

## Preface

by Gian Luca Farinelli and John Simenon

It has been a long journey for us too.

In 2015, Simenon's Italian editor, Roberto Calasso, through Matteo Codignola, put us in contact so as to explore the possibility of establishing a center or exhibition on Simenon. We worked together for ten years to find a way of showcasing the whole life of a writer who always, stubbornly, insisted on being a novelist and 'only' a novelist.

First, we had to wait for the Galleria Modernissimo to be completed. In the heart of Bologna, a few meters beneath Piazza Maggiore, amongst the remnants of via Emilia and traces of ancient Rome, in a space carved out in the late Fifties then closed and forgotten at the end of the Twentieth Century, the Galleria was renovated and reopened together with the Cinema Modernissimo. With a worthy location to host it, and thanks to the work of numerous people and institutions, the time was ripe for a Georges Simenon exhibition, eight journeys of a novelist.

Despite its dimensions (roughly 1,300 meters squared of exhibition space), it does not aspire to represent the 'complete Simenon'; rather, it is an invitation to embark on eight journeys, eight essential stages in the evolution of a single identity, both personal and expressive. Visitors to the exhibition are thus invited to accompany Simenon on his journeys, both literal and creative.

We start in Liège at the beginning of the 19th century, but also in Seraing, a suburb to the south-west of the city and a place well known to cinephiles, because two of Liège's other most famous children, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, set all their films there.

What is so special about this flat region in Wallonia?

From the 1820s, thanks to its important carbon reserves, waterways, and easy accessibility, Liège, which is bisected by the Meuse river, became the capital of economic liberalism and the first city on the European continent to experience the industrial revolution which was already transforming the United Kingdom. By 1850 the Cockerill iron and steel works in Seraing were the largest in the world and, thanks to Wallonia, Belgium was the second largest economic power in the world. To protect this wealth, the Belgian state undertook important canalization work on the Ourthe and Meuse rivers, making Liège the first industrial metropolis on the continent – a testing ground for modernity and a theatre for social conflicts, with the emerging workers movement heading up strikes, struggles, victories and defeats. Two years after Simenon's birth, in 1905, Liège hosted the World Fair and celebrated its status as one of the capitals of the modern world.

Simenon's youth in Liège accompanied him for the rest of his life in his search for what he called "the naked man", with his metaphysical fear of the chaos of the world. Conversely, the films of

the Dardenne brothers describe the periphery of Liège as it is today, sixty years after the end of the industrial era. Only a small number of Simenon's readers and the Dardennes' audience have been to Liège, but we can all identify with the universal stories and places they recount, which exemplify a condition which affects us all. It is certainly curious that artists from such different periods, who are so different in their background and outlook and who never met, have nonetheless both brought us such a faithful and lucid portrait of the world and its ills.

### **The Man's Journey**

Let us now follow the young Georges on his first four symbolic voyages, which proved to be decisive formative experiences. First of all, Liège, the family nest, where aged eleven he discovered the meaning of war and experienced five years of German occupation. There, too, he became a journalist, while still very young, and began the lengthy process of honing his writing skills. Then came Paris where, together with his first wife Tigy – whose photo albums lend the exhibition a previously unseen perspective – he lived through the peak years of a city which, at the time, was the artistic and creative center of the world. There he became one of the most significant, if sometimes controversial, figures in a flourishing publishing world. However, the French capital soon became too small for a couple who were curious and hungry for new experiences, and so began a long and intense period of exploration: eight years in which Simenon crossed France, Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa and the world by boat, train and car. These travels were financed by the reporting in which Simenon honed his vision of mankind and depicted a world in transition and poised to tear itself apart. Simenon photographed everything he saw, without ever falling back on a tourist's gaze. For the first time, visitors to the exhibition can view hundreds of these photographs and try to imagine which character or novel they recall.

We opted not to display this exceptional body of work as print photographs, but instead to let them scroll across illuminated screens in order to better bring out their narrative component. Perhaps it is this aspect which ultimately convinced Simenon to stop taking photographs (following these journeys, he only took family photos). That said, for Simenon, living has always meant writing. This fidelity to the act of writing is the secret of Simenon's art and, after exploring other paths (he could have become a photographer, a screenwriter, a director, a journalist, or an editor), he would always remain faithful to his vocation as a novelist.

Fourth journey: Maigret. In 1931, Simenon reclaimed his surname, signing *Pietr the Latvian*, his first Maigret novel, as Georges Simenon. Prior to this, for eleven years beginning with the publication of his first novel *Au pont des Arches* in 1920, he had made use of a dozen different pseudonyms for what he defined as his "popular novels", which were written as a way to learn the trade. The birth of Maigret was the fruit of these labors, formed from discarded characters and intuitions that gradually emerged over the course of this apprenticeship.

Very quickly, Simenon accomplished three things: quantity, quality, and success. It is a synthesis which it is almost impossible to achieve, a combination effectively forbidden by the unwritten rules of the culture of the period. Simenon quickly established himself as an author with both a

popular and literary appeal, writing at a frenetic pace, faster than any other writer. However, he was not solely an artist, because he concerned himself with every aspect of his work, effectively becoming his own editor. He worked on the covers and printing of his books, on their promotion and international sales, and enabled the mediatization of both his characters and his own persona.

### **The Work's Journey**

After the war – which he experienced from the side-lines, as a foreigner in an occupied land, protecting himself and his wife and firstborn son – he settled in the United States where he met, and later married, his second wife, Denyse Ouimet, who gave him three children and helped him manage his work. This period signaled a decisive turning point in which everything changed in his life, both his working practices and literary output. It was in the United States that Simenon began the second phase of his life, which is represented by the last four of our journeys, the first of which would earn him the status of an international novelist. In 1955, the Simenons returned to Europe and, three years later, settled definitively in Switzerland. From that moment on, it was no longer Simenon himself but rather his work which would travel the world, reaching an astonishing level of fame and dissemination.

Our journey continues in Italy, where we are joined by Mondadori, which started publishing Simenon's novels in 1932, thus becoming his first publisher not in the French language. Despite Elio Vittorini's reservations, in the Thirties Mondadori published both Maigret and the so-called "hard novels", managing to limit the impact of the Fascist censors, who considered Simenon a repugnant novelist. After the war and the difficult recovery, in the Sixties Mondadori completed two magisterial coups. First, they assigned the illustration of the Maigret covers to Ferenc Pintér, initiating a series of memorable volumes published between 1961 and 1978 which forever left a mark on the history of Italian publishing. And second, with the help of Diego Fabbri and Andrea Camilleri, they enabled Maigret to enter every home in Italy. The performances of Gino Cervi and Andreina Pagnani as the police inspector and his wife in the legendary series of Rai TV movies turned Maigret into a household name for every Italian who possessed a television set.

At the same time, Simenon did a lot for Italy, helping to forever alter the image of its cinema. In 1960, as the jury president of the Cannes Film Festival (and thanks to the friendship of another juror, Henry Miller), he oversaw the awarding of the Palme d'Or to *La dolce vita*, an explosive, prophetic film which struck a devastating blow against the moralism which dominated Italy at the time. This prestigious and distinguished international victory helped protect the film when both Fellini and Mastroianni were jeered and insulted at the Italian premiere and accused of being atheists and communists.

This episode marked the beginning of a beautiful friendship. The messages, telegrams, photographs and 'love letters' which survive are testimony of the tight bond and enormous respect that Simenon and Fellini shared. Simenon watched Fellini's films and kept up with his publications, while Fellini passionately consumed his friend's novels. No other writer is so well

represented in Fellini's personal library, which contains over one hundred Italian editions of Simenon's novels.

Simenon also played a role in the international launch of *La città delle donne*, while Fellini advised him to sign with a new Italian publisher, Adelphi, which was run by his friend Roberto Calasso. The first Adelphi volume was *Letter to My Mother*, which had not previously been published in Italy. It was published exactly forty years ago, in April 1985, as Calasso's successor as managing editor, Roberto Colajanni, has pointed out. Is it a matter of chance or the alignment of the planets that we were the only two who did not know?

In turn, Italy gave a lot back to Simenon. Adelphi's efforts to publish his entire output altered the public's perception of the novelist. No longer was he a successful writer of crime fiction but the author of a masterful, rich, complex and multifaceted oeuvre. According to Unesco, Simenon is the second most translated author in Italy after Shakespeare, and Italy became the biggest market in the world for the writer's work. Simenon sealed his relationship with the country with Teresa Sburelin, who remained by his side until his death.

Our penultimate journey is perhaps the most surprising, because few writers have described their writing method so openly and clearly. Simenon considered himself a craftsman and often detailed, without boasting or coming across as self-satisfied, the daily ritual of his craft, explaining the effort and difficulties involved. He did so with a sense of irony and childlike joy which precludes any sense of conceit from his statements.

And so we arrive at our final journey – a journey through the world of cinema and television, by way of the Simenon adaptations of both past and future, because this journey is still underway. The journey began as soon as Maigret came into being, under the auspices of one of the most venerated artists of the cinema, Jean Renoir, who was so struck by *La Nuit du carrefour* (1931) – the seventh Maigret novel to be published in thirteen months – that he immediately adapted it for the big screen, choosing his own brother, Pierre, for the role of Jules Maigret. It was an important encounter because Jean Renoir would remain one of Simenon's closest friends for the rest of his life and would become godfather to his son, John. *La Nuit du carrefour* marked the beginning of a long love affair between filmmakers and Simenon's world. This fascination continued long after the author's death, through films, TV movies and series, and this fact testifies to the modernity of Simenon's writings, which transcend fashion and can be adapted to different time periods and countries. (There are approximately 80 feature films, 500 hours of TV adaptations, and 39 different Maigrets on the big and small screen from all over the world). Few writers have given rise to a world of stories and, above all, characters and atmospheres which are so fascinating and so inspire the imagination of directors, screenwriters and producers. In this catalogue, Serge Toubiana notes that, in order to write, Simenon used a method more typical of filmmakers. Just as a director has to inhabit his characters, so Simenon had to know them, live with them, map out in his mind the sequences which would become pages in a novel, imagining the locations, acting out every role, reciting every line.

Perhaps it was precisely this use of a 'cinematic method' when planning his novels which made adaptation so challenging. Nevertheless, the sheer number of images inspired by Simenon's writing has helped us to overcome the challenge of 'staging' a writer. The extraordinary riches of his archives have allowed us to assemble this volume, which must surely be read for the extraordinary contributions it contains, or simply flipped through in order to follow Simenon on his journeys and better understand the riches and complexity of his immense universe.