



The Mahé Circle

Georges Simenon , Siân Reynolds (Translator)

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The first English publication of Georges Simenon's compelling novel about summer escape and elusive obsessions.

'In Porquerolles, things were hostile to him. He had tried in vain to tame them. Back there, all the time, he had felt as if there was a tremendous chaos around him, a kind of life that was too vivid, so that the slightest contact with it made his blood pulse more quickly, and prompted a rising fever inside him.'

Nobody could understand why Dr. Mahé continued to drag his family to Porquerolles for the summer. Had he really become obsessed with the girl dressed in red? Or was it a longing to go fishing and play boules with the locals? Or maybe there was something even more powerful that drew him back to the island.

The Mahé Circle Details

Date : Published June 5th 2014 by Penguin Books Ltd (first published 1946)

ISBN : 9780141394169

Author : Georges Simenon , Siân Reynolds (Translator)

Format : Paperback 151 pages

Genre : Cultural, France, Fiction

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From Reader Review The Mahé Circle for online ebook

Jessica says

A wretched, dismal little man freaks out when he figures out that his loving mother has engineered his entire comfortable existence, and proceeds to destroy everything out of some petty desire for "freedom."

Nate D says

A kind of midlife-crisis novel, from a prolific purveyor of the French hard-boiled genre, though the protagonist is actually younger than me for much of the story. All in all, he's not much to get excited about or feel real sympathy for -- having passively allowed his comfortable, affluent life to be arranged for him by others, a deep and unexpected resentment creeps up on him over a series of boring vacations, leading him towards revolt. I can feel his ennui, sure, but aren't each of us responsible for carving some kind of meaning, purpose, or interest out of the lives we find ourselves in? If our protagonist can't find any trace of those in his medical practice or family, then yes, things are clearly going wrong but surely there are other routes than alcoholism, arbitrary obsession, and a kind of petulant shapeless desire for escape. Simenon's descriptions are crisp and vivid throughout, the recurring island setting conveys a great sense of place, and the occasional slips into dream provide a sharp contrast to the mundane realism that reigns otherwise, but this just may not have been the Simenon plotline for me.

[P] says

There is a British TV series, which I think aired in the 1970's, called *The Fall & Rise of Reginald Perrin*. I watched it as a child, on one of those TV Gold type channels [I wasn't around in the 70's, of course]. As I remember it, the basic premise of the show was that Reginald fakes his own death, by leaving his clothes at the beach, as a means of escape, an escape from his sterile life, and then moves away and starts again, reboots himself, so to speak. I've long found this idea extraordinarily attractive. The show plays on my mind a lot. I've always had an anti-conventional mind-set, by which I mean that whenever I have been in a situation that one might call stable, or whenever my personal circumstances have been settled, I have instinctively rebelled against it. The most extreme example of this was when I was in relationship with a lovely girl, but I could not handle the stultifying daily grind of dinner with her parents, conversations about career goals, etc, and so, with no warning, up and left her and moved to London to be with a girl I had known only a few weeks. Yes, sometimes you have to try to escape; sometimes your social and family circle feels like a noose.

The Mahé Circle starts with a frown. As first sentences go, it is not particularly exciting, but it is significant, and strangely effective. The Mahé of the title is Doctor Mahé, who, when we meet him, is on a boat. He has, it appears, engaged a local man, Gene, to take him out fishing. However, Doctor Mahé, unlike his companion, isn't doing well; most of the time he catches nothing, and when he does manage to tempt something onto his bait it is a diables, which is some kind of horrid spiny fish that, amusingly, you cannot touch with your bare hands and must be immediately thrown back. Ruefully, Mahé notes that, although he is a failure as a fisherman, he is doing exactly what Gene does, that their technique or approach is the same.

Disappointment, unease, and a strange kind of tension, permeates this evocative opening section. The doctor has a headache, the wine that was brought on board is warm, his wife is a smudge on the shore, and an approaching boat brings news that a local woman is near death. Indeed, Mahé is actually on holiday, but you wouldn't know it, for nothing about his demeanour or circumstances suggests fun or freedom; it is, in fact, made clear that the climate and atmosphere of the mediterranean island of Porquerolles is hostile to him. However, as the narrative progresses, once Mahé and his family have returned home, it is revealed that there is something about that hostility that he craves, that it, in some way, makes him feel alive.

“In Porquerolles, things were hostile to him. He had tried in vain to lessen their impact. Down south, all the time, he had felt as if there was a tremendous chaos around him, a kind of life that was too vivid, so that the slightest contact with it made his blood pulse more quickly, and prompted a rising fever inside him.”

Simenon is at pains to stress that Doctor Mahé's life, his life at home, away from Porquerolles, is a conventional one. He makes a comfortable living; he has a wife and children and he still lives with his mother. Moreover, his mother is said to still tell him when to change his underwear, she also chose his wife [more for herself, than for him, Mahé thinks], and this wife, with the bland smell, is described as being incapable of full-blooded grief [which is used as a kind of criticism, as a way of highlighting her middle-of-the-road nature]. It is not difficult, then, to see how the island – with its extreme heat, scorpions etc – offers greater excitement, a sense of something other, something different. Placing cosseted or average men in a [comparatively] wild environment, making them literally and existentially confront the alien, is a trick often made use of by authors, but this is one of only two times [The Lost Steps by Alejo Carpentier being the other] that I have come across a protagonist that actually enjoys, yearns for that hostility.

There is, however, another reason why Mahé wants to return to Porquerolles, there is one other motivating factor. When, at the beginning of the novel, he is asked to attend upon the dying woman he sees, while at her house, a young girl, Elisabeth. From this moment onwards both the girl and the red dress she was wearing when he first saw her come to dominate his thoughts and, in turn, the novel. Initially, one thinks that the doctor might be concerned about her welfare, or even that he simply admires her for the way that she copes with the dire circumstances in which she lives, including dealing with her drunkard father, but it quickly becomes apparent that he has a more sinister interest in her. With each return trip he seeks her out, and on each occasion she has, of course, grown older, more womanly; yet she is, on each occasion, still wearing the same dress.

Throughout the novel Simenon makes use of a number of symbols, like the island of Porquerolles, which is a manifestation of Mahé's increasingly dangerous, unconventional frame of mind. Elisabeth's ever shortening and tightening dress is a symbol of Mahé's lust [the colour red is itself a symbol of lust or danger] and, in a sense, mirrors the unravelling fabric of his life and, like the island, his mind also. Furthermore, a young girl is, of course, a symbol of independence, purity and youth. In one of the most significant episodes Mahé, like the two old men in Witold Gombrowicz's great Polish novel *Pornografia*, encourages his nephew Albert to pursue Elisabeth, to sleep with her, in an effort to spoil or sully her. It should be pointed out that Mahé doesn't really want or value any of these things for themselves, that they exist as symbols for him too; he doesn't love the island, he doesn't love the girl either [although the word is used towards the end of the novel it doesn't convince], he is simply drawn towards anything that isn't representative of his awful, common life, anything that will or could break the circle that he feels is closing around him.

Kathy says

Four stars equate "I really liked it" - but I didn't. The writing, however, must be recognized. General overview: man depressed/somewhat mad. But the carefully chosen words and settings are more similar to a play or poem, just not a commercially successful one in its overall darkness and confused thinking. The poor doctor simply went on the wrong vacation...? Who arranges a vacation on island of misery? Well, the author does. We are introduced to this miserable man trying to catch fish just as his guide in the boat has been teaching him without success. Everything is symbolic, of course, with the doctor struggling to see through the water (his life?).

"They had been in Porquerolles only four days, and already he was tired of it. Utterly worn out."

He is abruptly rescued from his fishing failures by a call for a doctor. He is taken to a hovel where a woman has just died and his eye is caught by a young girl in a red dress crouched in the dark corner hugging the wall.

Obsession enters. Strange results. A dark and unique work. Considering this was published in 1944, does this sound like a prophetic midlife crisis? Or did he simply stay too long in the sun?

"The Mahes could just take a running jump! What had they brought him up to do? Nothing. They had truly fixed a circle of stone round him, just like his dream. You will marry Helene, because she's mild and docile. You'll father a couple of children with her. You'll do your rounds on a motorbike to save petrol. You'll be a country doctor all your life, and your house will be well cared for."

This Penguin book is just 151 pages.

Nigeyb says

I really enjoyed *The Mahé Circle*, one of Georges Simenon's *Roman Durs* (hard novels), and which are very different to his more famous Maigret novels.

Unlike the Maigret novels, Simenon didn't view these as commercial in nature and felt no need to make concessions to morality or popular taste. The difference between the two, Simenon concluded, was "*exactly the same difference that exists between the painting of a painter and the sketch he will make for his pleasure or for his friends or to study something.*"

Dr. Mahé is in the midst of a midlife crisis. He's a small-town general practitioner whom we first meet holidaying with his family on the island of Porquerolles in the south of France, off the coast from Hyères. As the novel progresses he has the dawning realisation that he is living someone else's life and that he has never really made any decisions but just gone along with his mother's wishes.

None of his family or friends could understand why Dr. Mahé continued to drag his family to Porquerolles each summer. Had he become obsessed with the girl dressed in red whose dying mother he had attended to? Or was it a longing to go fishing and play boules with the locals? Or was there something more powerful that drew him back to the island each Summer?

Georges Simenon's writing is crisp and vivid throughout, the recurring island setting conveys a wonderful sense of place. Nothing much happens however I feel as though I saw the world through Dr. Mahé's eyes during his slow and fatalistic disintegration.

A mesmerising read.

I look forward to reading more of Georges Simenon's *Roman Durs*.

4/5

Toby says

How exciting! A brand new Simenon roman dur! OK technically not true but it's a novel that has never officially been translated in to English. Sure the guy wrote something like 400 novels but that's no excuse to wait almost 70 years to translate one little piece of literature from one of the biggest selling authors of all time. But then Simenon as pretty strict with how and when his work was translated by all accounts so perhaps this is one he was writing perhaps a little with the handbrake on? Somewhat ashamed of? Perhaps he just didn't think it would be understood by the English speaking world.

I didn't take to it as much as I've taken to other of his romans and I can't put my finger on why. Translation is a key aspect in the enjoyment of any work originally written in a language other than English, and it may well be that my impression of Simenon's writing is coloured by Geoffrey Sainsbury's translations and so by definition I could blame Sian Reynolds modern translation for my lack of enjoyment. But then again it's a disjointed tale of the mental disintegration of a prematurely middle aged country doctor that moves from mid-life crisis to something more as he becomes obsessed with what he doesn't have, what he couldn't have because of circumstances and his lack of self-belief so the issue could be his fractured mental state reflected in a narrative you can't connect with.

Simenon wrote obsession like nobody else, time and time again he dissected man's twisted nature with skill and bleak poetry but in Mahe Circle his assessment of a man who longs for a life less ordinary and comes to realise too late that if he wanted a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell he should probably have done something about it a long time ago doesn't need obsession for it to be bleak or cutting to the bone to be powerful and true. Here's a writer who seems to be just showing off how accurately he understands what makes people tick, not striving for anything beyond that as far as I can tell.

Penguin are also reprinting one Simenon a month until the entire Maigret series is back in print and as such are crowned once more as my favourite publishers as there's still about 30 I don't have. Hoorah!

Matthew Pritchard says

First Simenon. Great stuff. Dark, pressing and obsessive. The opening chapter is a masterclass in establishing a character quickly and seeing the world from his perspective. The way Mahé glides through the entire scene, as if on rails, almost dreamlike, taking one inevitable step after another is very well crafted.

Only a short little book but dense. I found myself taking it slowly, pondering the good doctor's slow mental disintegration.

Siti says

La vita in espadrillas

Porquerolles è l'isola nella quale viene ambientato gran parte di questo intenso e , come al solito, amaro e struggente romanzo. È un non luogo, o meglio il luogo delle vacanze, quello dove le relazioni sono tutte da costruire, gli abitanti da studiare nella loro quotidianità, l'essere un turista di passaggio un affare dalla grande delicatezza. È un ambiente prevalentemente marino preso d'assalto da vacanzieri non sempre attenti, circondato da essenziali abitazioni e dove si respira la capacità di accogliere e di integrare. È insomma un delicato ecosistema dalla fauna variegata che si agita nei placidi e suggestivi fondali. È un luogo scomodo inoltre , fuori mano, estremo sud francese, ci si va una volta e basta. Non può pretendere l'ancor giovane dottor Mahé di trascinarvi oltre la sua famiglia, tantomeno per ben cinque anni. Cosa lo spinge verso quei fondali? Cosa va a cercare? Qual è il malessere che lo anima facendogli alimentare una atroce, inutile, fallimentare ossessione?

Quanta della sua inquietudine ha sfiorato lo stesso Simenon quando anch'egli vi dimorava per lunghi periodi, osservando, cogliendo i particolari del vivere quotidiano, in quel luogo che, per estensione, rappresenta la seconda isola più grande della Francia dopo la Corsica, persa lì , a sud di Tolone.

L'ambientazione è dunque la protagonista di questo scritto, fagocita il lettore e il dottore che, come tanti altri personaggi del belga, si specializza nell'evasione, nella fuga dalla propria famiglia, dal luogo natio, dalle certezze per, in sostanza, rigettare la propria identità, spesso artificiosa, precostituita e falsata da pressioni, oppressioni, incapacità di vivere o ancora prima di dare giusta lettura alla propria esistenza.

Suggestivo e malinconico, lo consiglio.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

The Last Roman Dur: "The Mahé Circle" by Georges Simenon

Back in the day I did a year of French. My teacher was a native speaker. You'd think that this would make her fun and interesting, right? You couldn't be more wrong! All she did was drill us on grammar, and I couldn't even understand what she was saying half the time. She just expected me to automatically know the language as if I'd already lived in France for years. I was always procrastinating doing French stuff, and she was always expecting me to write and memorize a huge bunch of sentences in a language that I hardly knew, and then repeat it back to her. She totally turned me off to the French language. I started hating everything remotely connected with French and France in particular. I know not all French people are awful, cruel, soulless people, and that most are friendly and completely normal, and that I was just unlucky to have gotten stuck with the one person I'd be totally ok with having deported... Just saying...I'm done ranting now...That felt good.

If you're into French-speaking literature, read the rest of this review elsewhere.

Roberto says

Il dottor Francois Mahé, il protagonista, è un medico trentacinquenne grassoccio, stimato, banale, perbene, con una moglie insignificante che non ama e due figli che non sono al centro dei suoi pensieri. Un uomo senza qualità particolari che sembra già un vecchio e che trascina un'esistenza insignificante dentro le rigide regole sociali della provincia francese.

La sua esistenza è stata decisa dalla madre, che in casa fa tutto: sceglie anche la moglie giusta, la professione giusta, le vacanze giuste.

Ma interviene qualcosa a disturbare questo sistema stabile solo in apparenza. Durante una vacanza a Porquerolles un evento imprevisto, l'incontro con una ragazzina scarna vestita di rosso, compie un vero cataclisma nell'animo del protagonista. Questa ragazzina diventa per Francois una vera insopprimibile ossessione di cui si vergogna e che tiene gelosamente nascosta a tutti e a lungo anche a se stesso.

Fuori dal suo ambiente e dalle sue piccole incombenze quotidiane, Mahé si rende conto che la sua vita è frutto di scelte fatte sempre da altri.

È per lei che, senza che nessuno lo immagini, torna ogni estate a Porquerolles. È per lei che spinge il nipote a incontrarla e a possederla e che decide di lasciare ogni cosa e di trasferirsi con la famiglia nell'isola.

Un senso di morte pervade tutto il libro. Da una parte il bisogno di libertà e dall'altra la responsabilità di mantenere le cose come sono sempre state; il conflitto inizia a logorare la psiche di Mahé, che non può più vivere come prima ma non riesce neppure a decidersi a una svolta. Nel frattempo la sua vita, sua moglie, i suoi figli gli diventano insopportabili. Il dottore si trova di fronte all'ultima occasione per cambiare la sua vita, ma esita, dentro di sé cerca disperatamente il coraggio di fare ciò che sente come necessario.

Ci sono tutti i temi tipici dei romanzi di Simenon: una passione inconfessabile, l'innocenza dei comportamenti, la colpevolezza delle pulsioni, la frustrazione, l'impotenza, l'incapacità ad affrontare le situazioni e i propri malesseri e l'inevitabile sconfitta finale. La scrittura, un po' piatta e noiosa, si accorda con l'esistenza vuota del dottore. Splendide come al solito le descrizioni e le ambientazioni.

Andrew says

Thoroughly enjoyed this short novel about one man's obsession with something barely seen and how he is inextricably and inexorably drawn into making decisions against his better nature. It's wonderfully underplayed and because of this it's eminently believable. The prose is succinct and occasionally illuminating. I gave it 4/5 initially but I've just upped a star because in typing this review I've realised there was nothing I could fault. Actually, it's quite wonderful.

Tony says

THE MAHE CIRCLE. (1946). Georges Simenon. ***.

This was one of the author's so-called 'dur' novels. The plot was thin – much as if Simenon made it up as he went along. There is no continuity. From the back cover: "During his first holiday on the island of

Porquerolles, Dr. Mahe caught a glimpse of something irresistible. As the memory continues to haunt him, he falls prey to a delusion that may offer an escape from this conventional existence – or may destroy him...Simenon's dark, malevolent depiction of an ordinary man trapped in mundanity and consumed by obsession." The overall story is less than impressive.

latner3 says

This is a novel that prioritises mood over incident reaction over action, a grimly satisfying tale of obsession and breakdown. "A dark deep journey into the human soul. Very good."

charta says

La maestria con cui questo irriducibile misogino sa rappresentare la percezione delirante, l'ossessione paranoide e la scissione è sempre fonte di stupore.

Sandra says

François Mahé, un borghese piccolo piccolo. A Porquerolles, in un clima soffocante di una vacanza estiva, questo medico affermato e dalla vita ben impostata in società matura riflessioni che lo portano a capire cosa è stata la sua vita fino a quel momento: un prigioniero nella rete intessuta da sua madre, da quando è nato fino al matrimonio con Hélène, scelta non per lui, "ma per se stessa". La sete di libertà dal vincolo familiare si incarna in una adolescente che incontra per caso in paese, solo intravista per strada, "un paio di gambe esili che spuntavano da un cencio rosso": il romanzo racconta il conflitto interiore di quest'uomo senza qualità tra libertà e convenienza, tra le pulsioni dei sensi e il grigio scorrere delle giornate con madre e moglie che lo conducono per mano. Tuttavia non siamo in presenza di un conflitto sterile perché François Mahé si dibatte, tenta inutilmente di uscire dal cerchio del "suo clan", gli avi e parenti che popolano la memoria di una famiglia borghese e benestante irrigiditi nel ruolo imposto dalla società come tante statue di pietra che fanno il girotondo intorno a lui, ma si tratta di guizzi oramai inutili, sono solo tentativi di sgusciare fuori dal cerchio dell'infelicità e della morte che lo portano a sprofondare sempre più nei cupi fondali del suo personale abisso.

Un romanzo intimista di un Simenon che è sempre bravissimo nel descrivere particolari momenti di presa di coscienza cui non c'è via di scampo.
