



The Children Return: A Bruno, Chief of Police novel (Bruno, Chief of Police Series)

By Martin Walker

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The Dordogne's favorite chief of police is back in a case full of twists and turns that finds his small town shockingly targeted by a terrorist network.

When an undercover agent tracking domestic jihadists is found murdered, it's troubling enough for Bruno's beloved village. But when this is followed by the return of Sami, a local autistic youth thought lost to Islamic extremism, provincial St. Denis suddenly becomes a front line in the global war on terror. Abducted and exploited for his technological genius in Afghanistan, Sami has used his talents to gather invaluable stores of al-Qaeda intel—but as an international tribunal descends to begin an exhaustive debrief, it becomes clear Sami's former handlers are far from ready to relinquish him. Now the same jihadists who killed the agent aim to silence Sami, and as the eyes of the intelligence world turn toward his case, Bruno must scramble to track down the terrorists before they exact their own justice.

As if things aren't complicated enough, Bruno finds himself contending with the mixed, alluring signals of one of the high-ranking U.S. intelligence officers on Sami's case, even while juggling the affections of his neighbor and sometime lover. Add to that a member of the tribunal with dangerous skeletons in his closet, the mysterious history of two Jewish siblings who claim to have been sheltered locally from the Nazis during World War II, and a high-profile philanthropist whose presence in St. Denis seems to be attracting attention from the jihadists, and it's all *almost* enough to absent Bruno from the village's wine festival.

With international intrigue and action aplenty, *The Children Return* is a journey to St. Denis that readers won't soon forget.

Published in Great Britain under the title *Children of War*.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Thoughtful...but Bruno still has time to savor food, wine, and his attraction to an FBI liaison.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[A] heady mix....As prescient as it is terrifying.”

—*Kirkus*

“A solid mystery, with the ever-fascinating character of Bruno at the helm.”

—*Booklist*

"At the drop of a beret, Saint-Denis takes reluctant center stage in the war on terrorism. Nicely crafted with sensitivity and humo(u)r, *The Children Return* is tailor-made for fans of Peter Mayle, Colin Cotterill and Alexander McCall Smith."

—*Bookpage*

About the Author

MARTIN WALKER is a senior fellow of the Global Business Policy Council, a private think tank for CEOs of major corporations, based in Washington, D.C. He is also editor in chief emeritus and international affairs columnist at United Press International. His six previous novels in the Bruno series are *Black Diamond*; *Bruno, Chief of Police*; *The Crowded Grave*; *The Dark Vineyard*; *The Devil's Cave*; and *The Resistance Man*, all international best sellers. He lives in Washington, D.C., and the Dordogne.

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Benoît Courrèges, chief of police of the small French town of St. Denis and known to everyone as Bruno, had witnessed too much violent death. After twelve years in the French army and eleven as a policeman, he had seen the gruesome effects of artillery shells and machine guns and then of the metal and glass of automobile crashes on the human body. And while he often hoped to forget the impact of a bullet on his own flesh, the sullen ache in his hip with the coming of each winter's damp would remind him of the shot that had sent him tumbling into the snow in the hills above Sarajevo. He'd never forget the brightness of the French tricolore on the sleeve of the medic who worked on him until the helicopter came. Any sight of his country's flag now always brought back to Bruno the red of his blood against the white of the snow and the blue helmet he'd been wearing as a United Nations peacekeeper.

But Bruno had never seen anything quite as grim as the sight of the dead man now lying trussed and half-naked before him. Rain trickled down the corpse's chest and stomach, gleaming on the fresh burn marks where the stubs of his nipples had been. The body was lit by the headlights of Bruno's own van and the large fire engine of St. Denis. Flickering flames on the tires of the car defied the steady rain and the white foam the firemen had used to douse the fire. Breathing through his mouth to avoid the stench of both charred flesh and

burning rubber, Bruno checked his watch. Dawn was still an hour away.

It was not only the smell that turned his stomach. He felt sickened by a personal sense of outrage. Even though the dead man was a stranger, Bruno felt the manner of this man's death had been a kind of pollution of these woods that he loved and knew so well. He'd never be able to bring his horse or his dog this way without thinking of it. And this atrocity had been carried out by people skilled in the blackest arts of death, professionals who were notoriously hard to bring to justice. But he'd find them.

"He's certainly dead and it's obviously murder. Did you see the wound under the chin?" asked Fabiola, whose presence as a doctor was legally required to certify death. Bruno nodded. A stiletto up through the soft skin of the mouth and straight into the brain killed quickly and with very little blood. It was one of the assassin's tricks taught to troops in special forces.

"I can't even give you an approximate time of death," she went on. Bruno's good friend Fabiola wore no hat, and rain had plastered streaks of her dark hair across her face, covering the scar on her left cheek. Without makeup her face was pale in the headlights and her eyes enormous. Bruno was suddenly struck by how beautiful Fabiola could be.

"Normally I'd use an anal thermometer for body temperature, but he's been badly sodomized and then the fire .??.?"

"The ground is dry beneath his hips," said Bruno. "The storm broke just after two this morning, so presumably the killers chained him to the tree before then."

"You were awake for the storm?" she asked. He nodded. The lightning had not disturbed him but the quick scuttle of Balzac, his basset hound, into his bed had jolted him awake just as the thunder came. Usually barred from his master's bed, the dog was still young enough to be granted a dispensation during the tempests that occasionally gave this valley of the River Vézère a brief taste of an Indian monsoon. Bruno had risen, gone to the window and looked out to see if the rain was hard enough to damage the vineyards now that the harvest was due.

After a lapse into a steady drizzle, the rain was coming harder again, the tail end of a storm front that had swept in from the Atlantic. Once Fabiola had finished her examination, Bruno tried to cover the body with a plastic sheet. It protected the charred bones of the feet and lower legs but didn't stretch as far as the man's wrists, still handcuffed around the trunk of a young chestnut tree. The poor devil would have to stay that way, arms stretched out behind his head, his legs staked apart and his back arched like some medieval torture victim, until the forensics team arrived from Périgueux with its cameras and checklists.

"Do you think he was killed before the fire burned his feet away?" Fabiola's voice sounded forced as she tried to control it.

Bruno shrugged, a gesture that turned into a shudder as he thought about it. "That's more your expertise than mine. I don't know how you'd tell."

"The autopsy will confirm it. After death the heart stops pumping blood."

Bruno suspected the feet had been burned deliberately before the car was set on fire. The blaze might have scorched the legs but it could hardly have devoured them. He guessed the killers had poured gasoline onto his feet.

The only time Bruno had heard of that being done was in the Algerian War. It was a cruel joke of the rebels, who called the white colonists on their land the *pieds-noirs*, the “black feet,” after the black boots the French troops had worn when they first conquered the country in 1830. “We’ll give you black feet,” they taunted the French prisoners as they poured the gasoline. He’d been told that by Hercule, an old friend, now dead, who had served in the vicious conflict France had fought in vain to keep Algeria and its oil.

“No identification?” Fabiola asked. “I’d say North African heritage with that hair and the olive skin.”

“He has nothing on him, and the registration plates were removed from the car.” Bruno had taken the vehicle identification number from the engine block, but he didn’t expect any feedback until much later in the day. Fabiola was staring at him, expecting him to say more. “All we know is that Serge was getting up for the cows and saw the explosion in the woods. He called the *pompriers* just after four. You might as well go back to bed, since I’m stuck here until the forensics team arrives.”

Bruno yawned and stretched. It had been a broken night, his phone ringing with its special emergency tone waking him before midnight. Then he had dozed, expecting to be called again, until the storm had woken his dog. He’d dozed again, Balzac tucked in against his shoulder, until Albert had called him to report the fire in the woods. At least the storm had stopped it from spreading. Like most of the rest of southern France, the *département* had recently issued a forest fire alert after the dry summer.

“It’s too late to go back to bed, and I wouldn’t sleep, not thinking about this.” Fabiola gestured with her chin at the plastic-covered corpse. “I’ll go back and shower and put some coffee on. Feel free to come and have a cup once you can get away.”

“Thanks, but it won’t be for a while. I might have to leave the horses to you this morning.”

“Poor Bruno. Nobody should have to see scenes like this. If you need something to help you sleep .??.”

He smiled his thanks but shook his head. It was thoughts about women and his confused love life that kept him awake some nights, not memories of war and corpses. Fabiola quickly kissed his cheek and then briefly took shelter with the *pompriers* in the cab of the fire engine to sign the certificate of death before heading home.

The burned-out car was on a rough gravel path about a hundred meters from a minor road, just at the entrance to the commune’s old garbage dump. It had been closed since the building of the modern *déchetterie*, where all refuse had to be sorted into different containers. The dead man lay a few meters from his charred vehicle. The car had been stopped just beyond the entrance to the dump, beside a pile of logs. Bruno raised one end of the topmost log to assess its weight; it was at least fifty kilos. He could lift it, but he couldn’t carry it far.

Four charred logs lay on the gravel path behind and beneath the burned-out car. Bruno guessed the driver had been lured onto this side road and then found himself unable to reverse because somebody pretty strong had been waiting to toss thick logs behind his wheels. But why had the driver stopped? Bruno walked on up the slope and around a sharp bend, and his flashlight picked out some broken twigs and crushed grass. He saw tire tracks; a second car had been parked here, blocking the way. It could have been waiting, its driver then switching on the headlights to force the oncoming car to stop. Then an accomplice could have used the logs to immobilize it. He’d be looking for at least two men, and forensics might get something from the tracks.

The spread between those marks looked too wide for a car. He went back to his vehicle for a metallic tape

measure and recorded a width of one meter thirty in his notebook. He'd have to check this against the width of various types of truck when he got back to his office.

He loosened the hood of his anorak to make room by his ear for his phone and punched in the speed-dial number for the brigadier, an important official from the Ministry of the Interior who had given him the phone during a previous case. It was supposed to be secure from wiretaps and it rang with a special tone when someone else on the brigadier's private network was calling. That had been the tone that had woken him before midnight. The caller had identified himself only as Rafiq and said he was coming onto Bruno's territory and might need support. He'd said he would call again, but hadn't.

"Duty officer," came the voice in Bruno's ear. Bruno identified himself, described the call from Rafiq and reported the death and the evidence of ambush and torture. "It may be Rafiq," he said, stooping to protect his notebook from the rain and read out the vehicle identification number. "If that's Rafiq's car there's no sign of his phone. It could be compromised."

"We'll check and call you back."

Bruno began to give his location and was interrupted.

"We know where you are. With that phone your GPS coordinates come up on my screen. Have any other police officers been alerted?"

"Commissaire Jalipeau, chief detective for the département," Bruno said. He had pondered calling the gendarmes, but J-J's team had the expertise and the forensics lab. And the call from Rafiq on the special line had made him cautious. Bruno, employed by the town of St. Denis, got on well with the local gendarmes, but J-J, like many detectives of the Police Nationale, tended to see them mainly as traffic cops.

"Good, keep it that way." The duty officer ended the call.

Bruno trudged back through sodden leaves toward the fire engine. Fabiola's car was already gone, but the pompiers were happy to stay, warm and dry in their cab and drinking coffee from a thermos. Bruno was just finishing the cup they gave him when his phone rang again.

"It's me," came the voice of J-J. "We're just coming into St. Denis. Can you guide us to the place? I can't make this damn GPS work and I don't want to have to ask the gendarmes."

Bruno gave directions and told him to watch for the lights of the fire engine. He went to tell the pompiers they could go home soon, that the police were on their way. Would French policing be any more efficient if they were all one service, he wondered, or at least if they could overcome the traditional rivalries and learn to work together? His phone buzzed again with the special tone, and this time it was the brigadier.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mike Yerkes:

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