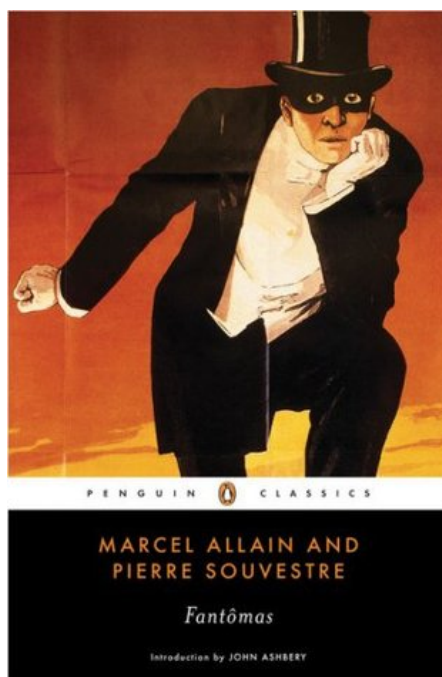




Fantômas

Marcel Allain , Pierre Souvestre , John Ashbery (Introduction)

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"One episode simply melts away as the next takes over" (*The New York Times*) in this deliciously sinister turn-of-the-century tale of a French evil genius run rampant. Three appalling crimes leave all of Paris aghast: the Marquise de Langruen is hacked to death, the Princess Sonia is robbed, and Lord Beltham is found dead, stuffed into a trunk. Inspector Juve knows that all the clues point to one suspect: the master of disguise, Fantômas. Juve cleverly pursues him in speeding trains, down dark alleys, through glittering Parisian salons, obsessed with bringing the demon mastermind to justice. As thrilling to read now as it was when first published in 1915, *Fantômas* is not a puzzle but an intoxicant" (*The Village Voice*).

Fantômas Details

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ISBN : 9780143104841

Author : Marcel Allain , Pierre Souvestre , John Ashbery (Introduction)

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From Reader Review Fantômas for online ebook

Scott says

Fantômas (Fr. original 1911; Eng. trans. 1915) – a comic strip without the pictures – is fiction so pulpy that not only can you see the chunks of wood, you can count the rings, and when you turn the page you have to be careful not to get a sliver in your finger. And just who is *Fantômas*? "Fantômas is a being against whom it is idle to use ordinary weapons; because he has been able to conceal his identity and elude all pursuit for years; because his daring is boundless and his power immeasurable; because he is everywhere and nowhere at once and, if he has had a hand in the affair, I am not even sure that he is not listening to me now!"

Fantômas holds all of Paris, even all France, in the grip of his terror, his name alone causing otherwise stout men to turn pale. He is a master of disguise and impersonation, sadistic, and loyal to none but himself. A creature so perfectly dastardly hardly creates suspense or sympathy, but his outrageous crimes surprise us and, to a degree, entertain us with their originality, brutality, and complete lack of humanity.

The slapdash narrative of the criminal's gory exploits shows negligible literary skill; but I found it hard *not* to be caught up in the serpentine plot and large cast of curious, albeit stock, characters. Though the book's flaws are many and obvious, it's simple episodic pattern of suspense/resolution followed by a new complication turns out, surprisingly, to be real page-turning entertainment. This, the first of 42 volumes documenting Fantômas's diabolical treachery, resolves very little ... Souvestre and Allain leave the door wide open for dozens more savage murders, blood-stained carpets, impossible disguises, resurrections from the dead, and, of course, seductions of wealthy heiresses.

If you like *Fantômas*, you may also enjoy E. W. Hornung's master criminal, A. J. Raffles, whose conscience-shorn felonies – never as bloody as Fantômas's ghastly murders – are related with considerably more taste and skill.

David Stephens says

"Fant?mas."

"What did you say?"

"I said: Fant?mas."

"And what does that mean?"

"Nothing. . . . Everything!"

"But what is it?"

"Nobody. . . . And yet, yes, it is somebody!"

"And what does the somebody do?"

"Spreads terror!"

And, thus, the story of Fant?mas begins, expressing quite well the cheesy and over the top tone of the entire novel. First released in 1911 and popular enough to merit thirty-one sequels, Fant?mas follows the vicious murders and cunning robberies of the eponymous arch villain. What enjoyment can be gotten out of the book largely comes from the unexpected twists and turns, so the less said about the plot, the better.

Fant?mas himself is able to change his persona to fit any situation he might be in. He could be a debonair

lover one minute and a ruthless killer the next. In many ways, he is reminiscent of Jigsaw in the Saw movies. He carefully plans everything out and always manages to stay several steps ahead of everyone else. But, like Jigsaw he stretches the bounds of believability about as far as they can go and even his most intricate plans never go even slightly awry.

His nemesis, Inspector Juve, is the only character capable of piecing together these plans. Actually, he's one of the few characters that even believes Fantômas exists and is not just a mythical creation. Of course, this could be, in part, because Juve is terrible at explaining his theories and backing them up with evidence. Toward the end of the novel when he is questioned about Fantômas, he repeatedly gives the answer, "anything is possible to Fantômas." Perhaps the authors just felt the need to keep things vague enough to provide material for the numerous sequels, though. (Perhaps in those sequels the authors will close up the many unresolved side stories as well.)

Speaking of vagueness, many of the characters are described in such bland, nondescript terms that it seems there are few differences between any of them. This does, however, make it easy for the authors to periodically reveal that one character has been impersonating another to add a shocking twist. Of course, it doesn't take long for one to realize these impersonations are terribly unrealistic. In one instance, a male character dresses as a female for several months, fooling everyone except Juve. I know Shakespeare did these things, too, but at least he had other things going for him.

There is certainly fun to be had reading Fantômas, especially the cliffhanger of an ending, but often it gets bogged down in unbelievable situations, flimsy settings, and argumentative dialogue that thinks it's much more sophisticated than it actually is.

Jim says

The famous illustration on the cover of this Penguin edition has been altered. What the arch-criminal Fantômas is grasping in his right hand is a bloody dagger which he is holding by the hilt, for which see the original.

The eponymous character of Fantomas by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre is perhaps the greatest of the arch-villains in literature. His ruthlessness is greater than Professor Moriarty's, and his slipperiness ever so much more pronounced. Fantômas does not at any point come out and say that he is Fantômas. Instead, he moves about disguised with diabolical cleverness -- as do the detective, Juve, who pursues him, and at least one other character who disguises himself as a female and holds down the job of a cashier at a luxury hotel.

In this arch-villain, there is not a trace of Robin Hood. He robs from everyone, and gives to himself. Why? The reason is never explained. Always, he attacks with savagery and strength and leaves a trail of bodies in his wake. It is as if his criminality were a principle of evil in his own person. I am reminded of an old Star Trek episode directed by Joseph Pevney and written by Robert Bloch entitled "Wolf in the Fold," in which Redjac and Jack the Ripper are the same character traveling through time and space.

At the same time, there is something Gallic about Juve and his nemesis Fantômas. Both are talented and relentless, and one feels that, somehow, beyond the boundaries of this book, there will ultimately be some resolution. For me to discover that, however, I would have to read some 42 other novels, most of which are not available in English. A pity!

Stacia says

Fantômas was enjoyable enough, though a little too gruesome for me in a few parts. Since this is one of those books written in the early 1900s, it is easy to think it will be milder/nicer than current novels when, in fact, that is not necessarily the case. (I always think stuff like that until I remember humans have been bloodthirsty throughout history, such as past times when people would attend public executions as a fun family outing.) This was the first of what was apparently a wildly popular 'pulp fiction' series in France (which also spun-off into multiple silent films), starring a not-quite-Sherlock-Holmes-like police inspector called Juve. Being popular pulp fiction, the story is a little wild, the solving (by the mastermind detective) a little too convenient, & the escaping of the dastardly villain a little too easily gained multiple times (but I guess that's how Fantômas manages to keep Juve on the run for the many sequels in this series). Overall, Fantômas is fiendish, fast-paced, & slightly severe in parts. I probably won't be running out to read the sequels, but I'm glad I delved into this popular piece of French cultural history from the early 1900s.

Algernon says

There are no ghosts here, despite the title. 'Just' a criminal mastermind terrorizing the faubourgs of Paris and the countryside chateaux, cca. 1910.

"Fantomas."

"What did you say?"

"I said: Fantomas."

"And what does that mean?"

"Nothing ... Everything!"

"But what is it?"

"Nobody ... And yet, yes, it is somebody!"

"And what does the somebody do?"

"Spread terror!"

The audience loves to be scared and often enough cheers for the smooth criminal who lives by his wits and challenges the rules of society, even if he is an unrepentant thief and a murderer. The French public bought the story penned by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain in huge numbers, spawning about forty sequels in novel form, more than ten movie adaptations, a television series, comics, fanfiction, plays and art exhibitions. A valid argument can be made that "The Pink Panther" is a comic rewriting of the original Alain & Souvestre hero. How did Fantomas become such a cultural phenomenon? What sets him apart from the other pulp heroes at the turn of the twentieth century?

I believe two aspects of his personality make Fantomas stand out from the pack : his audacity and his ruthlessness. Without going into plot spoilers (a synopsis would totally ruin the numerous surprises awaiting the reader), the defining characteristic of the criminal cases investigated by the Fantomas counterpart in the French Police Force, Inspector Juve, is the high risk of exposure, the very narrow margin for error and the talent for improvisation that gives Fantomas an edge in the game of cat and mouse with the police. An even greater advantage for Fantomas is his complete disregard for rules of civility and a total absence of scruples. He is a serial killer, no halfways or doubts about it

I know I said earlier there are two main ingredients in the recipe for success of this feuilleton, but I had forgotten the third and probably the most important one : the mystery surrounding his identity! In the beginning, even the existence of Fantomas is in doubt. He may be only a figment of the imagination from too excitable reporters, or a way for incompetent policemen to blame their failures on some very clever opponent. Even later, when we learn more about the crimes and about the chase, Fantomas' identity remains obscure. He is a chameleon, changing not only his clothes and his assumed identity, but also his apparent age, his skin tone, hair colour, speech patterns, and so on. Credibility is sometimes sacrificed in favour of thrilling developments and cliffhanger section endings. Same goes for character development, which comes secondary to fast action and plot twists, as many as possible in the given format.

Sidenote : an interesting trick in the writer's arsenal that is used repeatedly here is to give the reader enough clues to spot the criminal and to 'solve' the murder before Inspector Juve, who doesn't have access to all the information that is passed on to the reader. In this way, the novel is not a type of 'whodunit' but more an early example of police procedural.

Stylistically and plotwise, Fantomas is a bridge between the previous century's serialized melodramas of Eugene Sue or Charles Dickens and modern crime novels, both police procedurals and pulps focused on the criminal element in society. Inspector Juve is modelled on the likes of Sherlock Holmes and Vidocq, has extraordinary deductive powers and uses the best in terms of modern devices available to the investigator. Fantomas is emphatically not a gentleman robber, although he occasionally likes to play that role. The locations are still preponderantly upper class : a castle, a luxury hotel, the mansion of a British peer, etc. The visits to the more impoverished segments of society are, for now, treated more as comic relief than social commentary.

The prose feels often dated and melodramatic to the modern reader, but I believe it is in line with the taste in popular entertainment of the public before the first world war. Context is as usual a great help to appreciate the novel for its important role in the development of the modern pulps and not to judge it based on current sensibilities.

Bonus points : the first book is available in English translation at Project Gutenberg.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

This is a work of French crime fiction from a century ago. Barely into it, I realized that Fantômas is the name the newspapers and detectives have given to the perpetrator of a number of gruesome crimes.

I am frightened, because Fantômas is a being against whom it is idle to use ordinary weapons; because he has been able to hide his identity and elude all pursuit for years; because his daring is boundless and his power unmeasurable; because he is everywhere and nowhere at once and, if he has had a hand in this affair, I am not even sure that he is not listening to me now! And finally, M. de Presles, because every one whom I have known to attack Fantômas, my friends, my colleagues, my superior officers, have one and all, one and all, sir, been beaten in the fight! Fantômas does exist, I know, but who is he?

There is a detective, Juve. It is just possible he was the inspiration for Hercule Poirot, although there are many dissimilarities. But Juve is the brightest of them, and solves many cases. The question is, of course, will he solve this one? And, if he does, will he be right? And then, even, will he have the man in jail and convicted?

Deceit, disguise, duplicity - you'll find them all in this. It was more fun than I anticipated. I thought I might leave my pursuit of Fantômas with this one novel, but now I am enticed to read more. I don't know how many of the series has been translated, but be assured I will be investigating.

Alex says

Here's the problem with this book: I never really got any idea why Fantomas was doing all this shit. I mean, he gets up into these elaborate disguises so he can kill one person or another, but why does he want that person dead? Not really explained. And he also makes some pretty stupid mistakes for being such a genius mastermind. Shit Moriarty would never have put up with.

I'm just saying, if you're writing a book about a criminal genius, the criminal should do genius things. Not just really convoluted things.

And there's quite a deus ex machina there at the end, too. Trail of the Serpent did it better, yo.

Entertaining enough, sure. Just not really a must-read.

Gary Inbinder says

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
Shakespeare, Hamlet

Substitute Inspector Juve for Horatio in the famous quote from Hamlet and you might catch the gist of Allain's classic Mystery/Thriller. Juve's "philosophy" of detection is evidence-based, depending on keen observation, surveillance, disguises, facts, forensics, deductive reasoning and skeptical analysis that challenges and scrutinizes each theory of a crime. In all these respects, he's much like Sherlock Holmes with a French accent. His archenemy, Fantômas, might likewise be compared to Moriarty. On the other hand, Fantômas might be the Devil himself: that is the underlying mystery—the source of human evil that defies modern scientific explanation.

A century before Conan Doyle and Allain, Ann Radcliffe wrote novels filled with events and horrors that were seemingly supernatural but were ultimately traced to natural causes. In that regard, her early Gothic thrillers could be compared to Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles." Fantômas is something else entirely; it inhabits a grey area where human evil, its motives and actions, is something deeper, more baffling and inexplicable. In that regard Fantômas is more like a comic book villain with superhuman powers or those criminals in contemporary thrillers that incorporate elements of the supernatural.

In addition to its appeal to period mystery fans, Fantômas also has considerable appeal for those interested in the Belle Époque, the Grand Guignol, macabre silent films like "The Phantom of the Opera," and the Parisian underworld.

Nancy Oakes says

What a fun book! Fantomas is one seriously evil genius, and his nemesis, Inspector Juve, is one determined

policeman. Not only is this book fun, but it ends in a complete cliffhanger so I had to buy book two, The Exploits of Juve (Juve contre Fantômas), just to see what happens. I have this feeling that I'll end up with the entire set of Fantômas novels if the ending of book one is any indicator.

A series of heinous crimes leads Inspector Juve of France's Criminal Investigation Division to believe that they are all the work of a single mysterious evildoer: Fantômas. Trying to catch him, though, is going to be tough. There are some people who even doubt as to whether or not there actually is a Fantômas; one magistrate tells Juve that

"Fantômas is the too obvious subterfuge, the cheapest device for investing a case with mock honours. Between you and me, you know perfectly well that Fantômas is merely a legal fiction -- a lawyers' joke. Fantômas has no existence in fact!"

But Juve thinks he knows better -- he is obsessed with finding this elusive figure and has been after him for years. Events just may prove him right, as they put him on the trail of this mysterious and sinister crime genius, but in this book, nothing is ever as it seems.

for more of a look at this novel, you can [click here](#) to get to my reading journal's crime page; otherwise, I'll just say that I'll most definitely recommend the book to people who are into old classics or into fun sort of pulpy mysteries or to those who want something very much off the beaten path. This book (if you'll forgive the trite phrase) held me spellbound the entire time I was reading it -- and I can't think of a better recommendation for a couple of days' worth of sheer reading enjoyment.

Douglas Penick says

Fantomas is a very weird book. It's one of the Prof. Moriarity, Dr. Mabuse, etc. fantasies of a single master criminal at the heart of pre-WWI darkness. The master criminal, in this case, is brilliantly clever in the execution of his crimes but singularly devoid of motive. His pursuer, Detective Inspector Juve, is brilliantly deductive but amazingly indifferent to real facts. These two adopt many disguises enabling them to pass through all levels of society. Other characters also exist in persistent levels of imposture- the virtuous are actually evil, the dubious are true-blue, men pass as women for long periods of time; the entire atmosphere is unstable and hallucinatory.

The true interest in this book then is not so much the 'mystery' or the solution of the various crimes. For Detective Juve there is, after all, only one acceptable solution. The atmosphere of detailed social phantasmagoria is utterly compelling.

Noran Miss Pumkin says

I am torn about my rating of the book. Time does not pass evenly, and not still clear about the motives for the murders. Some just robbed, others killed. The trial came and went, without the wife being called. It is a different crime novel for sure. The criminal is quite brilliant, which earns the fourth star. Him vs Sherlock would a fascinating read!

the gift says

this is why i find what books to read from various sources: no one would call this great literature, i know of it only vaguely because i remember hearing that the surrealists, dadaists, liked it, a friend gave me some dvds of the silents serials from 1915 and i decided to read this first, i decided as with any historical documents to read it first without the prep of introduction... i am so happily amazed that this pulp, these fantastic characters, this melodrama, is so engaging over a hundred years later. no it is not great literature, yes it was great reading in one sitting, think i will watch a few serials- maybe even read another fantomas...

Nate D says

Turn-of-the-century french pulp stories about a mysterious killer praying upon the aristocracy, loved by the surrealists? I ought to be wild about this. And after a rather slow first half, I'm warming to it. The characters are still rather flat, and the prose perfunctory (perhaps inevitably for a series that produced some 20 volumes in three years -- seriously), but really you read this sort of thing for the plot and the plot is actually a lot of fun. What at first seemed a bunch of jumbled, irrelevant episodes scattered across France have begun to converge in delightfully implausible ways, like a more shamelessly lurid version of those scenes in *Les Misérables* where all the huge casts of characters who had been developing on their own for hundreds of pages all suddenly wind up in the same boarding house or whatever. I'm still not entirely sure why this series in particular became such an enormous touchstone of French culture, both in the mass, popular sense and as an inspiration and building block for the avant-garde, but then, even John Ashbery, who wrote the introduction, seems a little perplexed. Fun, anyway. Now that the core cast has mostly coalesced (the criminal, his lover, the determined detective, the star reporter) I'd probably read more of these just to see what other sorts of ridiculous plotting they may be dragged through.

(note: had to scan my own ex-library cover for this, as I'm convinced it's actually the best version of the image.)

Kim says

I have in my hands, or I did until I set it down to type this, a copy of a book called "*Fantômas*", I was given it one year as a Christmas present - I think - and have just now gotten around to reading it, why the gift giver chose this book to give me I no longer remember. On the front of my copy are three words: "*Fantômas*" "*Marcel Allain*". That's it, on the back of my copy it says nothing at all. I opened the book and found the contents page on the very first page, and on the second page the first chapter began, this copy wastes no time, no paper and no words, it just jumps right into the story. The reason I am telling you this is because when I finished the book and finally looked it up on the internet I was amazed to find out that the book wasn't written by one person but by two. According to Wikipedia:

Fantômas is a fictional character created by French writers Marcel Allain (1885–1969) and Pierre Souvestre (1874–1914).

One of the most popular characters in the history of French crime fiction, Fantômas was created in 1911 and appeared in a total of 32 volumes written by the two collaborators, then a subsequent 11 volumes written by Allain alone after Souvestre's death."

I wonder why my copy of the book didn't give any credit to Pierre Souvestre? It doesn't seem very fair, especially if he was around to help write 32 novels with the character in them. I guess Allain got the credit because Souvestre died first but it still doesn't seem fair. I had no idea that "*Fantômas*" goes on to be in that many more novels, or one more for that matter, but I'm guessing he isn't going to be shot or hung or locked

up for all his many crimes any time soon. Oh, he's the bad guy in case you hadn't figured that out, at least he is in the first book, I have no clue what he is by book 40 or so. I needed to know more about the two authors first though, especially the forgotten guy and this is what I've managed to learn.

Pierre Souvestre was a French lawyer, journalist, writer and organizer of motor races. Organized motor races? He died in 1914, did they even have motor racing then? It turns out that they did, I looked it up, organized motor racing began in France as "far back as 1894", and apparently Souvestre loved it. He isn't remembered for motor racing however, he is mostly remembered today for his co-creation with Marcel Allain of the fictional arch-villain and master criminal *Fantômas*. Come to think of it he doesn't seem to be remembered for that either, not in my copy anyway. In 1909, he was already a well-known figure in literary circles (I'll take their word for that), and Souvestre collaborated with his assistant Allain on their first novel, "Le Rour".

In February 1911, Allain and Souvestre began the *Fantômas* book series at the request of publisher Arthème Fayard, who wanted to create a new monthly pulp magazine. The success was immediate and lasting. Now I got wondering how long this "*Fantômas*" writing went on, after all, it seems reasonable to me to think that you would write one book a year - that seems logical - and since there were 32 volumes even before Souvestre's death this Fantomas character got to be quite an old man. Then I saw the year Souvestre died, he died in 1914, how did they write 32 volumes in three years? So I checked further and I still don't know how, but that's what they did, ten already in 1911.

Oh, Souvestre died of a congestion of the lungs, he was only 39 years old. After his death, Allain continued the "*Fantômas*" saga alone. As for Allain, he was the son of a Parisian bourgeois family, Allain studied law before becoming a journalist and later became Souvestre's assistant. Then came the co-writing of "*Fantômas*". After Souvestre's death Allain continued the "*Fantomas*" saga alone, and also launched several other series, one was "Tigris", another "Fatala", "Miss Teria" and "Ferocias" were two others, but none of those became as popular as "*Fantômas*", or popular at all for all I know. In total Allain wrote more than 400 novels. And now I'm back to this book, *Fantomas*, finally you're probably thinking by now.

The first words in the novel are:

"*Fantômas.*"

"What did you say?"

"I said: *Fantômas.*"

"And what does that mean?"

"Nothing.... Everything!"

"But what is it?"

"Nobody.... And yet, yes, it is somebody!"

"And what does the somebody do?"

"Spreads terror!"

These words are spoken at a dinner party given by the Marquise de Langrune, one of those parties where the guests are the wealthy of the area, one of the guest of the evening is President Bonnet and he is currently telling us about the criminal Fantômas. Fantômas is described this way:

"In these days we have been distressed by a steady access of criminality, and among the assets we shall henceforth have to count a mysterious and most dangerous creature, to whom the baffled authorities and public rumour generally have for some time now given the name of Fantômas. It is impossible to say exactly or to know precisely who Fantômas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some definite and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the forms of two human beings at one and the same time. Sometimes he works alone, sometimes with accomplices; sometimes he can be identified as such and such a person, but no one has ever yet arrived at knowing Fantômas himself. That he is a living person is certain and undeniable, yet he is impossible to catch or to identify. He is nowhere and everywhere at once, his shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries, and his traces are found near the most inexplicable crimes, and yet——"

I would love to meet a person who is two human beings at one time and is nowhere and everywhere at once, but unfortunately I know absolutely no one who has this talent. I not only find this a rather interesting talent to have, but no one has any idea of who Fantômas is, including me. And he is quite the criminal, he commits all kinds of crimes, robbery, murder, all kinds of bad things. Why he does some of these things I never found out, but he does them anyway. Perhaps knowing some of the other characters will help us find out who this man is.

First there is the Marquise de Langrune, Ten months of the year she spends at her château of Beaulieu, on the outskirts of Corrèze. It is her custom to entertain a few of her personal friends in the neighbourhood every Wednesday, having them for dinner and thereby obtaining a little relief from her loneliness and keeping up some contact with the outside world. Perhaps she is Fantômas, that would be surprising, especially considering where she is by the end of the book.

Then there is President Bonnet, a retired magistrate who had withdrawn to his small property after his retirement. He's the one telling them all about Fantômas, perhaps it is he who is Fantômas, that also would be surprising.

Charles Rambert, a charming lad of about eighteen is also a guest and possible master criminal. He has been staying with the Marquise and her granddaughter, Thérèse Auvernois, who has lived with the Marquise since the death of her parents, I almost forgot her. Charles is the son of M. Etienne Rambert, an old friend of the Marquise. He is sixty years old and owns several rubber plantations in Columbia, and spends a great deal of time going back and forth to America. I wonder what a rubber plantation is? Oh, there are three more suspects if we count them.

I don't want to miss mentioning detective Juve, the famous Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, who has brought many notorious criminals to justice. He tells us this about Fantômas:

"You are wrong to laugh, sir; very wrong. You are a magistrate and I am only a humble detective inspector, but you have three or four years' experience, perhaps less, while I have fifteen years' work behind me. I know that Fantômas does exist, and I do anything but laugh when I suspect his intervention in a case."

M. de Presles could hardly conceal his surprise, and Juve went on:

"No one has ever said of me, sir, that I was a coward. I have looked death in the eyes; I have often hunted and arrested criminals who would not have had the least hesitation in doing away with me. There are whole gangs of rascals who have vowed my death. All manner of horrible revenges threaten me to-day. For all that I have the most complete indifference! But when people talk to me of Fantômas, when I fancy that I can detect the intervention of that genius of crime in any case, then, M. de Presles, I am in a funk! I tell you frankly I am in a funk. I am frightened, because Fantômas is a being against whom it is idle to use ordinary weapons; because he has been able to hide his identity and elude all pursuit for years; because his daring is boundless and his power unmeasurable; because he is everywhere and nowhere at once and, if he has had a

hand in this affair, I am not even sure that he is not listening to me now! And finally, M. de Presles, because every one whom I have known to attack Fantômas, my friends, my colleagues, my superior officers, have one and all, one and all, sir, been beaten in the fight! Fantômas does exist, I know, but who is he? A man can brave a danger he can measure, but he trembles when confronted with a peril he suspects but cannot see."

"But this Fantômas is not a devil," the magistrate broke in testily; "he is a man like you and me!"

"You are right, sir, in saying he is a man; but I repeat, the man is a genius! I don't know whether he works alone or whether he is the head of a gang of criminals; I know nothing of his life; I know nothing of his object. In no single case yet has it been possible to determine the exact part he has taken. He seems to possess the extraordinary gift of being able to slay and leave no trace. You don't see him; you divine his presence: you don't hear him; you have a presentiment of him. If Fantômas is mixed up in this present affair, I don't know if we ever shall succeed in clearing it up!"

M. de Presles was impressed in spite of himself by the detective's earnestness.

"But I suppose you are not recommending me to drop the enquiry, are you, Juve?"

The detective forced a laugh that did not ring quite true.

"Come, come, sir," he answered, "I told you just now that I was frightened, but I never said I was a coward. You may be quite sure I shall do my duty, to the very end. When I first began—and that was not yesterday, nor yet the day before—to realize the importance and the power of this Fantômas, I took an oath, sir, that some day I would discover his identity and effect his arrest! Fantômas is an enemy of society, you say? I prefer to regard him first and foremost as my own personal enemy! I have declared war on him, and I am ready to lose my skin in the war if necessary, but by God I'll have his!"

It would be easy to understand why M. Juve is never able to catch Fantômas if he were him in the first place. And there are all kinds of servants and other guests running around too, lots of suspects. I believe I am done now talking about the book, after all, it is a mystery and you should read it for yourself to find who gets murdered and who doesn't get murdered and who gets robbed and who doesn't get robbed and more importantly, who Fantômas really is. I had fun reading the book, but I wonder if I would still be having fun after forty more of them. I probably will never know.

Sam Quixote says

It's all Grant Morrison's fault.

Years ago, before his falling-out with Marvel, he wrote a pretty decent New X-Men series where he introduced his character Fantomex, a pseudo-French mutant assassin clad entirely in white, in part inspired by an obscure series of trashy French novels from 100 years ago featuring a bad guy called Fantomas. And, because I'm a huge Morrison fan (and, to a lesser extent, Richard Sala, who's also clearly a fan of these books), that's all it took for me to pick this one up! But, to be fair, a novel about a prototypical supervillain thief doesn't sound half-bad, right – it could be fun? Bah! It wasn't. It's sooooo bad!

Following in the wake of the popular Scarlet Pimpernel, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre's derivative Fantomas is about one-dimensional idiot aristocrats murdering one another while the most bland, generic literary detective ever tries to figure out whodunit. The motivations and murders are instantly forgettable, the characters are indiscernible, they all sound alike and seem to share a handful of braincells among them, the

dialogue is laughable, the scenarios preposterous, there's no direction to the rambling, incoherent story, no point, no nothing – I didn't care about anything, it's all garbage, all the time!

Fantomas himself barely figures in the story – at least by that name. To be honest I couldn't spoil this one if I tried as I've already forgotten which character was secretly Fantomas. One of the dunces, which is to say any of them. But the incompetent writers fail at the most basic writing lesson which is show don't tell and whenever Fantomas is mentioned (which is surprisingly little in a book seemingly about him) we're only ever told of his evil deeds and never see them. Shame that he turned out to be such a crummy non-character.

One character is so witless he can't tell his own sixty-something year old father from someone half his age wearing a disguise! Overwrought, pitiful melodrama pervades every worthless page while one scene in maybe fifty advances the stagnant plot – it's such a tedious, frustratingly dull read. If this drivel proves anything, it's that any novel will be considered a classic given enough time passes. I bet a hundred years from now James Patterson's dogshit will be in the Penguin Classics range!

The only reason I pushed myself through was to teach myself a lesson about impulse buys in an effort to stop myself doing that kinda thing in the future. And did I learn from this torturous experience? I hope so. (Evil Me: That's what he thinks! MoohoohahaHAHAHA!!!!) Damn you, Evil Me – you take that item out of the eBay basket!! I don't care if it's going for pennies! Oh gawd, I'm gonna get another badly packaged book in the post aren't I...

Fantomas is boring nonsense from start to finish. Zero entertainment value, zero literary value – I recommend Morrison's New X-Men over this tripe!

Shawn says

[image error]

Fabian says

What began as an expected, plain, elementary Whodunit becomes quite a crafty convolution in the end. Train-hopping, fake identities (including transvestites), bluffs, double bluffs, Bentillon dynamometers (rudimentary CSI), slit throats and gruesome violence, insane Victorians, specters, the beginnings of witness protection, schedules and time frames-- this is in that same category of classics like W. Collin's very cool "The Woman in White."

The hero/villain dynamics and the inherent sensationalism that the both inspire are explored & interesting questions do pop up (like, who are we REALLY rooting for? I mean, the Joker won the Oscar-- Batman, zilch. Antiheroes and villains are our new heroes & superstars).

It's a delight to read the stages of the chase: here, of the mouse and cat AND dog. And dog-catcher. The list of suspects grows, aptly, and the archetypes pile up nicely. The true scare is the hint that Fantomas, or, early Michael Myers, is possibly many people... like in William Peter Blatty's exorcist novels. But, alas, it (the idea), like its labyrinthine plot (you know exactly whodunit from the get-go...Boo!), becomes un-horrific and quirky... there's blatant overexplanations PLUS a constant betrayal of the reader (the tricks are overused and, dare I say, useless).

Honestly though, the Shakesperean tableaux make you realize the literary form this landmark novel is taking. But get this, fellow bookworms: read the exemplary "Phantom of the Opera" instead. There, everything comes together like a delicious dessert table at the Paris, Las Vegas buffet...you know, with those strawberry things and mini crème brûlée. That one, to me, is a full-square masterpiece and vastly superior--so different from the musical (no romance, all shadow and gossip, smoke, mirrors, theatrical mayhem)--& it has all that this "Phantom" as seems to sadly lack.

Dfordoom says

The arch-criminal Fantômas made his first appearance in print in 1911. *Fantômas*, written by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, was followed by no less than 42 sequels.

There had been very successful literary criminal heroes before this, most notably Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin in France and E. W. Hornung's Raffles in Britain. They were gentlemen thieves, and always remained gentlemen. They avoided unnecessary violence and they had their own sense of fair play. Fantômas belonged to a very different breed. Horrifyingly ruthless and utterly selfish, Fantômas had no hesitation in committing the most cold-blooded murders. He had no real redeeming qualities. He was a very modern sort of anti-hero, of the kind that was to become depressingly ubiquitous from the 1960s onwards. But when Allain and Souvestre created the character he represented something genuinely new and fresh.

Fantômas is also a particularly shadowy anti-hero/villain. For much of the first novel he is no more than a menacing presence in the background. The hero of the piece is the master detective Juve who has dedicated his life to bringing Fantômas to justice. It's an exceptionally difficult task since many in the police force refuse to believe that Fantômas even exists.

The novel has a very episodic structure. There is a murder of a wealthy elderly noblewoman, the disappearance of an English lord, a daring jewel robbery in a hotel. There are no clear links between any of these crimes, but Juve has developed the ability to spot the Fantômas touch in apparently random and unconnected crimes.

The writing is pulpy and rather clunky and the pacing is very uneven. Despite these faults the sinister quality of Fantômas himself and the sheer scale of his villainy make this a worthwhile read. And for anyone with an interest in the history of crime fiction and of pulp literature it's essential reading.

Chuddchutney Buana says

Am I really only the fourth person in the Goodreads universe to have rated this twisty, classic-literature-yet-feels-like-an-airport-read book?

Full of tension, comedy, and unpredictable turn (though at times it stepped into a ridiculous zone, but I don't mind, as long as it keeps me enthralled), with page-turner quality of a New York Times best-seller. A surprising treat indeed. More people should read this.

Tosh says

What a remarkable book. "Fantaomas" made me understand what type of world we live in. The sexual, the terrorist, and the chaos - it's way too beautiful.

Also I wrote a much longer essay on 'Fantomas' on my blog. Read it at <http://tamtambooks-tosh.blogspot.com/>

And I have to add that I have a serious collection of Fantomas books in English. One book smell of piss - which is perfect of course!
