

**T**otal Chaos and Chourmo, the first books in Jean-Claude Izzo's Marseille Trilogy, offer an enlightening view of present-day Europe. They delve deep into the guts of multiracial Marseille, a city that is at once a hopeful symbol of the Mediterranean's rich cultural past and an urban dystopia burdened by unemployment, racism and violence. Published in France in 2001, *Solea* appears in English, seven years after the author's death, as the final instalment of Izzo's anguished ode to the city. Like its predecessors, the novel is characterized by an addictive, choppy prose (translated into street-smart American English by Howard Curtis). Once again, Marseille is seen through the eyes of Fabio Montale, a former policeman who can only be friends with people who have never voted for the xenophobic National Front, "not even once". Most of Montale's loved ones – the children of immigrants from other parts of Europe and North Africa – have died, caught in a web spun by underworld criminals and neo-fascists; and now property developers want to turn his beloved city, once a glorious port, into a consumer hell lined with shopping malls. But such travesties don't surprise Montale, who believes that we are in a new "era of human misery", where money is "the only morality".

There are some things that make it easier for him to keep going: women, single malt whisky, Cesare Pavese, Arabic-language songs by the Jewish Algerian singer Lili Boniche, and the jazz of John Coltrane, whose song "Out of This World" is "fourteen minutes that could devour a whole night".

# A burnt-out world

HIRSH SAWHNEY

Jean-Claude Izzo

SOLEA

Translated by Howard Curtis  
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At the beginning of *Solea*, Montale has been living in the void created by the departure of Lole, his soulmate and the only one of his childhood friends to survive into middle age. But he finds a glimmer of hope in Sonia, an attractive woman who shares his Italian roots. After meeting her, things "took a different turn . . . Sonia's thigh up against mine. Burning me. I remember wondering why things always happen so fast. Falling in love". A jarring phone call doesn't allow him to enjoy his newfound passion. "Your girlfriend, the shit-stirrer, Babette", says a menacing voice. "Do you know where she is?" Babette, an investigative reporter, has been Montale's co-conspirator and on-again-off-again lover for years. She has written an article that will reveal how the European Union's open markets have paved the way for fraud and corruption. The Mafia bosses, politicians and industrialists she exposes have colluded to wage a "war against the legally constituted State". (Babette's findings are based on actual reports published by

the UN and *Le Monde*.) It turns out that the mysterious caller is a Mafia emissary, and he demands that Montale hunt down Babette. Sonia's throat is slit to help him realize the seriousness of the matter at hand.

As Montale attempts to save his journalist friend, he meditates on his failed career with the police. He was once a member of an experimental squad that attempted to combat crime by engaging in dialogue with the poor Arab communities of north Marseille, the area in which he was raised in a working-class Italian immigrant family. Such tangents do little in the way of plot or character development, but they allow Izzo to articulate his sensitive insights into European society.

Whether you liked it or not, being a cop meant you had a history behind you. The roundup of Jews in the Vel' d'Hiv. The Algerians thrown in the Seine in October '61 . . . A whole lot of things that affected the way many cops dealt with the children of immigrants on a daily basis.

For Izzo, the treatment of immigrants in present-day France is part of a larger historical pattern of racism and violence, one that includes the horrific injustices committed by the police during the Vichy regime and the Algerian War. These radical digressions about race are less frequent here than in the first two volumes. Izzo seems reluctant to continue to address society's problems

in terms of colour, perhaps fearing that to do so might reinforce the very socio-cultural barriers he seeks to break down. *Solea* engages with the relationship between crime and social inequality, but its core dilemmas are of a more existential nature.

When Montale eventually finds Babette, she tries to remind him of the urgency of publishing her report. Washing Europe's "dirty linen in public", she says, is the only way to counter corruption and right-wing politics. But hitmen have taken the life of yet another of Montale's friends and threaten to kill his elderly neighbour Honorine, "the only thing left of my burnt out world". The threat forces him to question the value of sacrificing his personal interests – the lives of his loved ones – for the sake of taking a political stance that might prove futile: "making a fuss in the media wouldn't give this country back its morality. I didn't believe journalists were really interested in truth. The TV news was just a distraction. All those images of genocide, first in Bosnia, then in Rwanda, now in Algeria, hadn't brought millions of citizens out on the streets, in France or anywhere else". But "how can we live happily", Babette retorts, "if every time we go somewhere or buy something, we know we're being fucked by the Mafia?". This moral quandary, which is central to our age, plays out in an exciting chase that brings the series to a conclusion. *Solea* may not be the strongest novel in Jean-Claude Izzo's trilogy, but it is still noir at its finest: compelling, sophisticated literature with a biting social edge.