

---

Michelle Emanuel. *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers: Léo Malet and the Evolution of the French “Roman Noir.”* New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006. 196p.

CATHERINE MARACHI  
SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

Between 1954 and 1959, Léo Malet, “*le père du roman noir français*” (32), wrote fifteen detective novels as part of a series called *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris*. Each story takes place in a different district of Paris, although Malet fell short of his original goal, which was to showcase all twenty *arrondissements* of the French capital. In her book, *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers*, Michelle Emanuel examines the pivotal role of this series in the evolution of detective fiction in France, from the popular novels of Emile Gaboriau, Maurice Leblanc, Gaston Leroux, and especially George Simenon, to the more politically and socially engaged works of contemporary writers such as Jean Amila, Jean-Patrick Manchette, and Didier Daeninckx. Malet emerges as a pioneer of the genre through his unique adaptation of the American first-person-narrator hardboiled model, into an original and typically French *roman noir*, “presenting vivid avant-garde imagery, well-drawn characters, and detailed insight into the daily life of the generation which survived the war and occupation” (128).

From a literary perspective, Emanuel presents Malet as an innovator because of his extensive use of slang and of Surrealist techniques, such as play on words, the reliance on *fait-divers*, the concept of *merveilleux*, as well as the incorporation of dream sequences and unconscious states into the storylines. Michelle Emanuel argues that Malet’s connection with the Surrealists in the 1930s, minimal as it may have been, had a profound influence on his writing, and that his experimentation with voice and point of view, and his numerous references to the French cultural patrimony, help bridge the gap between recreational fiction and literature.

Emanuel’s cultural analysis of the series’ significance and richness is more convincing still. In this part she focuses on Malet’s detective-narrator, Nestor Burma, and on Paris as another central character in each novel. Burma, the private eye who solves each mystery, is a flawed and conflicted anti-hero in a rather corrupt society. As Malet’s alter-ego, he is an orphan, turned anarchist, then marginal Surrealist, but he also embodies the preoccupations of the French people struggling to rebuild their lives and their national pride after the Nazi occupation in a fast-evolving society: “Plagued by insensitive and xenophobic observations, Burma reflects the resistance of the working classes who see their socio-economic status threatened by the changing face of post-colonial Paris” (27). Malet’s originality resides in turning Burma’s shortcomings, even his occasional sexism and racism, into traits endearing

---

to his readers, who can easily relate to this less than perfect protagonist. In this way, Emanuel rightly asserts, the series is also a social commentary on the mood of the post-WWII generation.

Paris, of course, is at the heart of Malet's novels, because of the original design of the series. Here Michelle Emanuel shows how Malet's initial project was thwarted by the swift and massive renovation that took place in the city in the 1950s. Soon the author does not recognize the Paris he loved or its inhabitants and, defeated by "*une urbanisation galopante*" (139), he gives up on the series after the fifteenth book, leaves Paris for the suburbs and, losing the main source of his inspiration, stops writing altogether. This allows for another reading of *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* as a precious historical document on "a Paris that in many ways no longer exists" (126).

Michelle Emanuel's *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers* is a very clear, easy-to-read introduction to the birth and evolution of the French *roman noir*, treating it, as it deserves to be, as a legitimate literary genre. Her enthusiasm for Léo Malet and his characters is sure to attract new readers to his works. Emanuel's book will be relevant for anybody interested in the post-war and decolonization period, in the Paris of the 1950s, and in cultural studies. \*