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LA SERIE NOIRE ETAIT MORTE

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The Dead Series Was Black (reference to the French edition “La SERIE NOIRE”)

The « Série Noire » ‘s spirit is dead. Long live the « Série Noire« ‘s spirit. Wailing of the loyal readers, nostalgic sighs of the veterans. After 60 years of existence, supplying us with our dose of unsustainable suspense and turning our attention on the social actuality, we had started to believe that it belonged not only to the amateurs of great thrill but also to the collectors.

The new format, the new price (but the covers remain ugly, simple change, not a revolution) compel us to open our eyes: Patrick Raynal’s statement drives the point home (enfonce le clou): to get a lively and inventive police novel, better now to go to the competitors, such as « Rivages Noirs » (Black Shores). And while I was hearing Mr. Raynal churning out his editor’s souvenirs, passing over in silence his responsibility of the lost of the major authors and the poor distributing network to the bookstores, I was telling to myself: what about the titles? When is he going to mention the titles of the collection?

Please, understand me; it is not a step backward to try to revive the prestigious « Série Noire » which now looks like a rheumatic old man, victim lately of its lack of presence in the large bookstores and of a tenacious old fiend, the truncated translations.

A book collection will be dying without posterity if there are no aficionados to transmit their discoveries and no editors interested to print them.

If one is not careful, this will happen to the « Série Noire » just as it happened to most after war collections the pertinence of which nobody took the time to analyze on the account that they were addressed to a large and popular audience. Nowadays, they only concern a limited circle of professional collectors although they are as valuable and probably more literary than the texts of the

to-day thrillers.

With the embalming (mummification ?) of « Série Noire », job initiated by Mr. Raynal, even before stopping definitely the collection (Mr. Raynal, please note that the vultures have the decency to await until the victim is dead to start tearing it apart), we see to reappear the old sea serpent which concerns those who like detective stories for what they are: not a subgroup but an additional facet to literature.

Let Claude Aveline (Eugène Avstine's pseudonym, French poet and writer, 1901-1991) give a definition of this serpent conscientiously warmed up by the critics:

« Some months ago (we are in 1932), I read an article where it was announced that it exists two types of novels: the popular stories, be adventures or police, on one side, and the literary works on the other » Better not to mock the author of this statement but instead, through the weakness of the expression, try to translate clearly his thinking: the literary works are good novels while the others are bad. Hence, a police story is not a good novel.

In 2006, now that the authors of thrillers are successful with the public as much as with the critics, does the same position still exist?

Yes, still the same. Due to the negligence of the critics, the current success of the police novels hides the fact that the genre is desperately lacking of classical authors. Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961), J.H. Chase (1906-1985), Chester Himes (1909-1984), James Ellroy (1948- but once dead, his titles of glory could be ranked lower), the French Jean Amila (1910-1995), Jean-Patrick Manchette (1942-1995), Didier Daeninckx (1949-), Jean-Bernard Pouy (1946-), all these authors, re-published regularly, are well alive but they are not many. Where are the numerous talented American writers influenced by Chandler and Hammett? And what about the classical authors of police stories, the French, the Italian and other nationalities rich with crimes, atmosphere and style? They will keep their prominent status as long as they are successful but soon, they will be sent to the bosom of the police novels specialists and will be read by the few devotees not resigned to see them condemned to the purgatory.

Even the editions of these books do not help to survive a long time before sliding in their subgroup status. The examples of « Poche Noire » (Black Pocket) or « Carré Noir » (Black Square) supposed to reactivate the « Série Noire » classics or give a new chance to the unfairly neglected titles prove it: how to give some kind of value when we have in hand one of these paperbacks easily tearable, with a poor quality paper, moreover embellished with horrible naked or partly naked women due to the photograph Walter Carone. Do not be surprised of the final failure.

One is moaning about the impossibility for the police novel to be honorable and to stagnate in the limbo of a subgroup.

The same problem occurs under other latitudes than ours. In the States, the cheap edition « Gold Medal Books » created by Fawcett Publications in 1950 has ensured a niche to some authors like Jim Thompson (1906-1977), David Goodis (1917-1967), John D. MacDonald (1916-1986), or Gerald Kersh (1911-1968). All of them left almost no mark and, once more, these good authors, condemned by the false idea that the popular publications are no literature, are only known by some few specialists and collectors.

Consequently, if a prestigious collection like the « Série Noire », which has left a deep track in the French police novel, disappears, the risk is that the content will disappear as well.

Indeed, the classical authors like the Charles Williams, the Chandler, the Hammett, the Himes are protected and published again by the collection « Folio Policier » (Folio Police) but, for some times

now, the latter neglects works from « Série Noire » and prefers to re-direct its activity towards a more « commercial » vein such as the thrillers and, this is the core of the problem, leave numerous major police authors in a sort of desert.

For these multiple reasons, it is time that the entire French critic looks into the « Série Noire » in its entirety to prevent the only specialists, locked in their nostalgia, to study its content, proud to be the only ones to have the knowledge although, sometimes, their judgment on some books let us speechless. (Flabbergasted?)

It is time to look at them as literary writers (as André Gide 1869-1951, Nobel Prize of literature 1947, did in imposing Hammett in France who became a classical novelist) to study their characters and their style.

It's gone on long enough of slapdash comments or of enigma hasty summaries. It is now time to show the original utter value of the « Série Noire » authors such as Jonathan Latimer (1906-1983), Samuel A. Krasney (1922-), William Campbell Gault (1910-1995), Dolores Hitchens (1908-1973), Bill Pronzini (1943-), William Peter McGovern (1918-1982), John D. MacDonald (1916-1986), Gil Brewer (1922-1983), Margaret Millar (1915-1994), Mildred Davis (1920-), Stanley Ellin (1916-1986) and many more.

In spite of the variety of the collection, (except the « Gorille » series, - the Gorilla -, and few other exceptions, the spy stories did not attract the success), we have to draw your attention to the great quality of a large number of authors who deserve praise from the critics and a popular audience.

In order not to keep these hopes to a stage of wishful thinking, I will speak about the remarkable William Campbell Gault who wrote about twenty books (out of which, nine are in the « Série Noire ») and a large number of sport stories for teenagers (none published in France).

Admired by Ross MacDonald who dedicated him one of his books, Gault typifies the author who can go beyond the police story; hence create an original and personal world. Veteran of « Pulp» (designing the mass market paperbacks between 1920 and 1950), hence as prolific as his fellow writers Frank Gruber (1904-1969) or Harry Whittington (1956-), Gault seems to stay within the stereotyped limits of California with the winding roads, the muscular private detectives, the Homeric brawls and the lascivious blondes. But it is only an appearance and the author could approximately say with Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) that he likes to carve his characters with great care. He succeeds to please occasional readers of police fictions in satisfying their demand for clichés and action but, and this is something that one does not realize immediately, the characters have a different dimension than those of the ordinary stories. (Gault's novels deserve to be read a second time.).

Most of the time the Gault's hero is a former sporty type (boxer, rugby or soccer player), 5 feet 90 (1meter 80) and 220 pounds or 100 Kilograms of muscles. . He is clever with his fists, insolent with a well off mainly when a friend or a brother is concerned. Playing Romeo with the women, he gets them speedily in his bed All the clichés are used but, surprisingly, Gault adds an unusual feature: the deep immaturity of these males proud of their muscles. Essentially proud to belong to a peculiar community that they follow the rites and accept the most visible bondage to the extent that they become dependant of this microcosm. This happens to the character of « Don't Cry For Me» who belongs to a shady world respectful of his past of prestigious rugby player up to the time he is involved in a drug affair. The same applies to the young Kaprelian in «The Bloody Bokhara »who is comfortably installed among his community until a murder and a love story force him to discover how to become autonomous.

Gault knows how to diversify the set up of his stories but also approach realistically these exclusive

micro societies. Their ways and customs are dissected quite sociologically by an author able to evoke as well as the boxing world (« The Canvass Coffin »), than the movie one (« Death Out Of Focus »). He has a predilection for the Californian bourgeoisie more and more mythical that he will examine the defects either sexual, social or ideological like under a microscope.

However, all these worlds have finally in common, a corrupted ethic and their members will first be some kind of stupefied victims to become rebellious. They will have to change their personality, become adult, if they want to get out of difficulties. The former rugby player will not see any other solution than to go to Korea where he will meet young people even more confused. The young Armenian will learn how to act outside of his community, without the tutelary figure of the father.

Among the men trussed up with their environment, the women, more lucid, more intelligent, have an essential role to guide them in their search of the truth. They will even protect them physically.

As an example, in the book « Night Lady », there is an episode where the private detective Puma gets ready to beat a leading wrestler. The companion of the latter intervenes, revolver in hand and says to the private detective: « he can win, he can loose, now and always, he is my man and that is the only important thing ». Another book « Run, Killer, Run » throws light on the unusual female contribution to the enigma: escaped prisoner, the hero, in search of his truth, is successively helped and countered by women. Above all, proof that the police story is not necessarily male chauvinist, they are characterized by their capacity to choose the course of action even if it means self-sacrifice or give up their illusions. (see the sumptuous cruel ending of « Don't Cry For Me»), something that the Gault's character will resign himself to accept only at the last extremity.

Far from the « look for the woman » or « look for the money » (cherchez la femme, cherchez le fric) concepts , Gault drives his hero to a kind of third track that we perceive as the story goes. Behind the roughness of this world of fights and murders, there is an emotion, a feeling that the character's itinerary is not only geographic but evolves psychologically too. When one becomes conscious of it, one realizes that the setting is not made of pasteboard that the action does not look like a Mack Sennett who would have decided to buy a gun. Here we are hypnotized deciphering each sign as if the lesser phrase was there to recompose the hero's mental structure. As one can see, Gault has to be rediscovered beyond the specialists' critics, too quick to confiscate this author for their own profit in the name of a style to protect.

Indeed, Gault offers the best possible piece of evidence to reconcile the technical skill required by the police story with an original vision, which give his books an inimitable taste so confirming the ironic Claude Aveline's quotation: there are no bad books, there are only bad writers.