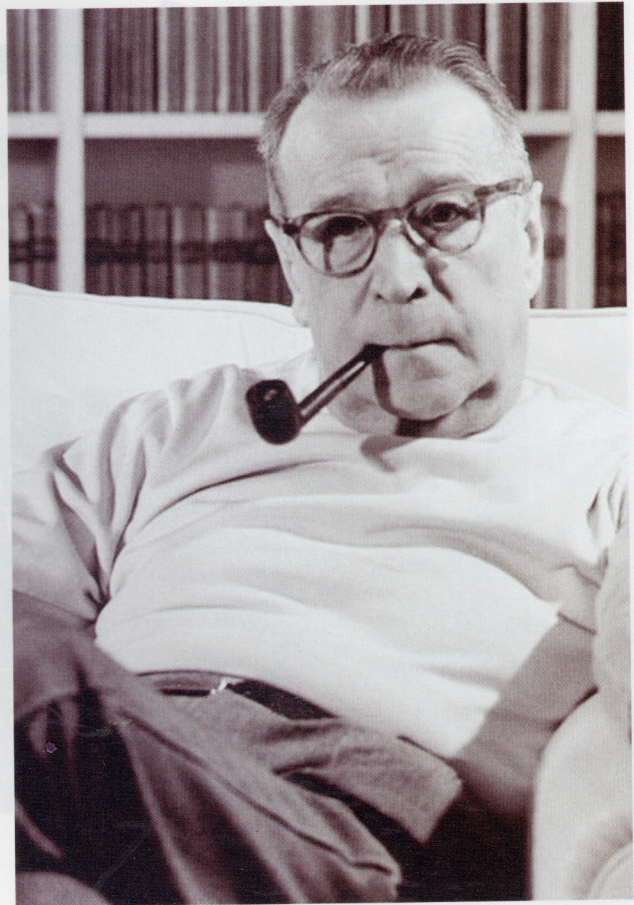


The Man Behind Maigret

By Lee Child

Georges Simenon and I are the only European-born writers ever elected president of MWA. The similarity ends there. He smoked a pipe, I smoke cigarettes. And so on. But mostly, the differences are about numbers, to do with both productivity and proclivity. He wrote one-hundred fifty newspaper articles—at the age of fifteen. Plus eight hundred humorous pieces. He wrote two hundred novels and too much short fiction to count. He could write twenty thousand words a day. He has five hundred-fifty million books in print. He is credited on one hundred seventy-one movies and television shows. He slept with ten thousand women. And he wasn't even French. He was Belgian.

His MWA status (he was president in 1955 and Grand Master in 1966) rests not on the women but on his seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories about the Paris cop Jules Maigret. The first was published in 1931, and the last in 1972—a 41-year span, between two and three titles a year. (Obviously he figured out what to do about aging a series hero.) His newspaper beginnings and his outsider status in Paris had made him familiar with drunks and prostitutes and other creatures of the night, and anarchists and artists, and criminals of every stripe, and together they became the background to the Maigret plots—not in a gritty way, not really noir as such, but more as a grimy background to the main character's domestic and professional life, which is notably settled, bureaucratic, and even uxorious. Maigret loves his wife and is faithful to her. Write what you know, indeed.



In French, the name Maigret sounds somewhat like the words for meager or diet, consciously chosen, I imagine, for its humdrum connotations. Sherlock Holmes had a domestic life, but it was bizarre, and Philip Marlowe didn't really have one at all. Jules Maigret did, big time. He gets up every morning, he goes to work, he frets and worries, he eats, he goes home. He was a new paradigm—a fairly normal guy living fairly normally, and written straight and bravely, without reliance on the kind of bolt-on gratuities lesser authors felt necessary. As such, I think we can see Maigret's literary children and grandchildren all around us, in Beck, and Renko, and Rebus, and Wallender, and many, many more. And given his proclivities, we can probably see his literal children and grandchildren all around us too, but we don't know who they are.



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