GEORGES SIMENON (1903–1989) was born in Liège, Belgium. He went to work as a reporter at the age of fifteen and in 1923 moved to Paris, where under various pseudonyms he became a highly successful and prolific author of pulp fiction while leading a dazzling social life. In the early 1930s, Simenon emerged as a writer under his own name, gaining renown for his detective stories featuring Inspector Maigret. He also began to write his psychological novels, or romans durs—books in which he displays a sympathetic awareness of the emotional and spiritual pain underlying the routines of daily life. Having written nearly two hundred books under his own name and become the best-selling author in the world, Simenon retired as a novelist in 1973, devoting himself instead to dictating several volumes of memoirs.

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THE WIDOW

GEORGES SIMENON

Translated from the French by
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Introduction by
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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

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TWO STARTLINGLY similar short novels appeared in France in 1942, at the center of each narrative, a conscienceless and slightly creepy young man, unattached and adrift, perpetrator of a meaningless murder. One was Camus’ *L’Étranger*, the other Simenon’s *La veuve Couderc*. Camus’ novel rose to become part of the literary firmament, and is still glittering, intensely studied, and praised—to my mind, overpraised. Simenon’s novel did not drop but settled, so to speak, went the way of the rest of his work—rattled along with decent sales, the occasional reprint, and was even resurrected as a 1950s pulp-fiction paperback with a come-on tag line (“A surging novel of torment and desire”) and a lurid cover: busty peasant girl pouting in a barn, her skirt hiked over her knees, while a hunky guy lurks at the door—price twenty-five cents.

Camus had labored for years on his novel of alienation; his *Carnets* record his frustration and false starts. “The fewer novels or plays you write—because of other parasitic interests—the fewer you will have the ability to write,” V.S. Pritchett once wrote, lamenting his own small fictional output. “The law ruling the arts is that they must be pursued to excess.” Simenon had published three other novels in 1942, and six the previous year. *La veuve Couderc* (in English variously *The Widow* and *Ticket of Leave*) became another title on the extremely long list of Simenon works; none of them regarded as a subject for scholarship.
INTRODUCTION

If reading Camus represents duty, Simenon represents indulgence, a lavishness that seems frivolous, inspiring a greedy satisfaction that shows as self-consciousness in even the most well-intentioned introductions to his work, the critic’s awkwardness over a pleasurable text, together with a shiver of snooty superfluity and the palpable cringe, common to many introducers of a Simenon novel, What am I doing here?

Simenon takes some sorting out, because at first glance he seems easily classified and on second thought (after you have read fifty or sixty of his books) unclassifiable. The Camus comparison is not gratuitous—Simenon often made it himself, and André Gide brought the same subject up a few years after L’Étranger appeared, favoring Simenon’s work, especially this novel. And (in a 1947 letter to Albert Guerard) he went further, calling Simenon “notre plus grand romancier aujourd’hui, vrai romancier.”

Born ten years apart, both Camus and Simenon had arrived raw and youthful in metropolitan France from the distant margins of literary Francophonie—Camus a French Algerian and polemical journalist with a philosophical bent, Simenon a self-educated Belgian who began his writing life as a cub reporter with a taste for crime stories; the pedant and the punk, both with an eye for the ladies. Camus seems to have taken no notice of Simenon (no mention at all in any Camus biography), though we know that Simenon was watchful and somewhat competitive with the decade-younger Camus, whose complete works (he must have noted) can be accommodated between the covers of one modest-sized volume. The indefatigable Simenon, confident of winning the Nobel Prize, predicted in 1937 that he would win it in within ten years. The literature prize went to others—Pearl S. Buck, F.E. Sillanpää, Winston S. Churchill. Hearing the news in 1957 that Camus had won it, Simenon (so his wife reported) became enraged. “Can you believe that asshole got it and not me?”
What to make of the gifted and unstoppable writer who has a rarified existential streak but also a nose for what the public wants? The universities are seldom any help—no one is less welcome in the literature departments than the accomplished filler of multiple shelves of books. Like many self-educated people, Simenon tended to be anti-intellectual in a defiant and mocking way, despising literary critics and giving literature departments a wide berth. The universities returned the compliment, rubbing him and belittling or ignoring his work. The academy is uncommonly fond of the struggler and the sufferer; scratch even the most severe academic and you find an underdogger. How can (so the argument seems to run) a prolific and popular writer be any good? Usually, like Ford Madox Ford or Trollope, they are nailed as graphomaniacs and subjected to cruel simplification, represented by one book, not always their best.

Professorial philistinism dogged Simenon; so did snobbery. And it was after all a bitter, provincial university librarian who wrote of

... the shit in the shuttered château
Who does his five hundred words,
Then parts out the rest of the day
Between bathing and booze and birds...

Simenon was the living intimidating embodiment of Philip Larkin’s envious lines, plenty of booze and birds available, though his daily output in the château was more like 5,000 words.

Simenon considered himself the equal of Balzac. He regarded his novels as a modern-day *Comédie humaine*. His one foray into literary criticism was a long and insightful essay on Balzac, which took the form of mother-blaming. “A novelist is a man who does not like his mother, or who never received
mother-love,” words that applied equally to himself and that inform one of his memoirs, *Letter to My Mother*. He was the Balzac of blighted lives, writing out of a suffering that was not obvious until the end of his long career. Material success, one of Balzac’s major themes, is not a theme that interested Simenon, who dwelled on failure, in spite of the fact that he himself was a great success and made a point of crowing about it.

Incredibly, for such a productive soul, Simenon was at times afflicted with writer’s block, and though in Simenon it seemed almost an affectation, it perturbed him to the extent that he used it as an occasion to keep a diary, to recapture his novel-writing mood. In the diary he recounted his obsessional subjects—money, his family, his mother, the household, and other writers. During the writing of this diary, Henry Miller visited him and extravagantly praised him as someone who lived an enviable life. While Simenon humored him, and anatomized his character, he unblocked himself with this unusual and valuable journal, later published under the title *When I Was Old*.

His many straight detective novels based on the character of Chief Inspector Jules Maigret fit a pattern, as compact case studies, problems of lingering guilt and subtle clues, with a shrewd even lovable detective of settled habits. He came up with the rounded and believable and happily married Maigret in 1930 and did not stop adding to that shelf until 1972, seventy-six volumes later. But what about the rest of the books? The immensity of Simenon’s life and letters baffles and defeats the simplifier. How to square the years in Liège as a reporter and an admitted hack with his postwar retreat to rural Connecticut? The trip through the Pacific in 1935, with the year he dropped out to travel by barge through France? The Arizona novels? The many châteaux? The classic cars he collected? The gourmandizing, the womanizing? “Most people work every day and enjoy sex periodically. Simenon had sex every day and every few months indulged in a frenzied orgy of work,” writes
Patrick Marnham, in *The Man Who Wasn’t Maigret*. Simenon lived long enough to have made love to Josephine Baker and to stare priapically into the cleavage of Brigitte Bardot. What of his ability to write a chapter a day and finish an excellent novel in a ten or eleven days, and write another one a few months later?

Simenon’s detractors put him down as a compulsive hack; to his admirers, who included not just the hard-to-impress Henry Miller and the sniffily Olympian Gide, as well as the generally aloof Thornton Wilder and the quite remote Jorge Amado, he was the consummate writer. He had no time for his other contemporaries. It wasn’t a question of his believing he was better than any of them; he simply took no notice of them. Even at the height of his friendship with Henry Miller, he did not read Miller’s work; he suggested it was unreadable, but shrewdly analyzed Miller the man in *When I Was Old*. He claimed in *The Paris Review* to have been inspired by Gogol and Dostoyevsky, but he wrote nothing insightful about them.

Like many other writers he hated anyone probing into his life, and habitually lied, laid false trails, or exaggerated his experiences. In 1932, he traveled through central Africa. Typically, he claimed he had been in Africa a year. The actual time was two months. Never mind, he made the best of it and wrote three novels with African settings. He hid himself, never more than when he was promoting one of his books, as the dapper writer, puffing his pipe, obscuring himself with phenomenal statistics. But the statistics were misleading in the way that record-breaking is misleading, merely the helpless adoration of the exceptional. Simenon trotting out his big numbers sounds to me like a man’s mendacious reckoning, not different from the modestly endowed group of islanders in Vanuatu who wear enormous phallocrypts and call themselves Big Nambas.

Yet, though they invite suspicion, the most unlikely figures associated with Simenon are probably true, the roundabout four hundred works of fiction he claimed to have published are
verifiable. A hundred and seventeen are serious novels, the rest Maigrets and books written under pseudonyms. He dropped out of school at thirteen to become a reporter. The facts associated with him take such an extravagant form that he seems a victim of his own stupendous statistics—the numerous novels, the 500 million copies sold, the 55 changes of address, and his often quoted boast that he bedded 10,000 women. (His second wife put the figure at “no more than 1,200.”)

It is perhaps not surprising that such a freakish example of creative energy is not seriously studied (though there exists a Centre d’Études Georges Simenon at the University of Liège). Apart from the Nobel omission, Simenon did not feel slighted. He said, “Writing is not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness.” But the consequence is that every new reissue of a Simenon merits an introduction like this, because he seems (like many of his characters) to come from nowhere. Well, he agreed. He said that as a Belgian he was like a man without a country.

Though he claimed that none of his books was autobiographical, his work is a chronicle of his life—his young self is vivid in Pedigree and The Nightclub, his mother looms in The Lodger and The Cat, his daughter in The Disappearance of Odile, his second marriage in Three Bedrooms in Manhattan, his ménage a trios in In Case of Emergency, his travels in the novels with foreign settings—Tropic Moon, Aboard the Aquitaine, Banana Tourist, The Bottom of the Bottle, Red Lights, The Brothers Rico, and many others—and in all of them the particularities of his fantasies and obsessions. Feeling that he was an outsider, he had a gift for depicting aliens—the nameless African in The Negro, the immigrant in The Little Man from Arkangel, the Malous (in fact the Malowskis) in The Fate of the Malous, and Kachoudas in The Hatter’s Phantoms. By contrast, in Camus’ The Plague you’d hardly know you were in a foreign country—all the characters are Frenchmen, and incidentally The Plague is a world without women.
“You know you have a beautiful sentence, cut it,” Simenon said. “Every time I find such a thing in one my novels it is to be cut.” Simenon is exaggerating, he sometimes lets slip a pretty sentence, but generally his writing is so textureless as to be transparent and never calls attention to itself (“It’s written as if by a child”). No love of language is ever obvious, he remains anti-lapidary. The only new words one is likely to find in Simenon are the occasional technical terms, like the medical jargon in *The Patient* with its medical terms, *The Premier* with its particularities of French governance, and some bridge-playing episodes elsewhere. You will never learn a new word in a Simenon. And you will never laugh. Comedy is absent, humor is rare. A bleak vision and relentless seriousness earned his non-Maigrets the appellation *romans durs* because *dur* is not just hard but implies weight, seriousness, not only a stony quality but density and complexity—a kind of challenge and even a certain tedium. (A *dur* is a bore in some contexts.) Simenon’s characters read newspapers, usually bad news or crimes; they plot, lie, cheat, steal, sweat, have sex; frequently they commit murder, and just as often they commit suicide. They never read books or quote from them. They don’t study (as Simenon did, to mug up on detail). They are generally fussing at the margins of the working world, coming apart, hurtling downward, toward oblivion.

For any writer, it is not possible to be productive without being possessed by a strict sense of order and guided by discipline. One of Simenon’s shrewdest French biographers, Pierre Assouline, sees the clock as his dominant metaphor. His novels are full of timepieces and clock-watching. Simenon himself timed all his movements, not just his writing, clocking in, clocking out; even meals were timed to the minute. He famously made calendars chronicling his novel writing—usually eight or nine days of furious composition, a chapter a day.

His sexuality, too, involved the stopwatch. Simenon was
anything but a sensualist. A sex act in his books usually takes a few lines at most. In *The Bells of Bicetre*: “They stayed a long time almost motionless, like certain insects you see mating.” *The Man on the Bench in the Barn*: “I literally dived into her, suddenly, violently, there was fear in her eyes”—and then it’s over. *The Nightclub*: “She looked at him in astonishment. It was over already. He couldn’t even have said how he set about it.”

These hair-trigger instances echo the love life Simenon recorded in his *Intimate Memoirs*. One day, he approaches his wife in her office as she is speaking with her English secretary, Joyce Aitken. His wife asks him what he wants.

“You!”

That afternoon she simply lies down on the rug.

“Hurry up. You don’t have to leave, Aitken.”

*The Widow* is exceptional in depicting several seductions that go on for a few pages. A sentence that repeats so often in a Simenon as to be a signature line is: “She wore a dress and it was obvious that she had nothing on underneath.” *The Widow* also contains a variation of this sentence: “Still wearing her blue smock, with next to nothing beneath it . . .”

Unlike most of his characters, Simenon was someone whose self-esteem was in good repair. His personal world seemed complete. He moved from grand house to grand house—and they were self-contained, holding his family, his lovers, his library, his recreations; his appetites, his pipes, his pencils, his fancy cars. He lived the life of a seigneur, the lord of his own principality, where everything was ordered to his own specifications. The completeness of Simenon’s life is impressive: the man who lives with his ex-wife, his present wife, and his loyal servant, all of whom he sleeps with, while still finding time to be unfaithful to all three with prostitutes, and keeps writing.
That was what thrilled Henry Miller. Well, what philanderer wouldn’t be thrilled? And Miller didn’t know the half of it. One day (according to Marnham), seeing a young serving girl on all fours dusting a low table, Simenon on an impulse took her from behind. The girl told Madame Simenon, who laughed it off as being typically Georges. Witnessing this drollery, another serving girl wondered aloud, “On passe toutes a la casserole?” (“So everyone has a go at this pot?”)

In great contrast to the apparent coherence, the fatness, of his own life are the insufficiencies in the lives of his characters, who are usually strong enough to kill but seldom resourceful enough to survive. And it must be said that having spent many decades vigorously writing and living in style, his last years, twenty-three of them—after the suicide of his beloved daughter—were spent in a kind of solitary confinement and protracted depression in a poky house with his housekeeper, sitting in plastic chairs because, among his phobias, he held the belief that wooden furniture harbored insects.

A number of Simenon’s novels, among them The Venice Train, Belle, Sunday, and The Negro, can be grouped around the general theme malentendu or cross-purposes—the title of the Camus play that is Simenonesque in its cruelty. The Widow is firmly in this category, though its descriptions of violence and sexuality are unusually graphic for Simenon; and it is one of the few Simenons with a strong woman character in it. The woman in Betty and the woman narrator of November are similarly strong. But his women tend to be one-dimensional, guileful, opportunistic, coldly practical, unsentimental, or else easy prey. Tati the widow is a peasant who knows her own mind and possesses an ability to size up strangers.

The action takes place in the Bourbonnais, the dead center of France, in a hamlet by the canal that joins St. Amande with
Montluçon—apart from omitting the “e” from Amande, Simenon is very specific in his provincial geography.

An odd solecism occurs in the first paragraph of the novel. A man is walking down a road that is “cut slantwise every ten yards by the shadow of a tree trunk”—Simenon at his most economical in precise description. It is noontime, at the end of May. The man strides across these shadows. Then his own shadow is described: “a short, ridiculously squat shadow—his own—slid in front of him.” The sun seems to be shining from different angles in the space of two sentences, creating two sorts of shadow. It is perhaps not a riddle. Simenon hated to rewrite.

The young man boards the bus outside St. Amande, bound for Montluçon. He has nothing on him, no impedimenta, no obvious identity. “No luggage, no packages, no walking stick, not even a switch cut from the hedge. His arms swung freely.” Among the women returning from the market he is a stranger, though for the reader of Simenon he is so familiar as to be an old friend: the naked man, someone at a crossroads, a bit lost, a bit guilty, on the verge of making a fatal decision.

The widow Couderc sizes him up, seeing something in him no one else sees. Later we understand why: he somewhat resembles her son, a waster and ex-con who is in the Foreign Legion. She sees that this bus passenger is going nowhere, that he has nothing; she understands him and she wants him.

In this beautifully constructed first chapter, with a subtle building of effects, the young man notices the woman, too, and in the midst of the nosy chattering market women, the two “recognized each other.” He also needs her.

The woman, Tati, gets off the bus, and soon afterward the young man, Jean, does the same. Jean asks if he can give her a hand with her bundles, a gesture she had been expecting ever since their eyes met. He moves in with her. A few days later, on a Sunday, after she returns from church—a nice touch—she pours him a few drinks and they end up in bed.
She is not beautiful, but she is tough, even fearless, the sort of indestructible peasant who would feel at home at the table in van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters*. Unloved and frumpy, even slatternly, in an old ragged coat, her slip showing, and with a hairy mole on her cheek, she is at forty-five more than twenty years older than Jean. She gives Jean to understand that he can expect occasional sex but that she must also sleep with her abusive father-in-law from time to time, because she is living in his farmhouse.

Belying Tati’s rumpled clothes, and precarious existence among her quarrelsome in-laws, is her animal alertness, a peasant shrewdness, especially as regards her niece. The teenaged mother Felicie lives nearby; the effect of this pretty young woman on Jean disturbs Tati. Her suspicions of Jean’s past are quickly borne out after a visit by the gendarmes: Jean has recently been released from five years in prison (thus the *Ticket of Leave* title) and his precariousness resembles hers. She had taken him for a foreigner—he seems foreign throughout, a true outsider—but in fact he is from a distinguished family in Montluçon, son of a wealthy womanizing distiller. Estranged from his family, he is “free as air... a man utterly without ties.” And “he was free... like a child.”

“He did not walk like other people. He seemed to be going nowhere.” But he has walked into a trap. He does not know it yet, though for him, as for Meursault in *L’Étranger*, there is no future. He lives in a “magnificent present humming with sunshine.”

He tells Tati that he has murdered a man, almost casually and partly by accident. A woman was involved, though he didn’t love her. Far from being seriously affected by the crime, the trial, or the years in prison, he “scarcely realized that it was himself it was happening to.” He has been cast adrift by the crime, and after prison nothing mattered: “he was committed to nothing, nothing he did possessed either weight or importance.”
In his lack of remorse, or pity, he resembles the cold-hearted killer Frank Friedmaier in *Dirty Snow* and Popinga in *The Man Who Watched Trains Go By*. And of course, he prefigures Meursault, even to the solar imagery, for at a crucial point in the novel, recognizing his desire for Felicie, “At one stroke the sun had taken possession of him. Another world was swallowing them up…”

He succeeds with Felicie, as he succeeded with her aunt, but wordlessly, rutting among the farm buildings. He continues to make love to Tati, and is always abrupt if not brutal: “He undressed her as one skins a rabbit.” And in this ménage, another familiar Simenon situation ensues, that of lovers separated by a physical barrier, the passions of propinquity, jealousy always figuring in the plot. In *The Widow* the lovers in nearby cottages are separated by the canal, in *The Door* a communicating door, in *The Iron Staircase* an iron staircase, and a similar shuttling back and forth in *Act of Passion*. All these novels end in murder.

In this springtime pastoral—conflict in the countryside: fertile farmland, browsing animals, quarreling peasants—Jean slowly goes to pieces, consumed by self-disgust and fatalism. Typically for Simenon, by the subtle building of effects, Jean’s condition is suggested rather than analyzed. Feeling possessed by the desperate older woman who won’t let him go, by the younger woman who is indifferent to him, Jean realizes that he is at a dead end, that a crime is inevitable, and “he waited for what could not fail to happen.”

The novel becomes implicitly existential, though Simenon would scoff at such a word: there is no philosophical meditation in the narrative. Jean has been put on a road to ruin by Simenon—been set up, indeed. Many if not all Simenon novels describing the occurrence of *malentendu* imply that there is no exit—and the maddening thing is that even though the doomed character does not see a way out, the reader does. It does not occur to Jean that he can just walk away or get back
on the bus. He protests that he is indifferent to his crime, but he is damaged, he is guilt-ridden, he is possessed, and when Tati begs him to stay and love her, he is helpless to do anything but smash her skull. “It had been foreordained!”

In describing this lost soul and his desperate act, Simenon was reflecting the fatalism of his time. He wrote the book in a dark period, on the French coast—the name “Nieul sur Mer” is given at the end as its place of composition, a place near La Rochelle. France was at war, German occupation not far off, and doomsday seemed imminent. In this uncertain war, only violence or an act of passion gave meaning to the passage of time. Like Meursault, Jean is headed to certain execution—the notion of it occurs to him throughout the last third of the novel—and he is the author of his fate. He had stumbled into an idyllic setting without at first realizing that it was not idyllic at all but an Eden that has become a snake pit of corruption matching his own loss of innocence.

Rereading the novel, one realizes that (as with most Simenons), Jean had been doomed from the first paragraph, when he walked through the shadows. And we can easily see why Simenon was so angry that Camus won the Swedish lottery—because in novel after novel, Simenon dramatized the same sort of dilemma, the life with narrowing options (but always with subtle differences of plot, tone, location, and effects), the risk-taking of the man with nothing to lose, his vanity, his presumption, his willful self-destruction. Earlier, Jean yearns for commitment and for fate to intervene, but when he meditates on it (and ultimately gets his wish): “He wanted something definite and final, something that offered no prospect of retreat.” Simenon seems to be talking to himself, sending another of his characters to his death in a world without happy endings.

—PAUL THEROUX

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