REVIEW

Ceux qui nous frappent by Anaïs Llobet: The Vertigo of Judging

by Amandine Mazas

November 17, 2026 · On *Ceux qui nous frappent (Les Léonides)*

How do we deliver justice when every testimony shakes our certainties? With Ceux qui nous frappent, Anaïs Llobet has written a courtroom novel of rare power, one that questions our relationship to truth, guilt, and human complexity.



Sara Messina, a former boxing champion, is dead after throwing herself into the Vilaine. Her former partner, Charles Levain, stands trial for psychological harassment leading to suicide. Over three days, witnesses, experts, investigators, and lawyers will try to reconstruct the events and determine who is responsible.

From the very first pages, Anaïs Llobet draws us into a trial from which it becomes almost impossible to detach ourselves. Yet the strength of the novel does not rest solely on waiting for a verdict. It lies in a far more dizzying question: how do we judge a human being when we never possess more than part of the truth?

A trial in which the reader almost becomes the judge

This is, in my view, the author's true tour de force: confronting us with a crisis of conscience comparable to that faced by those whose job is to deliver justice. Each testimony sheds new light. Each statement nuances, contradicts, or undermines what we thought we had understood. As the hearings progress, our convictions waver. We believe we have grasped a truth, until another perspective reveals its flaws.

Anaïs Llobet rejects the ease of a Manichean narrative. She explores the contradictions, wounds, and psychological drivers of her characters, never reducing them to their role in the judicial proceedings. This multiplicity of viewpoints is one of the novel's great successes. The author gives us access to the thoughts of many protagonists, letting us understand their motivations, their emotions, and sometimes their own blind spots. The exercise is unsettling. The deeper we go into their inner lives, the harder our judgment becomes. Understanding does not mean excusing, any more than suspecting is enough to establish guilt.

This complexity appears notably in the reflections of Lise, the defense attorney, who inwardly rails against the experts' conclusions:

"Those who go through life without experiencing their own monstrosity owe it only to luck: the luck of being born into the right family, of having walked a path free of rough patches. And being lucky doesn't make you better, you idiots!" (p. 106)

Behind the virulence of this thought lies a question about the role of circumstances, social background, and individual experience in our behavior. It is a provocative reflection, one that disturbs the reassuring boundary we sometimes draw between human beings and those we consider monstrous.

The novel thus confronts us with the difficulty of distinguishing what we feel, what we believe, and what can be proven.

Sara, at the center of every word, yet almost absent from her own story

Perhaps this is where one of the novel's most striking dimensions lies. Sara is at the heart of the trial. Everyone talks about her, her character, her aspirations, her fragilities, and what might have led her to end her life. Yet the person at the center can no longer give her own version of events. For some, she was a joyful young woman before meeting Charles, and their relationship precipitated her distress. Others point to older pressures tied to her sports career, the expectations of those around her, or her family history. The accounts multiply, collide, and contradict one another. Each person holds a piece of her story, but no one seems able to convey all its complexity.

Who was Sara really, beyond what others say about her?

This question runs through the entire trial. The messages she left are rare direct traces of her own voice. They therefore take on considerable importance, even though interpreting them remains delicate. A few words can illuminate a situation, suggest a state of mind, or shift convictions, without necessarily allowing

an entire life to be reconstructed. Anaïs Llobet thus brings out a fundamental difficulty: when the person whose actions we are trying to understand is no longer there to speak, how do we distinguish her truth from the interpretations of those who survive her? Paradoxically, this absence makes Sara omnipresent.

A remarkably fluid narrative construction

This reflection gains its full force thanks to particularly masterful writing. Anaïs Llobet multiplies forms of discourse: testimonies, exchanges, messages, and inner thoughts. The voices follow one another, answer one another, and sometimes clash, composing a choral narrative of great vitality. The reader doesn't merely observe the hearings but truly feels present at them. We sense the tensions, the silences, the hesitations, and also the inner movements of those in the courtroom.

I particularly liked the way the author compares the course of the trial to a boat crossing. This metaphor fits the movement of the story very aptly, with its swells, its changes of course, and its constant uncertainty about the destination.

Another success is the documentary precision. Llobet introduces us to the professions, responsibilities, and working methods of the various judicial players without ever interrupting the story for long technical explanations. Everything is woven naturally into the scenes, the exchanges, and the characters' psychology.

Her sense of humor also deserves mention. A few discreet touches, sometimes deliciously ironic, appear in the middle of a reflection. For example, when Léo, the police officer in charge of the investigation, thinks about the conversations he doesn't have with his wife:

"But that's not the kind of discussion that comes up at the dinner table in the evening, when you're negotiating GIGN-style to get the kids to finish their plate of peas."

This delightful contrast between the operations of an elite unit and family negotiations over a plate of vegetables perfectly illustrates the humor that surfaces without warning. These breathers bring humanity to a text whose gravity never wavers.

The whole is very fluid, carried by a particularly accomplished narrative structure. The pages fly by with a constant urge to understand, even when one senses that some questions may remain unanswered.

Between judicial truth and personal conviction

Beyond the case itself, *Ceux qui nous frappent* examines our relationship to guilt, responsibility, and truth. How do we assess a person's actions without being influenced by their history, their behavior, or our own experience? What place should we give to personal conviction when the facts prove hard to establish? How do we deliver justice in the face of violence whose mechanisms may remain invisible?

These questions take on a particularly delicate dimension when it comes to psychological violence and coercive control.

One of the novel's greatest strengths is the way it collides with our own convictions. Faced with the same testimonies and the same facts, each reader may form a different opinion. For we never approach a story with a perfectly neutral gaze. Our lived experience, our experiences, and our sensibilities inevitably influence how we perceive the characters and interpret their actions.

Anaïs Llobet thus holds up a disturbing mirror: in seeking to understand what happened to Sara, we are also led to question what underlies our own judgment. This freedom of interpretation belongs to the reader. Justice, on the other hand, must go beyond impressions, weigh testimonies against one another, examine the available evidence, and determine what can be legally established.

Doubt is not a weakness of reasoning: it can also be the consequence of a deeper understanding of human complexity.

A powerful novel that refuses comfortable certainties

I close this novel deeply impressed by Anaïs Llobet's work. She manages to combine great psychological finesse, real narrative mastery, and a demanding reflection on justice, without ever sacrificing the novelistic force of her story. The narrative is both intimate and extremely harsh. It brings us closer to the characters while confronting us with what their words, actions, and silences can have at their most disturbing. Above all, the author has the intelligence not to provide a definitive answer to every question she raises. Even when the court rules, the reader retains the freedom, but also the discomfort, of forming their own conviction. That is precisely what makes this reading so memorable.

Ceux qui nous frappent is far more than a trial novel. It is a reading experience that pushes us to question our perception of others, our deepest convictions, and our capacity to judge. We all read the same story, but we don't necessarily come away with the same certainties.

A novel of rare power, whose questions stay with us long after the last page.

— Amandine Mazas

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