

CELEBRATING THE

Georges Simenon
Centennial

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THE YEAR 2003 marks the centenary of the birth of Georges Simenon (1903–89), one of the most prolific French-language novelists of the twentieth century. Sponsored by the city of Liège, Belgium, and the University of Liège, a year-long series of exhibits, conferences, films, guided tours, and dramatic productions—under the rubric “2003, année Simenon au pays de Liège”—is being held to celebrate his work. Many of Simenon’s novels are being reissued, and a number of new critical studies of the author’s life and work are being added to the already substantial catalog of critical material devoted to the author. In May 2003 Simenon entered the pantheon of letters when he took his place alongside such distinguished writers as Hemingway, Montaigne, Dostoevsky, and Proust with the publication of twenty-one of his novels in two volumes of Gallimard’s prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade collection.

The recognition accorded to Simenon’s work is particularly significant when one considers that, until the third quarter of the twentieth century, Simenon was dismissed as an author of detective novels, a genre relegated to the status of para-literature. No notice was taken of the fact that, in these works—baptized *les Maigrets* in honor of their policeman hero—Simenon re-created the detective novel and transformed it into a viable literary genre, which he used to express many important themes in the twentieth-century novel—guilt and innocence, solitude and alienation.

The literary merits of Simenon’s work were also obscured by the sheer magnitude of his output. He was spoken of in terms of the records he broke: the hundreds of books written,



the hundreds of thousands of books sold, the millions of dollars earned, the number of novels adapted for the cinema and for television—all of which diverted attention from the overall excellence of his oeuvre. Henry Miller remarked that it was astonishing that such a prolific writer could be so good.

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, on February 13, 1903, where he spent the first nineteen years of his life, years that furnished him with an enormous store of experiences, sensations, impressions, and images that would find their way into his work the rest of his life. “It is clear that we absorb images, sounds, and life until the age of seventeen or eighteen,” he wrote. “As that is the part of my life that I spent in Liège, I absorbed a great deal. Since my profession consists of rendering what I absorbed, it is evident that there is a lot of Liège in what I render,” he added. Even more than the experiences of his early years in Liège, Simenon absorbed there the provincial insularity of a stifling milieu, which he internalized in a universally applicable model. Certain cities in Simenon’s novels, even those not so named, are in reality topographical transpositions of Liège with its alleys, small shops, church, and town square. Through his sensory perceptions, one of the principal sources of his inspiration, Simenon never lost contact with the child and the adolescent he once was. “All my novels are fantasies of my childhood,” he explained. Michel Lemoine’s *Liège couleur Simenon* serves as a guide to the world of Simenon’s childhood, as he re-creates the city that left an indelible imprint on the author’s work. Images of the period are also to be found in *Simenon, l’homme à romans*, by Michel Schepens and



Georges Simenon

Courtesy: Fonds Simenon, University of Liège



Cover of *Maigret et l'inspecteur malchanceux* (Presses de la Cité, 1947)



Cover of *La Pipe de Maigret* (1947; Presses de la Cité, 1949)



Poster for the film version of *Les Inconnus dans la maison*, first published in 1940



Cover of a roman dur: *Trois chambres à Manhattan* (Presses de la Cité, 1946)

Courtesy: Fonds Simenon, University of Liège

Jean-Baptiste Baronian, the first illustrated biography of Simenon, which incorporates numerous unpublished documents and pictures.

At the age of nineteen, surfeited with the sights, sounds, and smells of his native city, Simenon left Liège for Paris, the city with which he is inextricably bound. Indeed, Paris can be considered the second protagonist of the Maigret novels. Maigret is unimaginable without his city—it is as tightly linked to him as is London to Sherlock Holmes. In these novels, Simenon makes use of cultural references designed to prompt recognition by means of the type of images used in tourist brochures. Moreover, Simenon brings to the reader his Paris of the 1930s with its chestnut vendors and anglers on the banks of the Seine, bookdealers along the quays, and bistros with zinc bars.

Simenon originally conceived the Maigret sequence as a bridge between the popular potboilers he had been writing and the more serious literary efforts to which he aspired and for which he did not consider himself ready. Not knowing at that time how to shift the action from one location to another, he had the idea of creating a character who could move about freely without requiring justification to do so, and he decided that a policeman would serve such a purpose. Although Simenon intended to abandon the detective novels in favor of more serious works, their popularity was so considerable that he returned to them repeatedly and, over the years, wrote more than one hundred novels and short stories featuring Commissaire Maigret, often experimenting with situations and themes—paternity, alcoholism, passion, madness, suicide, old age, humiliation, degradation, solitude, exile, and the futility of flight—that he would reuse later in his other fiction.

In working toward what he would later define as the “pure” or quintessential novel, Simenon brought a crucial innovation to the detective novel—he sought not so much to unmask and punish the criminal as to understand him. At times, as is often true in the detective novel, the plots of the Maigret series are lacking in verisimilitude, but they captivate the reader by their sense of mood and the interplay of their characters. Where-

as Simenon did not alter the basic social conservatism of the genre—the job of the policeman is to punish deviant behavior and maintain the status quo—his Maigret was a new kind of hero with a newfound concern for the psychological and social determinants of crime. Over the years, Maigret has taken on an independent existence, as readers tend to view him as a historical figure rather than as a creature of fiction, so much so that Maigret even has his weekly calendar, *Agenda Maigret 2003*, with quotations and other pertinent material from the Maigret saga.

Wise and understanding, Maigret is one of the most fully realized characters in all of Simenon’s work. Because he knows that it is impossible to understand men completely, he accepts them as they are and never moralizes—his moral code is summed up by the maxim “comprendre sans juger” (understand without judging). Maigret’s wisdom restores faith in life. It is his reassuring presence that constitutes the major difference between the “Maigret” books and Simenon’s other novels, the so-called *romans durs*, or hard novels. Many of the same themes are repeated in both, and Simenon often takes up subjects in the Maigrets that are more serious than those in the others. Despite this, Simenon only takes us up to the threshold of tragedy in the Maigrets, which he crosses in the *romans durs*. This is due to the reassuring presence of Maigret, the father figure who convinces us that there is an order and a structure to life. In the *romans durs*, there is no Maigret to whom the protagonist can confess, there is no one to understand or with whom to communicate, leaving him immured in his solitude, stifled and suffocated by repressed confessions.

Other than Maigret, all of the characters in Simenon’s oeuvre are variations on the theme of failure, shadows in a dreary gray universe oppressed by the heartrending banality of life and the unremitting blows of fate. Simenon is one of the rare writers—if not the only one—to have suffused his fiction with an unchanging shade of gray, writes Jean-Baptiste Baronian in *Simenon ou le roman gris: Neuf études sentimentales*.

The constant subject of Simenon’s non-Maigret novels—those on which his literary reputation is based—is the violent

nature of aberrant human behavior. As with the prototypical crime story, the *romans durs* are novels of deviance. The deviant individual is one who differs markedly—in social adjustment or sexual behavior, for example—from what is considered normal or acceptable to the group of which he is a member. Simenon's modernity lies in his recognition that the deviant, the criminal of one sort or another, is an appropriate and even representative man for our age. In *Sur les routes américaines avec Simenon*, a comprehensive work on Simenon's years in North America from 1945 to 1955, Michel Carly argues that Simenon's kinship with American writers of *romans noirs*—among them Mickey Spillane, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James Cain—motivated his move to America as much, suggests Carly, as his concern with the risk of being tried as a collaborator for his successful film career under the German occupation.

All of Simenon's novels, whether detective or *dur*, are built around psychological investigations that are carried out in the *Maigrets* by the detective, the novelist's alter ego, and in the others by the novelist himself. In the *Maigret* novels, Simenon observes the characters from a distance and then slowly closes in, whereas in the others he focuses directly on a character from the beginning and then delves deeper and deeper into his psyche to reveal what neither he nor the reader previously suspected. In the *Maigrets*, Simenon starts with a given situation that he examines in order to discover the psychological imperatives behind it; in the *romans durs*, he gradually builds up the pressures leading to the final tragedy.

Simenon's universe is inhabited by psychologically marginal characters whose behavior is characterized by sexual deviance, revolt, flight, crime, attempted murder, murder, and suicide. Only 12 of the 171 *romans durs* are free of the violence that pervades his oeuvre. The violent actions of the characters are, for Simenon, "tragic consequences of the fact that for many men and women, life is sometimes, if not nearly always, unendurable. In moments of crisis, they are driven to affirm themselves and, human society being what it is, they can do so only through murder, rape, arson, suicide, and the rest of the catalog of crimes." Simenon's protagonist is the archetypal, alienated, modern antihero who lacks lucidity and is unable to understand his desperate situation as he is carried along by forces he cannot control. The type of man portrayed in Simenon's work lacks distinctive characteristics and positive values, which explains the paucity of great thoughts, ambitions, and feelings in Simenon's work.

Simenon's novels, by their very nature, would seem to be ideally suited for the screen and have been adapted for the medium more often than those of any other writer. Since the early years of the talkies, almost sixty feature films based on Simenon's novels, eleven of them in English, have been made for theatrical distribution, and scores of films have been produced expressly for television in many languages. However,



while some of the novels have been made into successful films, directors have had difficulty in capturing on screen the essence of Simenon's genius, the distinctive atmosphere that results from his blending of impressionistic notations of subtle psychological states, sensory impressions, and minute details of everyday life that lend veracity to what are often slight or contrived plots. *Simenon cinéma*, by Simenon scholar Michel Schepens and with an introduction by film critic and director Serge Toubiana, is a visual delight with its reproductions of the book jackets of all the original editions and of those of Simenon's novels adapted for the screen. Reproductions of 142 film posters as well as an illustrated filmography are included.

Simenon's extraordinary understanding of the fears and insecurities of humankind enabled him to depict man as he is. According to novelist Frédéric Dard (San-Antonio), "Before Picasso, they painted differently. Before Trenet, they sang differently. And before Simenon, they wrote differently. Simenon leaves us much more than a body of work, much more than a style of writing. . . . He did not reinvent life, what he did was to show it to us. Before him . . . our feelings were kept under glass and we expressed ourselves in well-articulated sentences. Since Simenon, we think with our senses, we perceive with our hearts. . . . [His intuitive gifts] permitted him to tell all, life and death, men and their misery, love and grief." **WLT**

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