

Simenon, a.k.a. Maigret

George Simenon's widespread popularity is in good portion due to the character he created in 1930: Inspector Maigret.

The re-editions of his "romans durs" - in-depth quests to discover the nature of man - have found in these last few years an attentive and loyal audience. But the real adventure is his very life.

Nico Zardo

Lots of paper was needed to print the countless editions of his books: over 500 million copies. Just consider that, placed one next to the other, they could cover 5000 soccer fields! From 1921 to 1972 George Simenon wrote about 400 novels, translated in over 50 languages. Many are the films and TV series based on his works that have made him famous with a vast audience. It is difficult to describe the "torrential" work of George Simenon - it would be like trying to communicate the flavor of a food, the intensity of a perfume, the ambience of a landscape. Maybe if we had his writing talent, we could... He succeeded incredibly well in capturing the attention of the reader by rendering the image of his characters using few words, making them come alive and vigilant, communicating the atmosphere of a place, outlining a situation with few details, accompanying us, glued to the pages, through tales dense with intriguing situations that dig into the complex psychology of human behavior.

GEORGE SIMENON WAS BORN IN LIÈGE, BELGIUM, IN 1903. His father, Désiré Simenon, was an accountant and his mother, Henriette Brüll, was a shop assistant in a department store. Since he was a child, Simenon showed a keen interest in adventure books (Dumas, Conrad, Dickens, Balzac, Stendhal, Stevenson). At 16 he quits his studies and begins to work as a journalist at La Gazette de Liège, embarking on a precocious apprenticeship to writing, being mainly interested in the crimes column - an area where, for four years, he will be able to collect lots of material for his future novels. In 1921 he publishes his first book, *Au Pont des Arches*, a humorous novel. In the years that follow, he moves to Paris, marries Régine Renchon, nicknamed "Tigy", a young artist he met in Liège two years before. He works as secretary to Marquis Tracy and, at night, writes for Parisian magazines: his stories attain great success and in just a few years allow him to dedicate himself completely to writing. His friendship with the writer Colette yields him a steady collaboration with *Le Matin* and her precious advice helps him to refine his literary style, making it simple and sober. 1921 to 1930 are the years of his "alimentary writing": about 200 productions, between books and short stories autographed using different pseudonyms (in most cases, George Sim). Three are the typologies: light novels, more or less osé with allusive titles (*Orgies Bourgeoises*, *Etreintes passionnées...*), sentimental novels like *Roman d'une dactylo* or *Coeur de Poupée*, and adventure novels (*Le Monstre blanc de la Terre de Feu*, *Un Drame au pôle sud...*). Naturally, critics do not take these pieces seriously, but for Simenon they constitute a field of essay that will shape him as a prolific writer and afford him a comfortable life. Popularity and good earnings project the writer into the Parisian "beau monde", initiating him into the company of painters (Vlaminck and Picasso), poets like Max Jacob and artists like Josephine Baker with whom he will have one of the numerous "liasons" attributed to him.

AT THE BEGINNING OF 1927, Eugène Merle, director of several Parisian newspapers, wanting to exploit his fame of fast novel writer on a promotional level (he could produce up to 80 pages a day!), challenges him to write a novel "live", under the eyes of an audience, closing Simenon in a glass cage. The writer accepts, attracted by a generous remuneration. The event is publicized and awaited, but for reasons that are still not clear, the project will not be brought to fruition. In the years that follow, driven by his desire to realize his dreams of youth, he begins to travel by boat, first in France navigating along the canals, that will become the setting for several novels (*Le Charretier de la "Providence"*), then in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Legend tells that in the Netherlands, in the port of Delfzijl, in September of 1929, during a forced stop for servicing interventions on the boat, a new character came to light: a certain Maigret.

In that same period, Simenon decides to abandon the pseudonyms and sign all his novels with his real name: in February 1931, Editions Fayard publishes *Pietr-le-Letton* through a promotional event to which all of Paris is invited. After this,

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the image of Simenon and of Maigret - on whose inquests, from 1931 to 1972, he will write 75 novels and 29 short stories - will walk hand in hand. More than 50 will be the films based on his novels (between stories of Maigret and other novels).

But even through the contribution of great directors (Jean Renoir, Claude Autant-Lara) and famous actors such as Jean Gabin who will give an unparalleled image of the renowned inspector, they will not have the same popularity as the novels.

THROUGH THE INSPECTOR OF THE QUAI DES ORFÈVRES, THE AUTHOR PAINTS A PORTRAIT OF THE PARIS OF THOSE YEARS IN ALL ITS SEASONS: from the brasseries, to the quais of the Seine, to the hotels of dubious reputation, to the concierges that smell of cooking. But also of the French province, of the navigable canals, foggy countrysides, and the suspicious and envious agricultural bourgeoisie. Maigret's *modus operandi* is very particular: even though he respects canonic procedures from which he extrapolates "scientific" elements for investigations, he lets himself be driven by instinct, investigating people's personalities, researching possible motives, almost placing himself in other people's shoes in order to understand where and when "the crime" can originate. Delving in-depth into the ambience and the psychology of the actors involved allows him to unravel extremely intricate events, matured in the most diverse social environments.

THE RESULTING FRESCO IS THE PORTRAIT OF A HUMANITY that stops at nothing in trying to improve the mediocrity of its own existence, not even criminal behavior. Maigret teaches us to understand these often tortuous behaviors, to discover the complex motives behind deviating behaviors, and - while not judging - makes the culprit face his responsibilities.

Wealth and fame change Simenon's life; he leaves Paris and goes to live in the country, on a 16th century farm near La Rochelle, in Vandea. But if, on the one hand, the writer looks for a tranquil place to concentrate on his work, on the other, his thirty years and the desire to explore the world will push him to travel. First in Africa, which will serve as the basis for his exotic novels, and then to Germany, from where, in 1933, he will send articles to his newspaper that are judged too accommodating toward the German regime and that will be partially censored. He will have better luck later through the scoop of his interview with Trotzki, in exile in Prinkipo, a Turkish island. But investigative journalism does not seem to be his fate: the publication of his articles on the Stavinsky case (a scandal that in 1934 caused the collapse of the French government) with some unreliable pieces of news collected by him through deceitful informers, cause him such discredit as to make him abandon this activity.

HE RESUMES TRAVELLING AROUND THE WORLD (New York, Panama, the Galapagos, Tahiti, Australia and the Red Sea), he temporarily sets Maigret aside and inaugurates a new genre of novels by publishing with Gallimard, his new editor, *Le Locataire* (1934), the first of his "romans durs". The change of editors from Fayard to Gallimard and this new novel mark Simenon's trial at freeing himself from the image of writer of "popular" novels and trying to get accepted by the Parisian cultural elite society that always snubbed him. But only in 1935, after André Gide, Nobel Prize for literature, acknowledged his stature of "phenomenon" will he be able to consider himself recognized as a great author and his name will be able to go side by side with that of Balzac. In his hard novels, Simenon often behaves by following the psychology of the protagonist as the story's main theme. Most of the time, this person is a victim of persecution or a social misfit who, when spurred to free himself of his condition of inferiority or of constriction, is inevitably overwhelmed by a world that leaves no room for the weak or the different. Like *Cour d'Assise* (1941), *Les Fiançailles de Mr. Hire* (1933), *La Fenêtre des Rouet* (1945), just to name a few.

During the German occupation of France, the Belgian embassy names him high commissioner in charge of welcoming evacuated fellow citizens to Vandea, his adoptive region. The writer performs the task entrusted to him well, all the while maintaining an attitude of opportunistic neutrality in regards to the events. He continues to publish works despite the scarcity of paper; he seems not to disdain solicitations by collaborationist newspapers and entertains commercial rapports with German producers to whom he sells the rights for the film adaptation of some of the Maigret novels.

At the end of the world conflict, this behavior of his will be object of an informal "investigation" for collaborationism that, even though it will bring no real consequences, will push the writer to leave France.

FROM 1945 TO 1955 HE LIVES AND WORKS IN THE UNITED STATES, first settling in Arizona and then in New England. His meeting in New York with a young Canadian woman, Denyse Ouimet, who was to be his secretary, turns into an overwhelming passion that he will recount in the novel *Trois chambres à Manhattan* (1946). At 42, Simenon starts a new life with a ménage-à-trois that he skillfully manages with his wife Tigy, who formally remains with him to take care of their son Marc (born in '39), and his new lover who handles his commercial relations and interests that have by now attained relevant proportions. Simenon will marry Denyse in Reno, Nevada, in 1950, after divorcing from Tigy. Their children John and Marie Jo will be born in 1949 and 1953, respectively.

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In 1952, driven by nostalgia, he takes a long trip to Europe. In Paris he is met with grand honors at the Quai des Orfèvres, the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Police Department, the reign of Maigret. Liège, the city of his birth, welcomes him in grand style. In Brussels he is offered membership to the Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises de Belgique. Two years later he returns to Europe definitively, settling first in the south of France and then near Lausanne, at Epalinges, where he will build a residence tailored to the needs of the family and of the "Simenon company". With the return to the Old Continent, the equilibrium between the couple starts to deteriorate. Recourse to alcohol by both favor hysteria and depression that put their relationship to a hard test. In 1960, Simenon is nominated president of the jury of Cannes. His instability becomes public domain with the outburst that brings the Palme d'Or (Golden Palm) to Federico Fellini, very unpopular among all the jury members but beloved by the Belgian writer. In 1964, after a series of hospitalizations also in psychiatric clinics, his wife Denyse leaves him definitively, and he will find affection and solace in the Italian Teresa Sburelin, since 1961 at his services as chamber maid.

IN THOSE YEARS, UNESCO STATISTICS based on the number of translations and books sold, present him as the most widely read writer in the world at the time. And newspaper forecasts that, in May 1961, reported his candidacy to the Nobel Prize for literature, remained without a following, maybe to make him atone - like the adverse fate of his characters - for the origins of his popular literature.

In February 1972 he writes his last novel, *Maigret et Monsieur Charles*. Later, his passion for recounting will take on a different form and express itself through "dictations": thoughts and reflection entrusted to a tape recorder and published from 1975 to 1981. Exceptions to this decision were *Lettre à ma mère* (1974), one of Simenon's masterpieces in which he remembers the difficult relationship he had with his mother, who died four years previously; and *Mémoires Intimes* (1981) a passionate, 1000+-page autobiography born from the need to defend himself against the accusations raised in a book written by his wife Denyse attributing him the responsibility of the suicide death of their daughter Marie Jo in 1978. By now ill and depressed, in 1984 Simenon undergoes an operation for brain tumor; in 1987 he becomes paralyzed in his left arm and legs. He dies in Lausanne during the night of September 3rd, 1989. As per his will, his children will learn of his death only through the newspapers. •