

La veuve Couderc

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A 'Roman noir' and also classified as a 'policier', the first is definitely correct, the latter questionably so, even if there is a murder committed. Anyway it is a tragedy the conclusion of which you find yourself shying away from as you approach the end of the book.

The widow of the title lives with her deaf elderly father-in-law in a farm by a canal. One day she returns home after having bought an incubator in town, deciding to raise chicken and expand her egg producing business, on the bus a lonely wanderer hops up and spends his last cash on a ticket to the next town, however, he decides to get off at the same stop as her helping her carrying the incubator to her home. One thing leads to another, he is treated to some wine, later to some dinner, and having nothing particular in mind he ends up staying over night, and then becomes a help being both bossed around and fed by her. She is forty-five as it transpires, with a grown-up son serving time in the army in Africa; while he is twenty-eight and just released from prison where he has served five years for manslaughter. She, by name of Tati, has been at the house since she as fourteen serving the old man who was a widower with three children. At seventeen she was raped by the young son, a child was born and a marriage pushed through. Her husband soon died, her sisters-in-law married one in the town the other to a neighbor having a daughter - Flicie - only sixteen but already with a child. He, by name of Jean, grew up in a rich family, spoiled by money, a failure in school, leading a life of dissipation getting him into some temporary financial troubles through gambling, for which he hit a man, stole back his money, and dumped him into the river, so as not to be caught. Eventually he is linked with the murder, but an unscrupulous lawyer gets him off the hook, making him plead accidental manslaughter and ignore that the crime was connected with other crimes, such as stealing and removal of evidence, which would have made the act premeditated and deserving of capital punishment literally inflicted by severing the head. Tati accepts him and Jean is ravaged by guilt of having escaped the fate due to him. And life continues.

One day the two sisters show up at the house and demand that their father moves in with them, he is too old to do work. Tati remonstrates, he has it good here, and she does after all even toss him some kindly acts of sexual satisfaction from time to time, as you give a child a candy. Later on the old man is abducted by them to live with the neighboring daughter, Tati opposes gets there and the husband of the sister-in-law hits her with a bottle on her head, which subsequently swells up and she is in bad shape indeed, the next day a doctor is summoned and she is ordered rest for several weeks by a concerned doctor. She is still a powerful presence, demands to be moved into another room which allows a view of the immediate vicinity so she can keep a watch on what is going on while she is bedridden.

Jean is attracted by Flicie, the young girl and part of the enemy camp, and manages to attract her which may not be so difficult and sleeps with her hidden from Tati's sight in

a shed with rabbits. Tati suspects something, her motherly love racked by jealousy, and he repeatedly denies that he ever meets or talks with Felice. In the end he gets exasperated, confesses everything, and she pleads with him to deny it, she would accept his dallying with anyone else, she does not begrudge him his fun, anyone but that particular girl. She loves him like a son, a replacement of her own good-for-nothing. She has gone as far as for all intents and purposes giving him the money she has for years of avarice saved for her son, revealing the hiding place. She dreams about pooling money, would his father not come and visit him, and expanding her egg-producing business. He instead takes a hammer and kills her brutally hitting her in the head.

This gratuitous act of cruelty jars in the reader; have we not been induced to feel sympathy for him and his growing devotion to the widow? Have we not seen how he gradually is atoning for his crime and how the widow slowly seems to be recovering from her head injury. But our sympathies are mislaid, we have been led to believe that the protagonist has more humanity in him than warranted. As she lies there with her head swollen he is struck with her ugliness and she only generates disgust in his mind. Maybe that is the cause of his sudden impulse, or was it meditated?

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