The French have always been smug about being the first to "discover" the value of noir literature, the genius of Jim Thompson, the hidden charms of David Goodis, or the stature of this or that auteur film director. So one might be justifiably startled to read this advertisement from Editions Gallimard, the tony French publisher of Proust and Faulkner, in its 1992 Spring list: "Raymond Chandler's novel The Long Goodbye, now complete and unabridged for the first time in France!"

They were very coy about explaining why Gallimard, one of France's top publishers in terms of sales and prestige, waited nearly 40 years to reveal that the original "abridged version," published in 1954 under the house's famous Série Noire imprint, had been missing an amazing 85 pages—more than a third of Chandler's complete manuscript.

No culture loves noir more than the French. So it's a shock to have one of France's most esteemed critics—Philippe Garnier—reveal a stunning secret: For decades French translations of American crime novels have been slicing and dicing classics of the genre.
French readers didn’t fuss at having to shell out twenty-two bucks (in U.S. dollars) to finally get the whole thing, instead of receiving a much-belated refund. No critic cocked a gun, or even an eyebrow. One could suspect collective embarrassment at work—if the French were capable of such a thing—but The Long Goodbye snafu was actually just the most egregious example of a situation long known to bilingual noir devotees: a slew of popular American crime titles has been maimed, mangled, and often mutilated by French publishers. These chopped and crippled editions have remained in print for years.

No outfit was more instrumental in propagating—as well as disfiguring—American hard-boiled and noir fiction than Gallimard’s celebrated Série Noire.

Because of its colorful origins (the name of the collection came from the libertarian poet Jacques Prévert, who, in the 1930s, sometimes employed founder Marcel Duhamel as an actor in his films) Gallimard was instrumental in feeding the French popular taste for the genre, but it molded it as well by constructing a conformist look for the editions that forged a recognizable identity. It also made the books acceptable to the intellectuals. California may have had its “I’d Rather Read Bukowski” bumper stickers in the ’80s, but as early as 1951, Jean-Paul Sartre confessed that he “rather read a Série Noire novel than Wittgenstein, any day,” and didn’t mind his publisher—Gallimard—quoting this in his promotional material. The books were geared to a popular audience, but intellectuals took to them, mostly because the covers—basic yellow and white covers, sans graphics—were as uniform as the translations. They would have had an entirely different reaction if Jim Thompson’s A Hell of a Woman had been sold, American-style, with a shapely slit on its cover, or if Horace McCoy’s Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye had featured the undressed woman from the cover of the New American Library edition, complete with black bra and come-hither blurb (“Love as hot as a blow torch”).

When it comes to critical acceptance of crime fiction there is no de-
Miles Davis or Bud Powell at Orly, but this didn’t prevent Duhamel from giving him Chandler’s La dame du lac (The Lady in the Lake) to translate, as well as countless others. Vian’s wife would “tell him what was going on” in the story, and he’d surf on this. Duhamel didn’t mind: Vian fit in his collection, was a novelist in his own right, and had the “Série noire” tone down cold: a combination of comedy and zany poetry to which French readers had grown attached. Even today, confronted with the mistakes and the deletions, many middle-aged French readers declare a preference for the French versions.

Indeed, one could argue that David Goodis’ prose was sometimes more palatable in French than in the original. François Truffaut, who in 1960 adapted Goodis’ Down There as Shoot the Piano Player, claimed he had tried to make his film “not America, but not France either.” The noir literature dispensed by la Série Noire was what he called “fairy tales for adults,” a kind of make-believe criminal kingdom. It should come as no surprise that the collection included many titles one could consider pastiches, if not outright steals. Série Noire No. 1 was Peter Cheney’s Poison Ivy (La môme vert-de-gris), No. 3 James Hadley Chase’s take on Faulkner’s Sanctuary, entitled No Orchids for Miss Blandish. In fact, Chase, a squadron commander of the RAF whose real name was Rene Brabazon, was sued for plagiarism over his “homage” to James M. Cain, In a Vain Shadow, which Duhamel published nonetheless, giving it the witty title L’abominable pardessus (The Abominable Overcoat).

Boris Vian himself translated The Lady in the Lake only after Duhamel turned down his own novel, J’irai cracher sur vos tombes (I’ll Spit on Your Grave). Vian’s scant regard for this vein of American literature was on par with what this jazz-lover felt for rock’n’roll: he thought so little of it he decided to skip the translating and simply made it up himself, in French. Just as he wrote ditties like “Zorro est arrive,” a pastiche of Leiber and Stoller’s “Along Came Jones,” he “translated” the novels of ex-pat American Vernon Sullivan, which les Editions du Scorpion published to great success. Into those colorful brews, Vian threw every cliche the French then held to be true about America: racism, miscegenation, rape, greed, etc. “Vernon Sullivan,” of course, didn’t exist.

We’re told that in Paris publishing circles pruning books is no longer allowed. Too many young people read English, and agents and even authors can sometimes be pesky about veracity. But as late as 1981, you could still find in a James Crumley novel a topless bar translated as “a bar sans enseigne” (a bar without a “top,” or a sign), and plenty of bad guys are still routinely whipping out shotguns, or weapons of even more improbable caliber, from “sous les aisselles” (under their armpits).