



DIRTY SNOW

SIMENON

**AFTERWORD BY
WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN**

DIRTY SNOW

GEORGES SIMENON (1903–1989) was born in Liège, Belgium. His father was an insurance salesman, easygoing and unambitious; his mother, an unhappy, angry woman whose coldness and disapproval haunted her son. Simenon 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 author of pulp fiction while leading a dazzling social life in the company of his first wife and such lovers as the American dancer Josephine Baker. (He is said to have broken up with Baker because their affair was a distraction: he had produced a mere twelve novels in the year.) 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—books in which he displays his remarkable talent for capturing the look and mood of a place (whether West Africa, the Soviet Union, New York City, or provincial France) together with an acutely sympathetic awareness of the emotional and spiritual pain underlying the routines of daily life. Simenon remained in France throughout the Second World War, at the end of which he was accused of collaboration with the Germans; though quickly cleared of such charges, he moved to America, where he married his second wife and lived for close to a decade, returning to Europe in 1955. Having written nearly two hundred books under his own name and become the best-selling author in the world, whose stories had served as the inspiration for countless movies and TV shows, Simenon retired as a novelist in 1973, devoting himself instead to dictating memoirs

that filled thousands of pages: "I consider myself less and less a writer . . . All this is nothing but chatter . . . Since dictating has become a need, so to speak, I will dictate every morning whatever comes into mind . . . I would like to be able to be silent."

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN was born in Los Angeles in 1959 and attended Deep Springs College and Cornell University. He is the author of many works of fiction, long and short, including *The Royal Family*, *You Bright and Risen Angels*, *Whores for Gloria*, and *The Rainbow Stories*, as well as an ongoing series of seven novels, collectively entitled *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*, about the collision between the native populations of North America and their colonizers and oppressors. (Four volumes have been published so far: *The Ice-Shirt*, *Fathers and Crows*, *Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith*, and *The Rifles*.) Vollmann has also written two works of non-fiction: *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, which describes his crossing into Afghanistan with a group of Islamic commandos in 1982, and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, a treatise on violence. He lives in California.

DIRTY SNOW

GEORGES SIMENON

Translated from the French by

MARC ROMANO

LOUISE VARÈSE

Afterword by

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

AFTERWORD

WHAT IS noir? The old saw about pornography applies: You will know it when you see it. Varying in temperature from downbeat to gloomy—in other words, below freezing in either case—varying in locale from urban ghettos to squalid little towns controlled by political machines, noir is actually surprisingly unvaried. Think betrayal, think murder, think secrecy and crookedness, and you're pretty much there. But for much the same reason that the most threatening street in the red-light district may support a plush, safe bar or even a business-class hotel, noir's grittiest page-turners are sometimes inhabited by heroes who are strangely—heroic. Raymond Chandler's protagonist, the private eye Marlowe, to whom the word "hardboiled" has been so often attached that it's now stuck to his shoe like chewing gum, is actually a softy: compassionate, even ethical in the bourgeois sense. He doesn't mind being nasty to stuck-up rich bitches or hiding the occasional dead body; all the same, he preserves what strikes this reader as a comically dated horror of drugs and pornography, he avoids sexual gratification on the job, and, above all, he'll never betray a client, much less a friend. Loyalty! Decency! As technology and corporatism impel us more and more to treat one another like things, those two words approach irrelevance, except between intimates, and sometimes even then. This is why with each passing decade, Marlowe's corpse decomposes ever more rapidly into a skeleton of outright sentimentality. To some readers he already seems as quaint as Fenimore Cooper's Deerslayer.

A couple of centuries from now (assuming that there will still be human beings to stain the snows of this earth), Simenon's protagonist Frank Friedmaier may be considered more or less repellent than he now appears, depending on the sensibilities of that age, but he's hardly likely to suffer Marlowe's fate. In fact, he is almost inhumanly horrific. Chandler's novels are noir shot through with wistful luminescence; Simenon has concentrated noir into a darkness as solid and heavy as the interior of a dwarf star.

How has he done it? Part of his artistry consists of limiting Frank's life and crimes, not to mention his whole world, to a scale as petty as a prison yard, thereby bringing Hannah Arendt's old phrase, "the banality of evil," to life. And of course Frank's evil is banal not to us, which would have meant that he bored us, but to Frank himself. Oh, no, he scarcely bores us; on the contrary, some of his doings are almost unbearable to read of. But what he does approaches pointlessness. The crimes of an inmate of Marlowe's world have their objects; the plot unfolds more logically than life itself. *Dirty Snow* is no improvement on life itself. This is why Frank reminds me less of Marlowe than of some Chekhov character, a provincial mediocrity condemned to swelter in his own dullness. Now magnify dullness until all possibilities are frozen and filthy. *Dirty Snow* is the aptest title I could imagine.

One fundamental question that this book raises is: Does every human being seek to evolve, even if unknowingly? Is Frank abnormal in this regard, or are his mother's whores and his own thuggish acquaintances more than they seem? In my own bread-and-butter work (I am a journalist) I travel to nasty places. Based on what I see there, it seems to me that brutality and immiseration compel the human majority to exhaust itself in what my interpreter in the Congo kept calling *the struggle for life*. In the world of *Dirty Snow*, that struggle occupies most people. The tenants of Frank's building hate him

not only because he is hateful and because they disapprove of his mother's business, but also because they are cold and hungry while he isn't.

Chekhov encourages us to believe, and I myself prefer to believe, that within us all hides a spark of something more than mere consciousness; that spark is called potentiality, and its common failure to become what it could have been is tragedy. Another place this theme is worked out is *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's longish nineteenth-century masterpiece where the characters live at some remove from noir: there Lydgate sets out to revolutionize the field of medicine but corrupts himself with a foolish marriage in which his social-climbing wife runs up ruinous bills; Dorothea marries pedantic Mr. Casaubon because she longs to devote herself to her husband's great scholarly work, only to find that his project is the feeblest phantasm. What about the struggle for life? And yet even if everybody could be sufficiently well housed and fed, most of us would be lucky to approach Lydgate's level of aspiration, and disappointment.

Thanks to his mother, Frank doesn't have to worry about the struggle for life at all. He possesses the freedom to aspire to be more than he is. He's at Lydgate's level. What makes *Dirty Snow* so haunting is that unlike Lydgate or Dorothea, or even Chekhov's three sisters who only know that they are unhappy and keep vaguely dreaming about going to Moscow, Frank never articulates what it is that he is looking for. Furthermore, the spark in him is not very nice.

To get right down to it, Frank despises what he gets. Without understanding himself or the world in which he finds himself, he sets out to pollute everything. Marlowe might have gotten dirty, but he aspired to be an agent of truth and even salvation, although sometimes he only accomplished finality. Frank for his part is nothing more or less than an agent of corruption.

But how intensely human he is! Here is Simenon's genius.

Frank wants to be recognized. He wants to be *known*. He scarcely knows himself, or anything else worth knowing. But if he can somehow stand revealed to the gaze of the Other, then maybe he will achieve some sort of realization. Don't you and I want to be more real than we are? And wouldn't it be convenient if somebody else could help us get there? All we have to do is move to Moscow or marry Mr. Casaubon.

This theme is very subtly articulated at first; certainly it remains almost invisible to Frank himself. The plot begins on page one with Frank's desire to be noticed. To fulfill that desire, he will commit a meaningless murder.

Frank's "friend" Kromer (I use the word because Simenon introduces him as such; I use the quotation marks because of course Frank has no friends in any human sense) once strangled a woman with whom he was copulating because she dared to hope that he was making her pregnant, and because, worse yet, "she had kept getting more tender and clinging." So it follows that Kromer wouldn't have killed her if he hadn't been fucking her; and the relationship between sex and death becomes still more pronounced when Simenon remarks:

And for Frank, who was nineteen, to kill his first man was another loss of virginity hardly any more disturbing than the first. And, like the first, it wasn't premeditated. It just happened. As though a moment comes when it's both necessary and natural to make a decision that has long since been made . . .

For weeks, perhaps months, he had kept saying to himself, because he had felt within himself a sort of inferiority, "I'll have to try . . ."

Frank's story is far more shocking and squalid than Dorothea's, of course. It is up to you to decide whether it is more

or less “tragic.” The gap between Dorothea’s aspiration and the far more limited reality which marks her best effort is measurable. In Frank’s case, both the goal and the achievement remain at such a low level, so close to the desperately brutish struggle for life, that it’s necessary to ask: Which is worse (and obviously I’m not speaking here in an ethical sense) Dorothea’s gaping failure or the sickening meanness of Frank’s potentiality?

Let’s just suppose for a minute (in which case *Dirty Snow* would be an entirely different book) that Frank chose to express his identity by joining the Resistance (I capitalize this in World War II form because *Dirty Snow* is despite itself a World War II novel). After all, the occupiers are ruthlessly oppressive, and violence against them would be justified. All right, so we’ve supposed it and it’s inconceivable. Why? Dystopian novels usually create some sort of opposition between tyranny and its victims, in order to highlight the wickedness of the former. Even Orwell’s *1984* endows its hero and heroine with sensitivity, in order to appall us with the ultimate destruction of that sensitivity in the torture chambers of the Ministry of Truth. But as we rotate our telescope through Frank’s universe, we seem to find an awful lot of people who don’t express any sensitivity at all. The best of them—Holst, Sissy, old Mademoiselle Vilmos whom Frank robs and murders—are no better than atomized. The rest are simply brutes.

Frank’s first victim, the Eunuch, is typical of *Dirty Snow*’s environs, which is to say of the struggle for life. This fellow scarcely deserves our pity at all. He compels the prostitutes at Timo’s to eat and drink; he finger-fucks them in front of others; he lays down his gunbelt on the table as they eat. To Frank, none of these acts are particularly interesting or relevant (like Marlowe, he’s seen it all), but all of the sudden, in

what he slyly pretends to be a non sequitur, Simenon articulates Frank's thoughts for him as follows: "So wasn't it natural that—since he had to kill someone sometime—he would think of the Eunuch?" Of course, nobody really does think of the Eunuch, not Simenon, not us; we're not even present at his murder; he's nothing but another nasty placeholder, a two-dimensional piece of work who's promptly swallowed up in the dirty snow. We don't care. He's nothing.

But the decision to slay him, unlike the erotic decision to which it has been normatively compared, goes far beyond callous bravado to outright self-destructiveness. To kill a member of the occupying forces would be nearly suicidal under any circumstances; to kill him without any particular motive is—well, it's certainly peculiar. And this is what makes Frank such a haunting character. The struggle for life alone cannot explain him. Frank doesn't know what he's about, and it is a measure of his sickness (and his world's) that all he can think of to do in order to discover himself is to commit acts of violence and betrayal.

Frank for his part proposes a more rational explanation for the crime: if he gets the Eunuch's gun he'll be able to impress a certain Berg, another non-friend whom he doesn't care about. Ayn Rand once wrote: "You have to flatter other people whom you despise in order to impress other people who despise you." It's beyond that: Frank has to flatter someone to whom he's indifferent in order to impress someone who's indifferent to him, and he knows all along that even if Berg is impressed, Frank will remain indifferent to that, too. In short, the motive is absurd, in keeping with the deed.

Here my editor advises: "Avoid this word" (absurd) "as carrying too much baggage? Also, the idea of the absurd suggests the 'motiveless crime' of Gide's Lafcadio, and this crime isn't motiveless, it just isn't explained by the reasons Frank supplies." But what if Frank wants those reasons to be absurd? If so, why would he?

We cannot ever ascertain whether Frank sets out to be caught, but he is certainly willing to increase his chances of getting caught in order to experience something or learn something, though he doesn't know quite why. Why else would he *want* Holst to see him lie in wait for the Eunuch? "Had Frank perhaps coughed out of childish impulse? That was too simple, too pat." We're told that the idea of Holst's knowing that Frank is the murderer "excites" Frank, that there's a "secret bond" between them. The exchanged gazes between the man and the boy come to take on a deeply intimate, almost erotic character for Frank, much like his impulse to the murder of the Eunuch. Holst is the one he murders the Eunuch for. (Why not say so? He didn't do it for Berg.) Holst is the one he fondles Holst's daughter for.

In short, Holst could be described as the key to Frank's soul. What exactly does Holst "mean"? We'll never know. (Love, kindness, fellowship; Frank rages against all these. Holst seems, insofar as we can tell, to be a decent and perhaps cultivated man. Why then does Frank not murder him?) Like so many other characters in this novel, he's delineated partially and sparingly. And in passing I want to call attention to another measure of Simenon's artistry: the enigmatic relations between Frank and Holst tease the mind; yet they take up an astonishingly small proportion of the page count.

What precisely do we know? Simenon reminds us explicitly that Frank lacks a father—that's the gist of it; Holst for his part (as we learn during their meeting in the prison) evidently sees Frank as a filial surrogate, for he compares him to his own son who stole mercury and platinum to finance his studies; the difference, of course, is like the difference between Frank and Dorothea: Frank has no goal, no studies apart from his own perverse search for self-awareness, of which he can scarcely be said to be aware; and he squanders the proceeds of his crimes. (The similarity is that both Holst's son and Frank commit suicide.) Frank's desire for Holst to be

his father, and Holst's desire for the violator of his daughter to be his son, seem off the mark, somehow, not quite comprehensible, maybe pathological. This meeting with Holst and Sissy, which Simenon grotesquely refers to as a wedding, could be the one false note in the book. "Destiny had given him a gift . . ." But Frank, as Simenon has already explained, "had spent the greater part of his life . . . hating destiny with an almost personal hatred."

So perhaps the note is supposed to be false. "Sissy was in him," Simenon ecstatically oozes. "She had come. She was there. She was in him. His. Holst had given them his blessing." But let's not forget that Frank has no use for Sissy.

Where does all this leave us? Lost in the dirty snow.

Indeed, the more we try to find landmarks in the novel, the more lost we get. In its dreamy, stifling, menacing vagueness, *Dirty Snow* reminds me of the work of science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, whose constructions tend to fall through their own subbasements into the dungeons of alternate universes.

Who is Frank Friedmaier? *Where* is he? The occupation authorities, whom at first from Frank's German-sounding last name I thought to be Americans at the end of World War II, gradually show themselves to be harsher than any American command. The names of other people, not to mention the streets, likewise baffle us into dead ends—are we in Germany, Belgium, or France?

What was he actually arrested for? We never know for certain how much the authorities have on him. After all, that doesn't matter. In one of his prison interrogations it becomes clear that the source of those marked bills he earned for his murder-robbery is of extreme interest to the interrogator. Simenon wants us to believe, such is his ugly vision of the world, that the occupiers are so corrupt that tracking illicit

disbursements is more important to them than the murder of the Eunuch. Still, maybe it was the murder which impelled them to bring him in. Well, what's the difference? If that crime didn't in and of itself lead to Frank's arrest, it commenced a string of in-your-face follies which eventually did doom Frank. All of them were vile, and all were meaningless. So why do we need to know?

Who turned him in? We can't be sure of that, either. Maybe no one; maybe the authorities were watching him all along. Probably not his mother, but we can't entirely dismiss her. With good reason, she fears his lethal anger and coldness, which might be cause for saving herself; she's an exploiter who's callously disregarding of her girls' health (the episode with the whore whose "plumbing" gets damaged by Otto is especially telling); she has an understanding of some kind with the inspector, who might be Frank's father; she turns her brothel into an information-gathering apparatus for the occupiers. One of the nastiest characters in this book, she turns country girls into whores, then, once they've become stale and blowsy, demotes them to household drudges and finally kicks them out; Simenon remarks that the girls arrive thinking they've found haven in her warm, food-rich apartment. She "knew how to train them." To be sure, she loves Frank, or believes that she does; and she caters to him; indeed, she is a major factor in his spoiling. She has fed him with the corruption he regurgitates, which is why, as I said, *he wants to be hated*—a surefire way to get others to *see* him, to be real, to actually catch the eye, like a blot of fresh red blood on the dirty snow. Indeed, most people do hate him. Therefore, the question of who might have turned him in can be answered: Anybody and everybody—except the two who had most cause: Holst and Sissy.

What do we know about Frank? Almost nothing. What is there to know? The same.

Given all that it does not say, *Dirty Snow* succeeds quite surprisingly in being a classic bildungsroman, a novel of development. By the end, Frank is asking himself: "Were they going to make him the kind of offer Lotte had accepted? . . . What would he do if they asked him outright? . . . What would Holst do?"

But this is not quite the great moment of moral redemption which we tend to encounter in the bildungsroman—or is it? Calmly, defiantly, Frank informs the interrogator: "I am not a fanatic, an agitator, or a patriot. I am a piece of shit . . . I want to die, as soon as possible, in whatever fashion you choose."

What makes *Dirty Snow* so depressing and so true is that Frank is a piece of shit who does deserve to die. In the end, he has learned to know himself; nothing more is left to him. Like the Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg who admitted to their crimes, he has achieved the only kind of heroism which is still open to him: he admits that he is ruined and evil through and through. He stands by himself. His moral and intellectual development, such as it is, has been the explicit assumption of the evilness which he has long since arrogated.

When the book first opens he has not killed anyone; he has not committed the worst betrayal of all, the seduction and proxy rape of Sissy. Nor, I repeat, was there ever any need for him to do these things. When I had only read a few pages of *Dirty Snow*, Frank reminded me of Camus' protagonist in *The Stranger*, who kills for no reason. But all around him a cruel and evil occupying force from some unnamed country is oppressing and killing. Frank is less "absurd" than the Stranger, less out of place. In spite of his privileged existence, he too is contaminated by the terrible struggle for life. The only experience available to people in Frank's country, so it would seem, the only form of maturing and growing, is being corrupted. And all that Holst's proxy fatherhood can give

Frank in the end is empirical validation of his own badness. There's destiny for you! No wonder Frank hates it. Can anything get much worse than this?

—WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

This is a New York Review Book
Published by The New York Review of Books
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

La Neige était sale copyright © 1948 by Georges Simenon Limited,
a Chorion Company
Translation by Marc Romano and Louise Varèse entitled *Dirty Snow*
copyright © 1951, 2003 by Georges Simenon Limited, a Chorion Company
Afterword copyright © 2003 by William T. Vollmann
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Simenon, Georges, 1903–

[*Neige était sale*. English]

Dirty snow / by Georges Simenon ; translated by Marc Romano ;
afterword by William T. Vollmann.

p. cm. — (New York Review Books classics)

ISBN 1-59017-043-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Romano, Marc. II. Title. III. Series.

PQ2637.I53N4313 2003

843'.912—dc21

2003013762

ISBN 1-59017-043-1

Cover image: Pierre Huyghe, *Les Grandes Ensembles*

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

September 2003

www.nyrb.com