

AFTER THE CRASH by Michel Bussi
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When I read the blurb on the cover of this book, I was definitely intrigued as to what kind of story it would prove to be. Having read the novel, I realised that, although it was an effective and engrossing mystery thriller, it is also so much more.

THE PLOT

Originally written in French and later translated into English, the novel starts with a plane crash in December 1980, when the Airbus 5403, flying from Istanbul to Paris, crashes into a mountain. Everyone on board is killed, except for a baby girl who, after being unstrapped by her mother while trying to comfort her, is flung from the plane on impact. However, her identity remains a mystery. As there were two baby girls travelling on the plane that day, nobody can be sure whether the infant is Lyse-Rose de Carville or Emilie Vitral.

During the weeks and months that follow, an investigation is launched to identify the miracle child. Each family is convinced the baby belongs with them, and both sets of grandparents fight tooth and nail to obtain custody. The media frenzy surrounding the case only serves to heighten the tension between the two sides. After the press demonise Léonce de Carville as the villain of the piece, further fuel is added to the fire when his lawyers turn the tables on the Vitral. The case then becomes a national symbol, contrasting the opportunities of the wealthy and privileged with those of more modest means.

Finally, a young lawyer named Maître Leguerne, employed by the Vitral, professes to have found fresh evidence that will prove the child is definitely Emilie Vitral. Despite the dubious manner in which this evidence was obtained, the judge finally awards custody of the baby to the Vitral.

Unable to accept the verdict, Mathilde de Carville enlists the services of Crédule Grand-Duc – a private investigator – to prove the child is, without doubt, Lyse-Rose. She tells him he will receive 100,000 francs a year for 18 years to discover anything he can about the identity of the surviving baby, in order to prove the judge's ruling was incorrect. The money is to be paid irrespective of the nature of any findings. Crédule naturally accepts, and his 18-year investigation begins.

However, nothing is as it seems.

MY REVIEW

Set in Paris and Dieppe, *'After the Crash'* is a complicated and multi-layered mystery thriller that has so many twists and turns on the way, you almost feel the need to leave a bread trail to keep up. However, the quality of the writing and clever structure of the novel is such that the reader is skilfully guided towards the conclusion, when all the pieces finally fall into place.

Each chapter is dated as a diary entry and the story unfolds minute by minute, giving a real-time feel to the catalogue of events. This style of presentation lends an element

of excitement to the narrative, driving the reader towards the next anticipated revelation.

The backstory is gradually revealed by means of a notebook, in which Crédule Grand-Duc documents the details of his investigation over the years. This is an effective device for divulging all the relevant information needed to understand events leading to the current situation, while maintaining the pace of the action.

As the story progresses, several themes begin to emerge, most notably the difference between the social and personal standing of the two families. Whereas the de Carvilles are rich and powerful, the relationships within the family are strained and dysfunctional. However, although the Vitral's are an ordinary working family, they are loving and supportive towards each other, forming a close family bond. This is illustrated by their refusal to accept Léonce de Carville's bribe of 500,000 Francs to surrender their claim on the baby. As they insist Emily is not for sale, it reminds us that even money does not buy everything.

When the Vitral's young lawyer confronts Léonce de Carville with new evidence, it is obvious it has been acquired unlawfully... probably stolen by one of the de Carville servants and sold to the lawyer for profit. I was therefore surprised when the judge not only allowed it as permissible evidence in court, but ultimately based his judgement on it. I also found it strange that the de Carville's lawyer did not object on the same grounds, merely dismissing it as irrelevant. However, that may simply reflect my lack of knowledge of the French judicial system.

While legal and increasingly vicious personal battles between the two families continue to dominate events, another element to the story runs parallel to the rest... that of a love story. The mystery child – now 18 years old and proclaimed a Vitral – and her newfound brother, Marc Vitral, have fallen in love. Naturally, this introduces an emotional tension to the story, making the discovery of her true identity all the more important, especially when Marc discovers the secret she has been keeping from him.

Spread across a period of four days, the story is fast paced, introducing a rich tapestry of characters along the way. Even the minor roles contribute to the storyline, maintaining the intrigue and suspense.

All the main characters are well rounded and believable. They are not all likeable, but the reader is nevertheless drawn into their worlds, intrigued by their motivations and reactions. However, the more you learn, the more you realise you have only just scratched the surface.

Given the emotive beginning of the novel, the main thread of the story deals with the destructive nature of grief and loss on family life, as well as the individual ways in which people deal with it.

From start to finish, I was totally absorbed by this book, causing me to stay up late into the night. With all its red herrings and false trails, it keeps you guessing right until the end and I am sure you will not be disappointed by the drama of the final resolution. I can thoroughly recommend it.

THE AUTHOR

Michel Bussi is a French writer of detective novels, a political analyst and Professor of Geography at the University of Rouen, where he leads a Public Scientific and Technical Research Establishment in the French National Centre for Scientific Research as a specialist in electoral geography.

According to the Le Figaro/GfK list of bestsellers, he was one of ten bestselling French writers of 2013, selling around 480,000 books. He has won 15 literary awards, making him one of France's most prestigious crime authors.

After the Crash has been translated into 26 languages around the world and is his first book to be published in the UK.

'After the Crash' is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (an imprint of Orion Publishing Group) and is available in eBook and paperback format. It can be purchased from Amazon and Waterstones.