

# Sex Was a Dangerous Obsession

***The Blue Room and The Accomplices*, by Georges Simenon, translated from the French by Eileen Ellenbogen and Bernard Frechtman (Harcourt, Brace & World. 284 pp. \$4.95), dissect two protagonists driven to their limit by sexual obsession. Dorrie Pagones has studied literature in France under a Fulbright grant.**

By DORRIE PAGONES

YES, Virginia, there is a Simenon, but sometimes it seems that, like Santa, he must have many helpers, to each of whom he annually assigns a novel or so. Then, when all the books are done, Simenon himself pops them into his bag and drops them down the grateful publisher's chimney.

Nobody knows exactly how many books this most prolific of authors has written, but he has published at least 150 under his own name and probably more than 300 under nearly a score of pseudonyms. After working briefly as a baker's apprentice in his native Belgium, Georges Simenon began to write pot-boilers. Then, at twenty-seven he initiated the Maigret series of detective stories. Today he concentrates on his serious works, which must now number close to a hundred; these are short, tense psychological novels.

It is easy to conceive that among Simenon's diverse admirers must be a good many of the people who write to lonely hearts columns. One feels instantly that he is sympathetic and that nothing can shock him. He has said that his prime interest is in finding out what will oblige a character to go to his limit; in *The Blue Room* and *The Accomplices* the answer is the same—a sexual obsession.

*The Blue Room* is the place where Andrée and Tony meet to make love, deceiving her husband and his wife. As the novel begins, Tony, on trial for murder, is reliving their last meeting there. Slowly and with growing horror he realizes, through questions put to him by the judge, the lawyer, and the court-appointed psychiatrist, what the true nature of his seemingly carefree mistress must have been and what, accordingly, will be his fate.

*The Accomplices* is the story of a hit-and-run driver. For one moment, his mind only on the girl beside him, Joseph

Lambert keeps to the wrong side of the road. A horn sounds but he hears it as in a dream. The next moment a bus carrying forty-eight children has crashed and burst into flame against a wall.

Lambert is not a bad man; he is more likable than anyone else in the book. But he cannot face responsibility. Caught in a boring marriage and business, he wants only to recapture an experience that occurred when he was nine. The dentist had given him a sedative for a toothache, and he was resting in the garden when he became aware that his pain had been subtly transformed into a kind of sensual pleasure:

He could feel the waves coming and little by little learned how to provoke them, to direct them, as if they were music. The foliage above, with its light and shadow, the slight swaying of the branches, and the flight of the flies, took part in the symphony, as did the secret life of the canal, its breathing, the reflections which stretched slowly, the red float at the end of the fisherman's line, and the white patch of the straw hat in the shade.

Lambert wants to use his mistress as an accomplice to help him escape again into that childhood dream, shutting out ordinary life. He is the opposite of Tony in *The Blue Room*. In Tony's affair with Andrée, she is the single-minded fanatic; he "took in everything, the bustle, the voices, the play of light on the walls, even the footsteps on the pavement and the clink of glasses on the terrace tables."

Such passages show very clearly Simenon's painterly way of writing. The stories will doubtless be read for the suspense and sex that are their most obvious components; but they have another dimension—an indefinable atmosphere—and it is this that makes "a Simenon" unique. There is a real sense of tragedy, of human waste, of the beauty that could have been.

*The Blue Room* is the less interesting of the two stories, partly because the drama cannot hide the banality of the situation, and partly because the central character is completely passive. If this is your first Simenon (Maigrets don't count), it may make you wonder what all the fuss is about.

*The Accomplices*, on the other hand, is a complete success. It is not Simenon's Great Novel (he has said firmly that he will never write one). But it is an integral part of that fantastically varied mosaic that has been his life's work and that, happily, shows no sign yet of coming to an end.

## One Weary Savage

***Cabot Wright Begins*, by James Purdy (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 228 pp. \$4.95), reports the saga of a young Wall Street apprentice who, under the influence of a quack psychiatrist, turns into a rapist of folk-hero status. Novelist Julian Gloag wrote "Our Mother's House."**

By JULIAN GLOAG

WITH *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* James Purdy demonstrated his great gifts for satiric comedy, informed and steadied by an underlying sense of compassion. His caricatures and charades are fantastic, sometimes hilarious, often poignant, always clever and original.

In his latest novel, *Cabot Wright Begins*, Mr. Purdy has stretched his concept of the absurd wider than ever before. The intricate plot, handled with easy mastery, revolves round the attempt of three people to produce a fic-

tionalized version of the life of Cabot Wright, who has achieved folk-hero status as a rapist. They locate Wright, now living in Brooklyn after having served his prison sentence, only to discover that he has lost all memory of his more than 300 rapes.

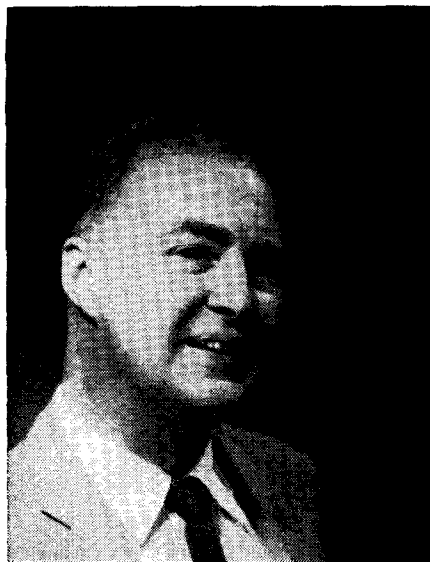
Cabot Wright is the supposititious child of wealthy parents who were burned to death in their yacht off Cuba, leaving him all their money; he was educated at Yale and worked for a Wall Street financier, Mr. Warburton, who shot himself and also left Cabot all his money, along with a volume of "sermons." Cabot has had every advantage, but as the quack healer he goes to see tells him, he is tired, tired like all America. His tiredness gives way under the ministrations of the quack to an insatiable sexuality, which his wife goes literally insane resisting and which launches him on his raping career. Cabot Wright cannot laugh, he can only giggle. He is incapable of feeling or making any connection except by means of his

phallus, which is adored by all his victims, young or old, high or low.

Cabot regains his memory by reading Mr. Warburton's "sermons," the cracked messianic vituperations of a paranoid financier. It is here that something goes very wrong with *Cabot Wright Begins*: Mr. Purdy's engaging waywardness with language becomes frenetic nonsense; the saving edge of humor, maintained fairly well up to this moment, degenerates into a kind of senseless savagery, and all satirical point is lost in wavering and adolescent generalization. Presumably Mr. Purdy intended to work up to a frantic climax, at the height of which Cabot learns to laugh, realizing at last that it is all a huge joke and thus finally freeing himself to live. Unfortunately, in the process Mr. Purdy loses all his cleverness and all his wit, and, wildly lambasting everything in sight, merely serves up a froth of the staggeringly obvious. In attempting to render the totally absurd, Mr. Purdy becomes totally absurd.

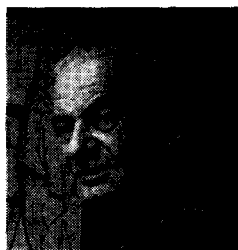
NEVERTHELESS, more than half of *Cabot Wright Begins* comes off. Mr. Purdy handles the theme of rape with a delicate sense of pornographic ridicule; his caricatures, while as exaggerated as hell, are sharp; he deals with a cliché world but he manages most of the time to avoid cliché. Towards the end *Cabot Wright Begins* quiets down, and the author regains control.

Just before this point Mr. Purdy, by way of not very acute parody, delivers an attack upon certain well-known and ill-disguised critics who are most likely going to pan his book anyway. The parody is poor, the point obscure, but the defiance obvious. I wonder why Mr. Purdy bothers. He has enough originality and (albeit specialized) talent to outlast most critics.



James Purdy — "a delicate sense of pornographic ridicule."

SR/December 12, 1964



Mr. PIERRE GUASTALLA  
President of famed La Jeune  
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Coming January 2, 1965

SATURDAY REVIEW

# Irish Times and Troubles

*The Scorching Wind*, by Walter Macken (Macmillan, 308 pp. \$5.95), continues its author's fictional accounts of Ireland's "times of troubles." Irish-born Edward Callan is professor of English at Western Michigan University.

By EDWARD CALLAN

WALTER MACKEN is one of the few Irish writers choosing to live permanently in Ireland, where he has exercised his talents as actor, playwright, and novelist for almost thirty years. He first achieved recognition with the Galway Gaelic Theater as both actor and director; later he spent three years with the Abbey Theater, and he also made brief appearances on Broadway in two Irish plays—one of them his own *Home Is the Hero*. For the past fifteen years he has given less time to the theater than to the profession of writing. He is prolific in this rather un-Irish activity, for, in addition to a number of plays, he has produced two collections of short stories and nine novels.

His three most recent novels constitute a historical trilogy of Ireland's times of troubles. The first two, *Seek the Fair Land* and *The Silent People*, were set in the days of the Cromwellian conquest and the Great Famine. The present novel, *The Scorching Wind*, has as its framework the three distinct "troubles" of the decades 1914-1923—the split between Sinn Féin and the Redmond Volunteers, the guerrilla warfare after 1916 that brought the Black-and-Tans to Ireland, and the Irish Civil War following the treaty with Britain in 1921.

As a novelist, Macken seeks to develop a compelling story in an authentic regional setting. His favorite milieu, which reappears in this novel, includes a Gaelic-speaking district close to Galway city and the Atlantic coast. The traditional storyteller's art is still alive here, and Macken has acquired the storyteller's skill in narrating convincing incidents with a wealth of interesting detail. He adds to this a working dramatist's ear for vigorous dialogue, reproducing the spoken word more authentically than the outlandish dialects sometimes favored by Irish writers of greater fame. But he shares the storyteller's weaknesses, too; chief among these is an addiction to the melodra-

matic flourish and a tendency to make characters subservient to incident.

Since he was born at the beginning of the decade he describes, some of Macken's success in capturing the atmosphere of the times may have its source in childhood memories (the harsh, urgent engines of the Crossley troop-carriers, the ring of military boots on empty streets, and the loud knockings on neighborhood doors); but he is obviously more indebted to stories of personal experience with ambush, capture, and escape. He manipulates incident and anecdote into an exciting sequence of scenes depicting the Black-and-Tan terror; but his hand is less sure, and the outcome too predictable, when he turns to the civil war. One theme of the novel is the heroism of ordinary people, and Macken's ordinary people seem more real than his main characters, who serve chiefly as a device to hang the story on.

*The Scorching Wind* has many of the ingredients of a popular success: it is exciting, largely authentic, and it moves at a good pace. Yet, with antagonists still living, Walter Macken has contrived to offend no one, English or Irish, of whatever persuasion; and this deference may guarantee that those who seek the inward-looking, the subtle, or the profound will find his novel disappointing.

**The All-Important Weapon:** With its extremely large type and typically "young readers'" jacket, Tom Lea's *The Hands of Cantú* (Little, Brown, \$6.75) looks like a juvenile. And with its even, archaic style, it reads like a juvenile. Yet it is not a children's book. Were it, Mr. Lea's thirty Chinese ink drawings would appear outstanding; instead they seem rather obviously academic. Why then should *The Hands of Cantú* be sold as an adult rather than a children's book? Because it is dull.

There is precious little action in it and hardly the thread of a story. *The Hands of Cantú* centers on the impressions of a young man, Toribio de Ibarra, who comes to live with a celebrated horseman and horse-breeder, Don Vito Cantú. When six Spaniards set off to find the renegade who traded the all-important Spanish weapon—the horse—to the Indians, the reader is led to believe that action will finally penetrate the narrative. The author of *The Brave Bulls* disappoints us. The villain is dead, and no confrontation takes place. Seven hundred leagues of north Mexican wilderness are covered, but the dust never rises on the kind of excitement Mr. Lea should have generated.

The book does treat knowledgeably of a subject that has been scantily explored—the horse of the New World; the chapter on the training of colts is, in fact, totally absorbing. Nevertheless—its few stunning passages notwithstanding—*The Hands of Cantú* still leaves the field open for a writer who would exploit the odyssey of the horse brought by the conquistadors.

—MAIA W. RODMAN.

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and Yetta Arenstein

### THE UBIQUITOUS IQ

The letters "i" and "q" appear frequently in many English words in no way concerned with the intelligence quotient. Ruth C. Clarke of Plainview, Texas, has assembled the framework of fifteen such words and asks that you supply the missing letters according to the accompanying definitions. No proof of I. Q. needed to consult answers on page 73.

1. — — — iq — — — — —
2. — — — iq — — — — —
3. — — — iq — — — — —
4. — i — q — — — — —
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old-fashioned  
compressed coal dust  
coterie  
declare ineligible  
manners  
certain cuts of meat  
unrighteousness  
settle indebtedness  
grandiose in speech  
slanted  
nearness  
galley with five banks of oars  
renounce  
sixteenth note  
distinction