

# Food as Love in the Maigret Novels of Georges Simenon

## Nutrition in literature

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“‘Why don’t you come and have dinner at ours, pot luck?’

Good old Lucas had probably added:

‘I can assure you that my wife would be delighted.’

Poor Lucas! It wasn’t true, because his wife, who panicked at the drop of a hat, and who found having a guest for dinner complete torture, would undoubtedly have given him an earful.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a very innocuous start to a novel. Detective Chief Inspector Jules Maigret is invited to dinner by his lieutenant Lucas at the end of a working day at Paris’s *police justiciare* (Criminal Police Department) at the Quai des Orfèvres. In the next few lines, we learn that the invitation has been extended because Maigret’s wife is away in the Alsace for a few days, supporting her sister, who is undergoing an operation. So far, so banal.

Yet in the space of five sentences, we learn that Maigret has a loyal and considerate second-in-command who is trying to cheer him up, and that Maigret, while recognizing this act of kindness, knows that accepting the invitation would cause misery for Lucas’s wife and ultimately for Lucas himself. And it’s all about a spot of dinner.

The Belgian author Georges Simenon (1903–89) wrote 75 novels and 28 short stories featuring the fictional Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. Appearing at regular intervals between 1931 and 1972, these stories created one of the world’s most enduringly popular fictional detectives.

Maigret is famous for his pipe, his physical size and strength, and his intuitive approach to solving crimes. He is also famous for his love of food – the homely cuisine of his wife, the faithful Mme Maigret, and also the cuisine he encounters as he moves through the world, investigating case after case.

A number of commentators have noted the prominence of food in the Maigret novels – a prominence that is encountered in the detective fiction of many of Simenon’s imitators and successors.

In the words of Peter Rozovsky of the crime fiction blog *Detectives Beyond Borders*, “Years before Andrea Camilleri’s Salvo Montalbano or Jean-Claude Izzo’s Fabio Montale ate their first fictional meals, there was Inspector Jules Maigret. Georges Simenon’s creation is, of course, right up there with Sherlock Holmes among the world’s most popular fictional detectives. If the benefit of the doubt goes to the detective who eats best, though, Maigret leaves the competition trailing in a cloud of kitchen aromas and pipe smoke.”<sup>3</sup>

“Maigret has a visceral relationship with food”

Maigret certainly loves his food, and the frequency with which the words ‘lunch,’ ‘dinner’ ‘bistro’ and ‘restaurant’ appear throughout the Maigret canon is remarkable. The representation of food in Maigret’s world is much more than an opportunity for self-indulgent escapism, however. Maigret has a



Georges Simenon. “I love man ... I love to see him in search of himself, century after century, failing each time, forcing himself to go on again.”<sup>1</sup>



“Dish of the Day.” *Rognons de veau à la liégeoise, soles normandes, tripe à la mode de Caen, bouillabaisse, coq au vin, veau Marengo, escargots, omelette aux fines herbes and choucroute garnie* are just some of the many classic French dishes referenced in the Maigret stories.<sup>5</sup>

visceral relationship with food, and what he eats is an integral part of each crime investigation he conducts. Food in the Maigret novels is in fact a proxy for love – and, on occasions, for hate and indifference as well. It is absolutely central to the way people live, the way people are, and as such is a quintessential component of the investigative process.

#### Texture, authenticity and three-dimensionality

“One thing good crime novels give you, along with the puzzle of the crime, is a world,” observes historian and novelist Miranda Carter. “It might be Maigret’s mid-century France, Rebus’s Edinburgh, Shardlake’s Tudor England or Carvalho’s Spain ... They open up the life and social habits of the world they investigate. Good food writing does the same thing. Roland Barthes wrote, ‘an entire world is present in and signified by food.’ In crime writing, descriptions of food immediately add texture, authenticity and three-dimensionality. They are a kind of shorthand. Look, they say, this world is real, the glasses are chipped and the shiny hot bacon fat sheens the plates, even if the crime is far-fetched. They also reach out beyond the crime and its investigation. The writer Jason Goodwin ... has written, ‘You uncover a place in the scent of a dish, more absolutely than in a thousand words.’ This is never more clear than in the Maigret novels, where the inspector learns the world of the crime and its secrets by eating, inhaling the atmosphere of grubby basement bars and shabby bistros, knocking back a small glass of marc, accepting a plate of roast lamb and a few leaves bathed in a garlic dressing.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Table for one

Returning to the dinner invitation that Maigret declines, and which opens the 1951 novel *Maigret Takes a Room*, we can see the extent to which the *commissaire*’s relationship with food is bound up with his closest relationship – that with his wife.

“What did he fancy eating? Because he was on his own, because he could go anywhere at all, he seriously asked himself that question, thinking about the different restaurants that might be able to tempt him, as if he were about to celebrate. First he took a few steps towards Place de la Concorde, and that made him feel a little guilty, because he was pointlessly going further and further away from home. In the window of a butcher’s shop he saw some prepared snails, swimming in parsley butter, which looked as if it had been painted.

His wife didn’t like snails. He himself seldom ate them. He decided to have some this evening, to ‘take advantage’, and he turned on his heels towards a restaurant in Bastille, where they are a specialty.

They knew him there.

‘Table for one, Monsieur Maigret?’

The waiter looked at him with a hint of surprise, a hint of reproach. On his own he couldn’t get a good table, and he was put in a kind of corridor, against a pillar.

The truth is that he hadn’t expected anything extraordinary. He hadn’t even really wanted to go to the cinema. He didn’t know what to do with his big body. And yet he felt vaguely disappointed.

‘And what sort of wine would you like?’

He didn’t dare to order too good a wine, still not wanting to appear to be taking advantage.

And three-quarters of an hour later, when the street lights had come on in the bluish evening, he found himself standing once again, still on his own, in Place de la Bastille.”<sup>6</sup>

With the opportunity to ‘take advantage’ of his wife’s absence by indulging himself on his own, the faithful Maigret is utterly at sea. He can’t enjoy the food and drink he orders, he feels ill at ease in his body, and he is even diminished in the eyes of the



Cassoulet – a classic French dish, typical of the traditional, hearty fare favored by Maigret



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A couple strolling by the Seine in Paris in the early 1980s. “I love France. Of all countries, it is the one nearest to me, although I do not belong to it and I don’t go there regularly.” – Georges Simenon<sup>9</sup>

waiter for dining out alone. This passage is not written for gourmet crime-lovers to feast themselves on the vicarious pleasures of the page. It is about how disorientating it can be to be separated from the person you most love.

## “He didn’t know what to do with his big body”

### Midnight feasting

The relationship between food and loyalty is further explored in this novel in a scene involving midnight feasting. Investigating a murder that has taken place directly outside a Parisian boarding-house, Maigret takes the unorthodox step of renting a room there to investigate the crime from the inside (this move also causes him agonized feelings of infidelity to Mme Maigret, who is still away in the Alsace). Maigret suspects the owner of the boarding-house, Mademoiselle Clément, of knowing something about the crime, or even of being a party to it. Unable to sleep one night, Maigret comes downstairs at 2:30 a.m. to find her in the kitchen.

**“In front of him, Mademoiselle Clément was standing in her nightdress, her hair held in a kind of net. For a moment it was**

**impossible to read anything on her face but confusion but then, when you might have least expected it, she exploded in a throaty laugh that made her big breasts bounce.**

“You scared me,” she exclaimed. “My God, I was scared!” The gas was burning in the stove. The kitchen smelt of fresh coffee. There was an enormous ham sandwich on the waxed tablecloth.

“I was so frightened when I heard footsteps that I turned out the light. When the footsteps approached, it made me drop my cup ...”

Fat though she was, her body and her nightdress were still young and appetizing.

“Were you hungry too?”

He asked, without knowing where to look:

“Did you get up to eat?”

She laughed again, more briefly, and blushed a little.

“It happens to me almost every night. I know I shouldn’t eat so much, but it’s stronger than me. I’m like that King of France who always had a cold chicken on his bedside table.”<sup>7</sup>

In front of the Detective Chief Inspector, the heavy-bodied and giggly Mademoiselle Clément slowly consumes the vast ham sandwich. Her behavior bears all the signs of compulsive greed. Only later do we discover that she has been hiding in her room a

young man who erroneously believes himself to be suspected of the murder that Maigret is investigating. Stuffing the ham sandwich down her throat in the middle of the night, she protects someone she perceives as an innocent victim against the potential predations of the police: her act of overconsumption is in fact an act of selflessness. It is a wonderful twist in the plot, a completely unexpected piece of Looking-Glass morality.

## “I’ve Starved too, like Chaplin”

### “I’ve starved too”

The food and wine critic Daniel Rogov has observed: “Maigret was more than a great detective. He remains known throughout France as a charming, sensitive man who has earned the respect of his colleagues as well as of the rogues with whom he had contact. It may well have been his special brand of quiet diligence, especially the ability to search out good food, that so endeared Maigret to the hearts of the French – a feat especially impressive when one considers the usual attitude that these good folk hold toward their policemen.”<sup>8</sup>

In a world of food insecurity, the double burden of malnutrition, and broken food systems, it could be tempting to regard the world of Maigret, with its cafés and bistros and good bourgeois cooking, as a place of escapism – a province of the mind in which the reader can play at being a detective and a gourmet at the same time. It is much more than this, however. “I’ve starved too, like Chaplin, like so many others, and I’m glad of it,” wrote Simenon in *When I Was Old*.<sup>10</sup> Born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903, Simenon was a teenager during the First World War, and grew up in a world of tragedy and deprivation. Via journalism, pulp fiction, detective fiction and literary novels, he wrote his way to fame and wealth and security over the course of many decades. But he never forgot the poverty and failure of his early years. He never forgot the importance of food, and love, and home, and he imbued his *alter ego* Maigret with this sensibility too. When Maigret smells the fragrant wafts of French cooking, there is a man inside him with an empty belly and no money in his pocket who smells it too.

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