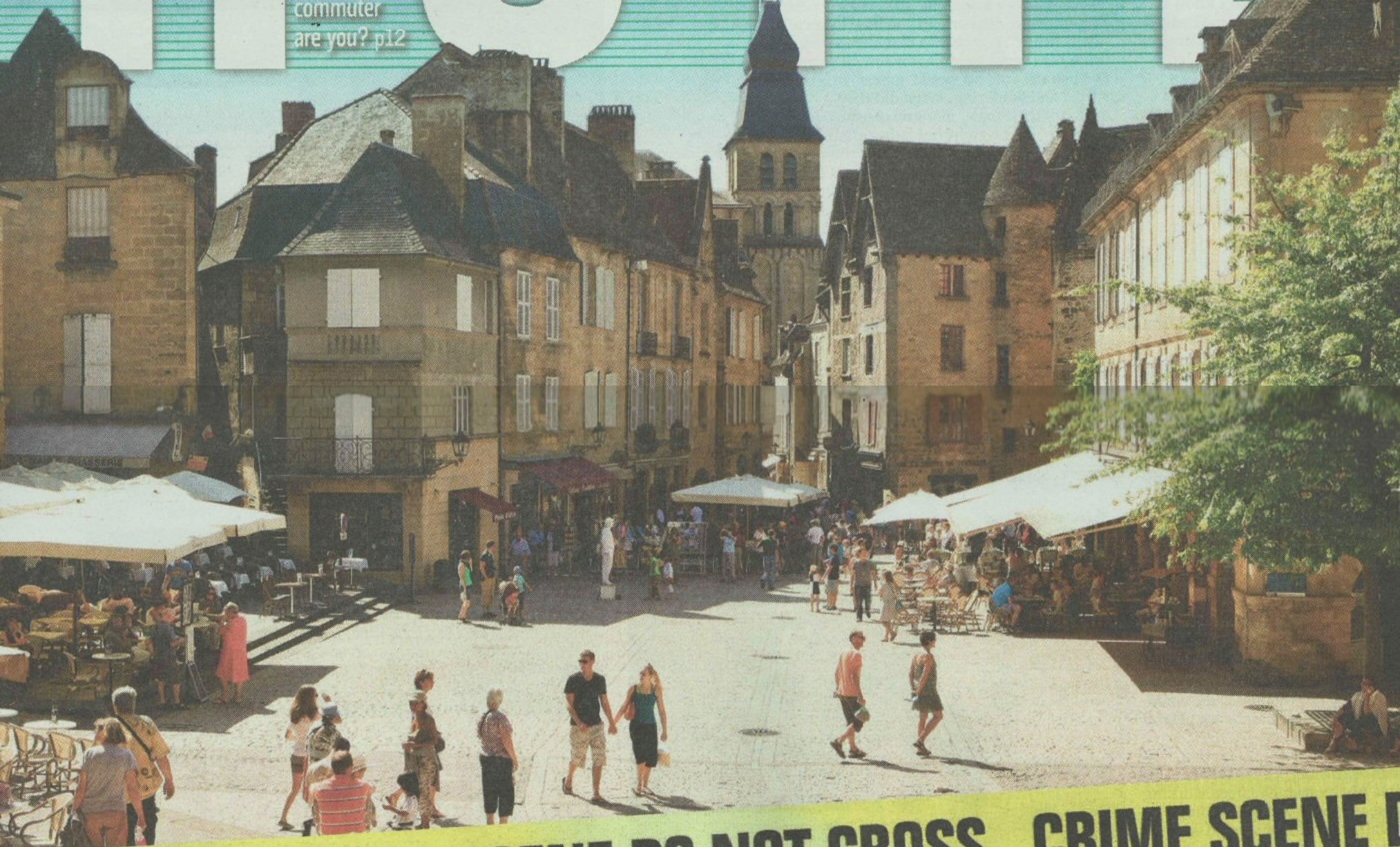


# HOME

## MIND THE GAP

Will trains help to solve London's housing crisis – and what sort of commuter are you? p12

CABINET RESHUFFLE  
THE WELSH DRESSER GETS A MAKEOVER



DO NOT CROSS CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

## MURDER THEY WROTE

Why top British crime writers are piling up in the Dordogne p34



# Dead calm

There's a mystery brewing in the Dordogne: why are so many British crime writers drawn to this sleepy corner of southwest France? **Karen Robinson** investigates

**W**raiths of morning mist cling to the valleys until the sun chases them away, revealing orchards, vineyards and walnut groves, all dark, spiky and lifeless in their winter guise. The summer tourists and Parisians have departed, and the Dordogne is restored to itself, the golden-stone hilltop villages turning their backs to the world and the farms hunkering down into the cold, quiet months. An ideal spot, perhaps, for anyone whose thoughts are turning to dark deeds, even murder most foul.

Among the many Britons who have made their home in this corner of France is a clutch of bestselling crime writers. It's coincidence, rather than conspiracy, that has caused them to settle in this picturesque, largely unspoilt slice of rural France – they don't even know each other. So what makes it such a great place for wickedly inventive endeavour?

Peter May is the author of the bestselling Lewis trilogy of novels, set in the Outer Hebrides – which might have acquired some of their brooding atmosphere of mystery and menace from the “highly eccentric” home in a hilltop hamlet in the heart of walnut country that he shares with his wife,

Janice Hally. In 1996, after successful careers in Scottish television – for several years, she was a writer on the popular soap *Take the High Road*, and he was script editor – they quit TV “so I could focus on trying to make a living from books”, May says. “We bought this house in 1997 for £60,000. That seems crazy now.”

The old farmhouse in 1,800 sq metres of garden and woodland had been restored by the previous owner, who had installed a magnificent François I tiled chimney breast (salvaged from a chateau somewhere) in the downstairs sitting room, formerly the animal byre. She had also





Crime scene Château de Castelnaud towers above the River Dordogne

**In winter, it seems ideal for anyone whose thoughts are turning to dark deeds**

added a tower to enhance the grandeur. "She was in her nineties when she died in what is now my study – she keeps me company when I'm writing," May says. His latest book, *Coffin Road* (Quercus), another dark and intriguing Hebridean mystery, has gone straight into the Sunday Times bestseller list at No 6.

When the couple bought the property, near Souillac, it was a "bit of a shambles". Since moving in, they have tackled what they could. "I'm terrible at DIY, but I got forced into doing stuff," May says. The Lewis trilogy has sold more than 2m copies in the UK, but it took a while for the money to start rolling in – he and Hally once taught a creative writing course in a nearby town to make ends meet.

The stone farmhouse with red shutters is now a comfortable, book-filled home with a well-equipped kitchen, to make the most of May's love of cooking *confit de canard* and other local produce. The pair have a study each, and a media room, but though "people always want to come and stay, we discourage that as much as possible – we only have one guest bedroom".

Social life in the hamlet is surprisingly lively. Their neighbours are "two farmers, a musician, an artist, a psychotherapist and an osteopath. We all restored the communal bread oven, and every year we have a *fête du pain* and get together to make bread." Not unlike *Midsomer Murders*, but in France, and without the high body count.

After a terrifying-sounding test on French language, history and culture, May is now a naturalised French citizen, and Hally awaits her papers. They pay all their taxes in France, the author says, and feel more at home here than in Glasgow.

With fewer years in *la France profonde* under her belt, Fiona Barton has also settled in happily. Barton, 58, swapped life at the sharp end of journalism – running news and features desks at *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* – for *Les Deux Lacs*, a Périgordian stone house set in 2½ hectares of meadow and woodland, with two lakes. It's in a hamlet near Nontron, 45 minutes from Limoges airport.

And then there were three From top left, the novelists Peter May, Martin Walker and Fiona Barton, with her husband, Garry

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She had not even imagined her new career as a crime writer in 2011, when she and her husband, Garry, 62, a builder, paid €385,000 (then about £340,000) for the property, having spent six months renting in the area and being shown "a lot of dross".

Although picturesque and traditional, the house is only

30 years old, and was in good nick when they got it. The plan all along had been to open a B&B. "We knew we wouldn't make a huge income, and we didn't," Barton says. They charged €55-€65 a night for one of the two ensuite rooms on the ground floor, but after the expenses of laundry and a cleaner, there wasn't a lot left.

Which doesn't really matter now, because Barton's debut novel, a twisty psychological thriller called *The Widow* (Transworld), has just entered the Sunday Times bestseller list even higher than May's *Coffin Road*, at No 3.

TV rights have already been snapped up and the book is set to be published in, at the →



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Sariat-la-Caneda is one of the region's most famous towns

→ last count, 28 countries. She says it was inspired by some of the cases she covered as a journalist, which included Harold Shipman and the Shannon Matthews kidnap.

On a budget of just €20,000 (impressive until you realise that this doesn't factor in Garry's time and skills), they renovated the house and ensured there was enough space and privacy to take in paying guests, putting in new wooden floors, two woodburners, an Ikea kitchen and upgraded bathrooms. Garry built walls in the upper attic, creating two bedrooms under the high beams and trusses. He also constructed a deck with a small pool perched over one of the lakes.

The Bartons are an adventurous pair: they did VSO in Sri Lanka for two years before moving to France, and Barton now leaves the restful Dordogne countryside for stints teaching journalism in "emerging areas", including Burma. Garry has become good friends with all the local builders' merchants, despite — or possibly because of — his cheerfully enthusiastic efforts to master the language.

Les Deux Lacs is their home — they sold a house in Blackheath, southeast London, to buy it — and Barton says: "Living in France has given me the space and peace to get on with writing. I can write anywhere, but if I had to choose, it would be here." Though she hasn't, as yet, incorporated the Dordogne or any of her neighbours into her work as heroes, villains or victims.

Unlike Martin Walker. Once a globetrotting journalist — he reported for The Guardian from Moscow and Washington — these days he relishes life

#### VEYRINES-DE-DOMME

In a rural hamlet, this pretty four-bedroom home has been built in glowing golden stone. At one end, a pointed roof adds a fairy-tale touch, while inside there's an original bread oven, a pantry and a studio. The surrounding landscape is lush and rugged, but the property has its own patch of woodland, as well as a formal garden with a pool and a separate one-bedroom cottage. Bergerac is just over an hour's drive away.

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