



Interview: Ros Schwartz on Translating the Prolific Belgian Author Georges Simenon



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Belgian author Georges Simenon was born on February 12, 1903, although according to one biographer he was actually born Friday the 13th and his mother, out of superstition, preferred to declare his date of birth on the 12th. An incredibly prolific writer, he published a sizeable amount of pulp fiction before inventing Inspector Maigret in 1931, for whom he is best known, and who, interestingly, is very different in character to how Simenon apparently was. He published 192 novels, of which 75 involved Inspector Maigret, 117 novels that he deemed more "serious", 158 short stories, several memoirs and numerous articles. He is also the fourth most translated Francophone author.



Georges Simenon



Ros Schwartz with her beloved Harraps dictionary

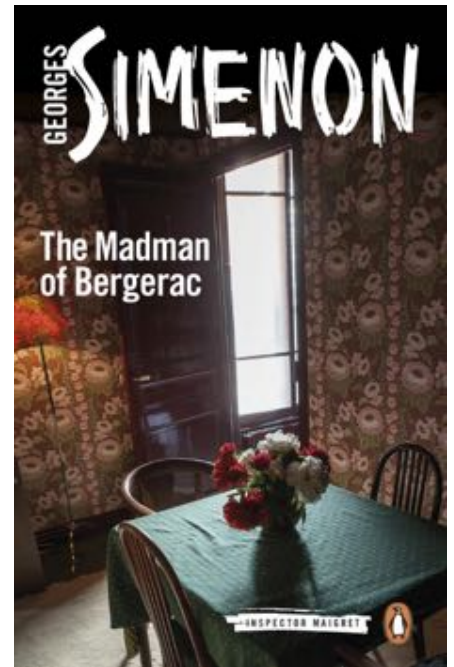
Here we interview [Ros Schwartz](#), who has been translating Simenon since 2013 for [Penguin Classics](#), which decided to retranslate all of Simenon's detective novels, using stunning photography by the Belgian Magnum photographer Harry Gruyaert for the covers.



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You have just delivered your 13th translation of a Simenon book, have they all been Inspector Maigret novels? If so, are there other works you would like to translate, and which ones?

Yes, so far they've all been Maigret novels, which is Penguin Classics' priority at the moment. I think some of the *romans durs* are extraordinary, and the one I'd love to get my teeth into is [*La Vérité sur Bébé Donge*](#). It's about a woman who poisons her husband with arsenic in front of his entire family. Because she's bored witless in their stifling marriage.

How did Simenon come to you the first time, and how has your "relationship" with him evolved over time? Have you noticed certain trends, quirks or other that you didn't notice at first?

I was approached by Penguin in 2013 when they were putting together a team to retranslate Simenon's entire oeuvre. By now I feel more married to Maigret than poor, long-suffering Madame Maigret.

Of course Simenon has certain trademark words and phrases, but what is brilliant is the variety and range of his storylines and settings. His descriptions of place are what mark him out for me as unique. He can conjure up a town, its atmosphere, mood and people in a single paragraph. You can see it, hear it, smell it and taste the air.

What's it like translating a writer who is dead, as opposed to a living author?

On the minus side, you can't ask them any questions, but actually, Simenon's writing is limpid and there are rarely ambiguities that need clarification. I love working with living authors and have close relationships with some of the writers I translate, which is mutually enriching. But on the plus side, a dead author can't criticise your translation. Simenon's second wife Denise was notoriously hostile to his translators and wrote detailed commentaries and lists of instructions. I'm relieved she's not looking over my shoulder.

What are the challenges of translating Simenon to English?

His deceptively simple economy of language. It's a real challenge to replicate Simenon's seamless style. Period detail too. In one novel, a female character goes to sleep with *épingles* in her hair. I couldn't visualize these, so I needed to find out what women wore in their hair at night in the 1930s to make it curly. I eventually found the answer on eBay where someone was advertising a set of 1930s bobby pins. Or another time, a woman has a fever and her husband goes to the pharmacy to get some ice in what Simenon loosely calls 'a device'. I had to quiz French friends to find out that it would have been a rubber pouch. In another book he refers to a street with wooden paving, and I had to study old photographs of that street to see that it really was paved with wooden blocks. I really enjoy the research aspect of the work. The first dictionary I ever bought was a 1932 bilingual *Harraps*, when I was fifteen. It's been gathering dust for the past few decades, but now it's proving invaluable because it has all sorts of obsolete words in it. Like the name of the room in a railway station where they stored the gas lamps (lamp room or lamp cabin if you want to know).

Politics, religion and history are noticeably absent from Simenon's work. There has been much (unsubstantiated) speculation about him being a collaborator during World War II or being anti-Semitic. Have you ever been able to glean any insight on his political inclinations after spending so much time with him?

Not with regard to contemporary events, but what you do see is that Simenon is always on the side of the 'little people', the ordinary working people. He's very scathing about corrupt politicians and the wealthy. What makes Maigret so endearing is his humanity. His role is more akin to that of a priest, a healer of souls. The books are not whodunnits, they are concerned why the culprit acted. Simenon was endlessly fascinated by human nature and what motivated people to murder or steal, so the *dénouement* is usually about Maigret getting the offender to explain why they committed their crime. Often, they do not end up being arrested. Generally, Simenon's murderers are not 'bad' people, but ordinary people pushed beyond breaking point. And that's what interested Simenon. You get a strong sense of 'there but for the grace of God go I'. What is the trigger that can cause a person to commit a terrible crime? Often the answer is to be found in their childhood or their background – a long-festering grievance that drives them to murder or steal or both.

Simenon was a notorious philanderer. And yet Inspector Maigret has quite a close and exclusive relationship with Mme Maigret. Why do you think that is?

Because it's fiction! Maigret exudes gravitas and authority, it wouldn't do for him to go messing around with other women!

I see Mme Maigret as a slightly tongue-in-cheek fantasy wife. She's just too accommodating to be true! Whatever hour Maigret rolls in, she's there fussing over him and making him food or coffee. He can not come home for days, or not turn up to meals and she's fine with that. But she does occasionally get involved in his cases, and even has one all of her own: *Madame Maigret's Own Case*.

On the subject of women, I find Simenon's female characters intriguing. There are women who are sexual predators, quite astonishing for the period, and then – my favourite – there are his killer grannies. I'd better not name the titles (spoiler alert!).

Why do you think he is so popular and is he popular for different reasons, for example, in French, as opposed to English?

In France, he's a writer's writer. French authors see him as a model of concision and descriptive power. I think for English readers (mostly older generation), there's a kind of nostalgia for French provincial towns and Paris of the 50s. I'm not sure Simenon appeals to millennials. They find Mme Maigret's submissiveness a bit hard to stomach. And some of the original translations are dated. I hope these new translations will bring Simenon to a new English-speaking readership.



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Simenon's work has been adapted to television, film, radio, comics and theatre. Is there one particular medium (or film or play) that is the most successful for you?

I prefer not to watch the films or TV adaptations, they'd interfere with the Maigret inside my head. I feel quite possessive about him. I never see films of books I've loved because they superimpose themselves on my own reading. I lie: I couldn't resist seeing David Hare's *The Red Barn* at the National Theatre but I preferred by far [La Main \(The Hand\)](#), on which it was based. All the descriptive passages, which are what I so love about Simenon's writing, were lost – inevitably.

Penguin plans to publish all 75 Maigrets. Is the translation work divided between several translators? Do you consult each other so that you have the same voice?

There's a team of around a dozen translators, and we each take on as many novels as we are available to do in any given year. In 2015, most of the English team, the Dutch team (they were also re-translating part of Simenon's oeuvre), as well as a Finnish and an Estonian translator, gathered for a few days at the Translation centre in Seneffe, Belgium for a symposium, in the presence of Simenon's son, John, and various Simenon experts as well as our publisher, Josephine Greywoode. We spent three days discussing a whole range of translation issues – including an entire

morning arguing about the use of ellipses! John provided many fascinating insights and gave us access to Simenon's correspondence with his early translators and publishers. We visited Liège, where he was born, and we were given a guided tour of the Simenon museum there. It was moving to see his typewriter and the desk on which he worked: a midwife's wooden birthing table. We all gained enormously from these wide-ranging and in-depth discussions not only about Simenon but, as is always the case when translators get together, our whole translation approach and ethos. Most of us know one another and we occasionally discuss issues, but there's a fantastic editorial team who ensure consistency of terminology across the series, although there are unavoidable variations in approach and style.

Which books would you recommend for readers who have never read Inspector Maigret before?

Of the titles I've translated and know well there would be:

[*Maigret's First Case*](#)....because it's his first case!

[*Maigret Gets Angry*](#)...if I said why I like this one so much, it would give away the ending.

[*Maigret's Holiday*](#)...for his atmospheric descriptions of Les Sables d'Olonne.

Banner photo Jean Gabin as Inspector Maigret

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