

BELLEVILLE ROUGE, BELLEVILLE NOIR, BELLEVILLE ROSE :  
RÉPRÉSENTATIONS D'UN QUARTIER PARISIEN DEPUIS LE  
MOYEN ÂGE JUSQU'À L'AN 2000

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent for a copy of my thesis to be deposited in the university library and to be made available for loan and photocopying.

Carolyn Anne Stott

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## ABSTRACT

The suburb of Belleville is situated on the north-eastern outskirts of inner Paris. Its particular blend of social strata, race and architecture has made it a site of interest for historians, writers and artists since the Middle Ages. Thanks in part to the phenomenal success of Daniel Pennac's six tome *Malaussène* series, published towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and situated in Belleville, the site has continued to enjoy a privileged status among the historical and cultural precincts of Paris.

The representation of Belleville in the written and spoken word has a long history, part of which has been told, although in somewhat piecemeal fashion to date. Existing research may be divided into 3 categories, corresponding to the disciplines of history, sociology and literature. Historical studies are extensive and tend to support the suburb's reputation as a site of revolution and social unrest. The sociological studies focus on immigration to the suburb and on the consequences of its physical transformation over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The overall image presented by sociologists is one of a cosmopolitan suburb whose inhabitants manage to co-exist peacefully despite the multicultural mix; Belleville's reputation as a melting pot success story sits at odds with that of its image as a centre of rebellion. Literature-based research conducted into the suburb is more sketchy; Belleville's association with the *noir* genre and its inherent illicit elements also contrasts with the previous observations. If the existing studies present various pictures of historical and contemporary Belleville, they do not, however, give a comprehensive image of the suburb, nor do they provide an analysis of the role of Belleville in the *noir* genre, with particular reference to the *Malaussène* series.

I have thus undertaken a multidisciplinary study of the suburb, with the objective of establishing links between the history, sociology and the literature of Belleville, of gaining an understanding of the function of Belleville as a setting for detective fiction and of offering a new explanation of the success of Pennac's *Malaussène* series, by relating it to his representation of Belleville.

The three focus areas of my research are its history from the Middle Ages until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its diverse representations in literature and popular culture, and its connection to a particular literary genre: the *noir*. The originality of my project lies in the method created to categorise existing research. *Belleville rouge* presents a view of the site as historically anti-

authoritarian in its attempts to promote social justice. *Belleville rose* incorporates those studies which emphasise the suburb to varying degrees as a utopia, a model of social harmony or a centre of joyful festivities. *Belleville noir* focuses on the choice of the suburb as backdrop for the *noir* genre in literature and film; a hub of transgression and criminal activity, the antithesis of the positive space presented in the second category.

The first part of my research project looks at the history of Belleville, the changing nature of its borders, which differ greatly from the administrative division according to author and historian, and the creation of a collective Belleville identity. Part two examines the representations of Belleville in literature and popular culture from the Middle Ages until the year 2000, and furthermore attempts to determine to what extent these cultural representations correspond to the suburb's history. The third section deals with the role of Belleville in *noir* film and literature. If a single image corresponding to the décor of the *néo-polar* genre begins to emerge from the representations of Belleville by the film directors and various authors whose texts make up our corpus, this image differs greatly from the nostalgic one offered by Daniel Pennac; his representation of the suburb is hence treated separately.

It is this strong sense of attachment to, and identification with, Belleville that is underlined by Pennac in his *Malaussène* series. Setting himself apart from his *néo-polar* contemporaries, Pennac draws heavily on all of the three faces of Belleville: the *rouge*, the *rose* and the *noir*. His refusal to adhere strictly to the *néo-polar* genre and his corresponding tendency to borrow from other genres such as the fairy tale, has resulted in a fusion of the real and the mythological which has engendered in his series a streak of optimism not found in the works of his contemporaries. Pennac draws on the history and traditions of the suburb to thus present an original view of contemporary Belleville as a peace-loving, cohesive community. If we accept that the cultural memory of a site is dictated in part by its inhabitants, and hence is in constant evolution, outlasting its physical appearance, Pennac's role of guardian of the cultural memory of Belleville may extend to that of the cultural memory of the French nation.

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