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BIOGRAPHY

Georges Simenon (1903–1989), wrote over 400 novels and collections of short stories and sold hundreds of millions of copies of his books in 55 languages. He was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903 and went to work as a reporter at the age of fifteen. In 1923 he moved to Paris, becoming a highly successful and prolific author of pulp fiction under various pseudonyms. By the early 1930s, Simenon had emerged as a writer under his own name, introducing his most famous character, the laconic Inspector Maigret. He also began to write his psychological novels, or *romans durs* (literally “hard novels”: not difficult, but hard as opposed to soft). In these books 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—as well as a sympathetic awareness of the emotional and spiritual pain underlying the routines of daily life. Joyce Carol Oates describes these novels as “a sequence of cinematic confrontations in which an individual—male, middle-aged, unwittingly trapped in his life—is catapulted into an extraordinary adventure that will leave him transformed, unless destroyed.”

In 1973, as the best-selling author in the world with countless movie and television adaptations to his credit, Simenon retired as a novelist and devoted himself to dictating memoirs that filled thousands of pages. He died in 1989.

THE ENGAGEMENT

by Georges Simenon

Afterword by John Gray

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“The *romans durs* are extraordinary: tough, bleak, offhandedly violent, suffused with guilt and bitterness, redolent of place... wonderfully entertaining. They are also more philosophically profound than any of the fiction of Camus or Sartre, and far less self-conscious.”

—John Banville

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Georges Simenon wrote hundreds of pulp novels, detective and crime stories, and psychological thrillers (*romans durs*), and is widely admired by writers from Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett to Walter Mosley, William Vollmann, and John Banville. *The Engagement* is one of his classic psychological novels: a chilling study of unacceptable individuals and how society works to eliminate them.

In a seedy apartment building on the outskirts of Paris lives flabby, pasty Mr. Hire (pronounced “Heer,” not like the English word “hire”). He is a faceless man of monotonous, obsessive habits who keeps to himself and gives his neighbors the creeps. When a prostitute is found murdered in a vacant lot nearby, the concierge is sure that Mr. Hire must have been the killer; the police are as happy to have him to pin the murder on as anyone else; the neighbors circle like vultures and wait for the chance to put this disturbing scapegoat away.

We slowly learn, on the one hand, that Mr. Hire earns his living from petty postal fraud and is a convicted pornographer, a regular at the whorehouse, and a peeping Tom. On the other hand, we also learn that he is entirely innocent of the crime. The beautiful redhead across the way, who seems not to mind Mr. Hire’s attentions, is using him for purposes of her own; in a way, she conceals more evil in her soul than Mr. Hire has in his. As Simenon shows us more and more of Mr. Hire’s outer existence, he reveals the gulf in us all between what we do and who we are.

First published in 1933, *The Engagement* can be seen as an important forerunner of existentialism, an ominous foreshadowing of Nazi rule, and a penetrating exploration of crowd psychology—how society turns its own prejudices about people into self-fulfilling prophecies. But it is first and foremost a masterfully atmospheric tale, whose cool, spare prose shows why Simenon is one of the best-selling authors of all time.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. None of the characters in *The Engagement* are very likable. Which ones, if any, do you sympathize with the most? Are nasty people more interesting to read about, or do you think Simenon is suggesting that such people are more common than we like to admit?
2. The other characters in the novel have an immediate visceral reaction to Mr. Hire: even the prostitutes find him “strange, disconcerting”, and in a seedy nightclub “he could sense their harsh, suspicious stares. He hadn’t done anything. He hadn’t said anything. All he’d done was be happy” [p. 80, p. 108]. What is everyone reacting to? If you saw someone like Mr. Hire, would you find him creepy? Is it less creepy when you read about him? Do you think Simenon finds him creepy?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Big Clock, Kenneth Fearing
(introduction by Nicholas Christopher)

That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana,
Carlo Emilio Gadda
(introduction by Italo Calvino)

The Day of the Owl, Leonardo Sciascia
(introduction by George Scialabba)

To Each His Own, Leonardo Sciascia
(introduction by W. S. DiPiero)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Other NYRB Classics by Georges Simenon: *Dirty Snow*, *The Man Who Watched Trains Go By*, *Monsieur Monde Vanishes*, *Red Lights*, *The Strangers in the House*, *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*, and *Tropic Moon*.

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*

Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Ruth Rendell, *A Demon in My View*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*

3. Why do you think Simenon chose to make Mr. Hire Jewish? (The name of the suburb, Villejuif, also means “Jewish city” in French.) Do you think it is important to his character, or to how the other characters see him? Do you think Simenon’s portrayal of Mr. Hire, or the other characters’ opinions of Mr. Hire, are anti-Semitic?
4. Why do you think we find out relatively little about the murder that’s at the center of the plot, and about the real killer? If *The Engagement* isn’t primarily about the murder, what is it about?
5. What do you think of the sex scenes in the book, for example, Mr. Hire at the bathhouse [pp. 27–29] or Alice with the detective [pp. 88–89]? Simenon leaves almost everything out; does that make the scenes less effective or more effective? How do you feel reading them? Do you find yourself trying to piece together what happens?
6. Like all mystery novelists, Simenon withholds a lot of important information in the book, especially the fact that Mr. Hire saw the murder. But the effect seems different, more disorienting than suspenseful. Did you like having the story told in this way? Why do you think Simenon chose to keep his readers off-balance like this?
7. Mr. Hire often sits still, his mind blank, “as if frozen in time and space;” even with other people, “Mr. Hire could stare at someone for a very long time, without meaning to, without wanting to, without anything” [p. 16, p. 39]. What does such emptiness mean? Does it symbolize anything deeper about Mr. Hire, or relate to other aspects of the plot?
8. Mr. Hire turns out to be a bowling expert: “He set his feet down on the floor at just the right spot. The ball flew from his arm in an arc that was pure geometry” [p. 68]. Does this hobby symbolize other aspects of Mr. Hire’s character? What about him makes him well suited to this particular activity?
9. During his meeting at the police office, the commissioner brings up Mr. Hire’s past: “It was all too true. It pained Mr. Hire not to be able to explain. . . . How could he possibly describe the little shop” and his parents and his childhood [p. 78]? What does his childhood mean to Mr. Hire? Can a person ever describe how these things matter? Is the police commissioner wrong to see things the way he does, or is he just doing his job?
10. At the end of the book, the whole world of the neighborhood simply goes back to normal as though Mr. Hire had never existed. Did you find the ending satisfying? Was it what you expected to happen?
11. Georges Simenon is one of the best-selling authors of all time. What do you think is the lasting appeal of the crime novel? What are the essential ingredients of a successful story?