias, Marc and Lucien - the three evangelists. They agree to dig around the tree and see if something has been buried there. They find nothing but soil.

A few weeks later, Sophia disappears and her body is found burned to ashes in a car. Who killed the opera singer? Her husband, her ex-lover, her best friend, her niece? They all seem to have a motive.

Vandoosler and the three evangelists set out to find the truth.

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Editorial Review

Review

'A work of real class - its characters sharp, multi-faceted and original, and its style crisply intelligent.' Glasgow Herald; 'Slick, creepy and full of engagingly odd characters, this thriller is a class act.' MATTHEW REISZ, Independent; 'Commissaire Adamsberg - the dreamy, irrational flic in Vargas's crime novels- must be the most engaging French detective since Malgret' SB Kelly, Scotland on Sunday; 'Poetic, offbeat and gently addictive. Her prose has an unusual deftness, a wry humour. A unique voice' Guardian"

About the Author

Fred Vargas was born in Paris in 1957. As well as being a best-selling author in France, she is by training an historian and archaeologist.

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I

'Pierre, something's wrong with the garden,' said sophia.

She opened the window and examined the patch of ground. She knew it by heart, every blade of grass. What she saw sent a shiver down her spine.

Pierre was reading the newspaper over his breakfast. Maybe that was why Sophia looked out of the window so often. To see what the weather was like. That's something you do quite often when you get up in the morning. And whenever the weather was dull, she would think of Greece, of course. These sessions standing at the window had, over time, become full of nostalgia, which swelled inside her some mornings to the point of resentment. Then it would pass. But this particular morning, something was wrong.

'Pierre, there's a tree in the garden.'

She sat down beside him.

'Pierre, look at me.'

Wearily, Pierre raised his face towards his wife. Sophia adjusted the scarf around her throat, a habit she had kept since her days as an opera singer. Protect your voice. Twenty years earlier, on one of the stone terraces of the open-air amphitheatre in Orange, Pierre had proposed to her with a cascade of protestations of love and undying certainties. Just before a performance.

Sophia cupped in her hand the gloomy face of the newspaper reader.

'What's eating you, Sophia?'

'I just told you something.'

'You did?'

'I said: "There's a tree in the garden".'

‘I heard you. That’s pretty normal, isn’t it?’

‘There’s a tree in the garden that wasn’t there yesterday.’

‘Well, what about it? Am I supposed to react or something?’

Sophia was not feeling calm. She didn’t know whether it was because of the newspaper, or the weary look, or the business about the tree, but it was clear that something was not right.

‘Pierre, explain to me how a tree can turn up in a garden all by itself.’

Pierre shrugged. He really could not care less.

‘What’s the problem? Trees reproduce themselves. A seed, a cutting, a graft: that’s all it takes. They grow into mighty forests in this climate. I imagine you know that.’

‘It isn’t a cutting. It’s a tree! A young tree, standing up straight, with branches and everything, planted all by itself a metre or so from the end wall. How did it get there?’

‘It got there because the gardener planted it.’

‘The gardener’s been gone two months and I haven’t found a replacement. So, no, it wasn’t the gardener.’

‘Well, it doesn’t bother me. Don’t expect me to get worked up about a little tree standing by the end wall.’

‘Don’t you even want to get up and have a look? Can’t you just do that?’

Pierre heaved himself to his feet. His reading had been interrupted.

‘See?’

‘Yes, of course I can see. It’s a tree.’

‘It wasn’t there yesterday.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Not maybe. It wasn’t there. So what are we going to do about it? Any ideas?’

‘Why should I have?’

‘That tree frightens me.’

Pierre laughed. He even put an affectionate arm round her. Briefly.

‘I’m not joking, Pierre. It frightens me.’

‘Well, it doesn’t frighten me,’ he said, sitting down again. ‘In fact, having a tree turn up is quite nice. You just leave it in peace and that’s that. And you might perhaps give me a bit of peace about it. Someone got the

wrong garden, I dare say. Their problem, not ours.'

'But it was planted during the night, Pierre!'

'All the more likely someone got the wrong garden. Or perhaps it's a present. Have you thought of that? One of your fans wanted to honour you discreetly on your fiftieth birthday. Fans get up to all kind of tricks, especially those mouse-type fans, the obsessive ones, who won't give their names. Go and see, there might be a message.'

Sophia thought for a bit. The idea wasn't entirely ridiculous. Pierre had decreed that her fans fell into two camps. There were the mouse-type fans, who were timid, agitated, silent, but unshakeable. Pierre had once known a mouse transport a whole bag of rice into a rubber boot over the course of a winter, grain by grain. That's the way they are, mouse-fans. Then there are the rhino-type fans, equally to be dreaded in their way: noisy, loud-mouthed, very sure of themselves. Inside these two categories, Pierre had developed masses of sub-groups. Sophia couldn't remember them all. Pierre despised the fans who had come before him and the ones who came after him, in other words, all of them. But maybe he was right about the tree. Possibly; not certainly. She heard Pierre go into his 'Bye-see-you-tonight-don't-worry-yourself-about-it' routine, and then she was alone.

With the tree.

She went to take a look. gingerly, as if it might explode in her face.

No, of course there wasn't a message. At the foot of the young tree was a circle of freshly dug earth. What sort of tree was it? Sophia walked round it a few times, grudgingly, feeling hostile. She was inclined to think it was a beech. She was also inclined to uproot it now, to tear it out, but being slightly superstitious, she dared not attack a living thing, even a plant. The truth is that few people would tear up a tree that had done them no harm.

It took a long time to find a book that would help. Apart from opera, the life of the donkey and Greek myths, Sophia had not had time to become expert on anything. A beech tree, perhaps? Hard to say without seeing its leaves. She went through the index of the book, to see if there were any trees called *sophia*-something in Latin. It could be some sort of disguised homage, the kind of convoluted thing a mouse-type fan might think up. That would be quite reassuring. But no, no *sophias*. Well, perhaps a species by the name of *stelios* something. That would not be nice at all. Stelios was nothing like a mouse, or a rhino. And he did worship trees. After the cascade of declarations by Pierre on the terraces in Orange, Sophia had wondered how she was going to leave Stelios, and had sung less well than usual. And the immediate reaction of her mad Greek had been to try and drown himself. They had fished him out of the Mediterranean, gasping for breath and floating like an idiot. When they were teenagers, Sophia and Stelios used to love to go out of Delphi along mountain paths with donkeys and goats, playing at being 'Ancient Greeks', as they called it. And then the imbecile had tried to drown himself. Luckily there was the cascade of declarations by Pierre. Nowadays, Sophia was still trying to locate a few trickles of it. Stelios? Was he a threat? Would he do something like this? Yes, he might. When he had been pulled out of the Mediterranean, he had been suddenly galvanised, and started screaming like a madman. Her heart beating too fast, Sophia made an effort to get to her feet, drink a glass of water and look out of the window.

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