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From the historian Jeffrey Ravel comes a scandalous tale of imposture that sheds new light on French politics and culture in the pivotal but underexamined period leading up to the Enlightenment.

In the waning days of the seventeenth century, a French nobleman named Louis de la Pivardicre returned from the Nine Years War and, for mysterious reasons, gave up his aristocratic life to marry the daughter of an innkeeper in a remote village. But several years later, struggling financially, he returned to his first wife in search of money. She turned him away, and he disappeared under mysterious circumstances. This led to a murder investigation and the arrest of Pivardicre’s first wife and her alleged lover, a local prior. Stranger yet, Pivardicre finally did come out of hiding but was believed by many to be an impostor conjured up in order to clear the wife of murder charges.

The case became a cause célèbre across France, an obsession among everyone from the peasantry to the courts, from the Comédie-Française to Louis XIV himself. It was finally left to a brilliant young jurist, Henri-François d’Aguesseau, to separate fact from fiction and set France on a path to a new and enlightened view of justice.
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Mystery lovers will be delighted; history lovers will be entranced; lovers of fine writing will be pleased and people who just want a good story will be satisfied. Ravel takes a puzzling event from the waning days of the 17th century and with a patient and careful eye examines not only the evidence but the implications of the evidence which prove to be more far-reaching than you might first suppose. Unlike historic fiction, where heroes and heroines hold the stage, here we meet ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances acting in very human but puzzling ways. What seems an unlikely story becomes very human and believable, and suggests truth about ourselves as well. Ravel's masterful writing, his presentation of the "facts", his sympathetic eye for all the people he describes combine with his historian's commitment to fairness and impartiality to give us a glimpse of a foreign place and time so real we put the book down thinking "yes, I was there; that's exactly how it happened." Try this book, you'll be glad you did.

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