

Le Voleur de Maigret

G.Simenon

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What is the charm of the Maigret novels? Their minimal depiction of the nether life of Paris? Paris noir. What are the significant details that makes it come alive? For one thing, at least for readers who are also residents of the city the mention of street names, all of them authentic I believe. The observation 'en passant' such as

Il revoyait la barre sombre du métro aérien qui coupait le ciel en diagonale, croyait entendre le roulement sourds de wagons..

or the constant allusions to Maigret and his pipe. Lightening it, smoking it, hitting it against the heel of his shoe. Or the note of the rain hitting the streets. Never anything elaborate, always something short, the significant detail so to speak, to create a mood and a sense of 'being there'. It is all part of being 'hard-boiled' in the American sense of Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler. Not so much a mystery to be solved as a depiction of criminal and bohemian milieus in stark settings. Much dialogue, making for a terse prose and elliptic interchanges. As Maigret and his assistants reappear regularly, recognizable by their set patterns of behavior, they make up a kind of a 'soap noir'.

In the present book there is an inauspicious beginning starting with a petty act of pick-pocketing targeting Maigret himself (hence the title), and then the story unfolds from there on. This time we move in the seedy circles of a producer of films surrounded by women, struggling screen writers, photographers, sculptors and general hangers on. Everybody seems to sleep with everyone readily available, at least this applies to the producer himself. They meet regularly in bars and restaurants (where they are so called regulars) and Maigret drops in to listen, to observe and pose questions. In the end the expected conclusion is revealed, but that is secondary to the tale.

They are easily devoured, yet not being pulp-fiction, for that the author is too accomplished and discerning. It is part of a craft which should not be despised. Admittedly much of it is hack work, sticking to a format that works, and on which variations are being played (and as I never tire of pointing out, your imagination is only truly exercised when you are working within constraints). How could it be otherwise in view of the great serial output? He reputedly wrote over 500 oos and novels, not only 'Maigrets' and was able to finish a book in eleven days, eight scheduled for writing, three for corrections. But most of the work people do is of that hack quality, some of us are just better than the others, and divine inspiration is a gift not an entitlement that you can earn. Simenon wrote as a professional having identified his mission early on, raised and educated as a journalist since his late teens, with the journalist's eye for the short and eye-catching, and having in that capacity early on been introduced to the seamier parts of life, which he would exploit throughout his career.

One interesting thing for a detached reader, i.e. one who does not read just for entertainment for the moment, is to note whether the changes of time is actually reflected

in the quotidian life depicted. After all the first Maigret novel appeared in the early 30's, while the last in the early 70's. For obvious reasons there are no cell phones or laptops, lines are fixed, and if not in residence you call from a bar or a phone booth, the latter nowadays having been totally phased out. Yet, there are of course cars, buses and the metro in or under the streets (and sometimes, as noted, above), and thus much of the daily events do not seem that extra-ordinary or exotic, maybe to a Frenchman the differences is to be found mainly in the franc, the old or the new ones, and the rate of inflation may be gauged. In the latter novels TV's appears, which you would not expect in the former. With few exceptions, while an author can ignore modern contrivances, he cannot make up future ones.

Then finally, the question that could be asked about most crime literature. What does the author really know about police work, most of not even all, crime writers would be helpless when facing a real case, as Simenon would learn to his humiliation. But of course it is all fiction, where the creating of illusion and suspension of disbelief, is what it is all about.

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