

# Book Review

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## The Celebration of Passion

Intense and cerebral, Marguerite Yourcenar was fascinated by sexual ambiguity.



Marguerite Yourcenar in 1984.

JERRY WILSON

### MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

*Inventing a Life.*

By Josyane Savigneau.

Translated by Joan E. Howard.

Illustrated. 527 pp. Chicago:

The University of Chicago Press. \$25.

By Edmund White

**M**MARGUERITE YOURCENAR, who was born in 1903 and died in 1987, was the last echo of a heroic chorus of European writers that included Thomas Mann and André Gide, older men whom she particularly admired and whose work influenced hers. Like them, she was a philosophical writer with a deep and wide culture, a moralist with a taste for historical perspectives and a virtuoso equally at home in novels, stories and essays (she also wrote rather bad plays and poems).

Like them, she joined a dignified, not to say marmoreal, manner to a penchant for shocking subject matter, for she was as fascinated as they were by sexual ambiguity. Mann explored incest in "The Blood of the Walsungs" and an exalted, if overripe, platonic homosexuality in "Death in Venice." Gide touched on bisexuality and reveled in hedonism in "The Immoralist" and avowed his own homosexuality in "If It Die." In a daring, if often over-the-top, essay, "Corydon," Gide defended homosexuality as natural and even useful to society.

As Josyane Savigneau reminds us in "Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life," Yourcenar, in her very Gidean first novel, "Alexis" (1929), showed how a young husband's homosexuality could compromise his marriage, while in her masterpiece, "Memoirs of Hadrian" (1951), she invented one of the great same-sex love stories of all time, the Roman Emperor's passion for his Greek lover. In her splendid essays on the Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy and the prolific Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima she honored two of the remarkable talents of our epoch, each so different from the other but both homosexual. Indeed, her critical introduction to Cavafy is a particularly acute evaluation; for instance, she remarks, "We are so used to seeing in wisdom a residue of dead passions that it's difficult to recognize in it the hardest and most condensed form of ardor, the gold nugget pulled out of the fire, not the ashes."

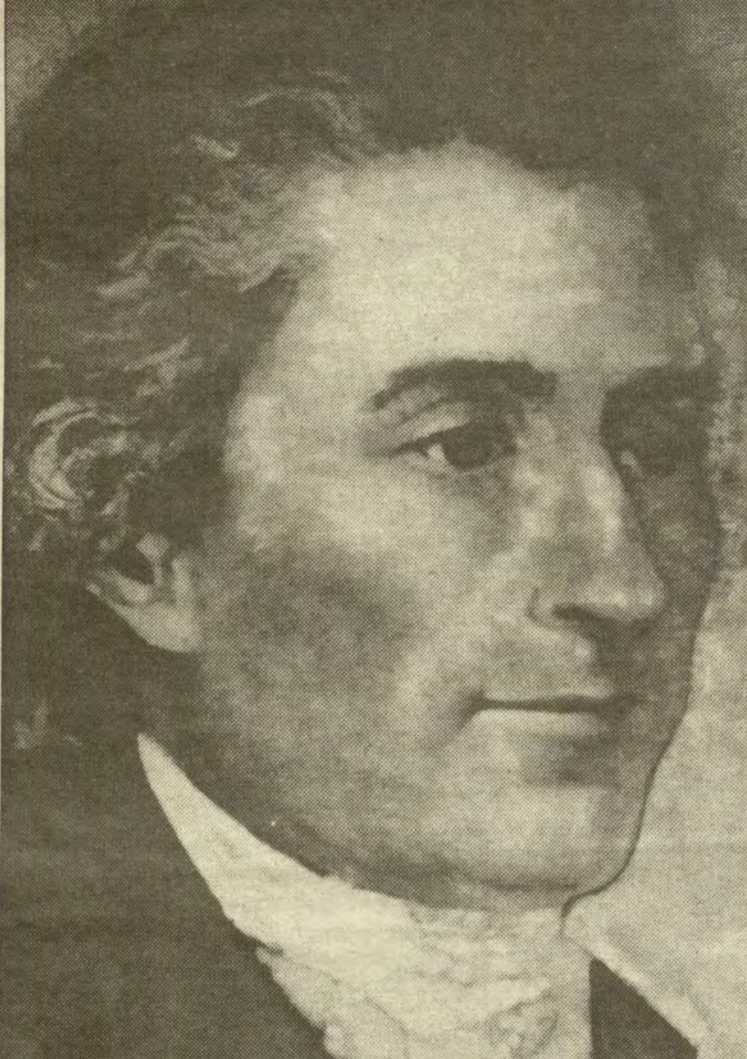
This Nietzschean celebration of passion would mark her own fiction. In her essay she also contrasts Cavafy's "exquisite freedom from posturing" about his homosexuality with Proust's dishonesty (which led him to give "a grotesque or false image of his own tendencies") and with Gide's need "to put his personal experience immediately in the service of rational reform or social progress." In her own writing and conduct she would avoid the Proustian and Gidean extremes and cultivate Cavafy's unemphatic self-acceptance.

Cavafy's honesty is also similar to that of the Emperor Hadrian in Yourcenar's brilliant re-creation. As she ex-

*Continued on page 30*

Edmund White's biography of Jean Genet will be published next month.

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# The Reservation Is His Beat

Tony Hillerman's hero faces a problem: How can a Navajo cop be true to both his culture and his calling?

## SACRED CLOWNS

By Tony Hillerman.  
305 pp. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. \$23.

By Verlyn Klinkenborg

"**M**AYBE the landscape is part of the answer," Jim Chee says in "Sacred Clowns," Tony Hillerman's 12th and most pallid mystery novel. "Maybe it makes the answer a little different." The answer is always a little different in a Hillerman mystery because the question is not precisely "Whodunit?"

Jim Chee is a Navajo police officer whose beat is the big reservation that surrounds the Hopi reservation and sprawls across most of northeastern Arizona and into New Mexico and Utah. In "Sacred Clowns," Chee is also training, as he has been for several novels now, to become a *hataalii*, "what the whites called a singer, or medicine man." Besides a corpse or two, a lot of road time and an extremely chaste variety of romantic frisson, each of Mr. Hillerman's Jim Chee novels presents Chee with an ethical dilemma that pivots on a single question: How is it possible to be a policeman and, at the same time, to follow the Navajo way? The landscape is part of the answer.

Among certain real Anglos on the nonfictional Navajo reservation, Anglos who have professional dealings with local law enforcement, there has been talk about printing a bumper sticker that says, "Where's Jim Chee when you need him?" Whatever else this joke accomplishes, it has the virtue of acknowledging the boundary between fiction and reality, a boundary that grows steadily fuzzier, where Mr. Hillerman's novels are concerned, the closer you get to the Southwest.

In the East, Mr. Hillerman is just a mystery writer with a successful series of novels, not especially different from, say, Dick Francis, Martha Grimes or Nicolas Freeling. But in the Southwest, Mr. Hillerman's mysteries have become a kind of regional gospel; they are the chief exponents, for many Anglo readers, of the Navajo and Hopi cultures. This fact is not entirely of the author's seeking; he has repeatedly reminded readers that he is not an expert on the Navajos or Hopis and that his books do not purport to represent Navajo or Hopi religious ceremonies. Still, the fact remains: Mr. Hillerman's novels serve as a kind of cultural Baedeker in a way that scarcely any other mystery novels do. And

Verlyn Klinkenborg, who teaches writing at Harvard University, is the author of "The Last Fine Time" and "Making Hay."

### Comic Relief, the Pueblo Way

The double line of kachinas had completed the circle of the plaza now and moved almost directly below their housetop. Chee looked at figures foreshortened by perspective, seeing the tops of the tubular leather masks which converted farmers, truck drivers, loggers, policemen, accountants, fathers, sons and grandfathers into the spirits who linked the people of Tano to the world beyond. He could see very human sweat glistening on their shoulders, a very ordinary Marine Corps anchor tattoo on the arm of the seventh kachina, the very natural dust stirred by the rhythmic shuffling of their moccasins. Even so, even for an unbelieving Navajo outsider, the dancing figures seemed more than human. . . . Four figures had emerged on a roof across the plaza. They wore breechcloths, and their bodies were zebra-striped in black and white, their faces daubed white with



RAUL COLON

that exacts a cost.

Mr. Hillerman's new book, "Sacred Clowns," whose plot needs no retailing here, illustrates the bind you encounter in his novels. Murder mysteries are inherently irreverent; they are comedies, not tragedies. The corpse is just an occasion for curiosity, the pretext for some pleasant, vulgar staring. The detective, whether private or official, usually behaves like a lord of misrule, toppling conventions, turning everything and everyone he meets inside out, acknowledging no authority except the vitality of life itself. He (or she) and we are all voyeurs, eavesdroppers, trying to understand the teleology of sudden death on the assumption that doing so somehow makes death less inexplicable, less forbidding. It is a rare murder mystery that does not contain — or try to contain — a vein of social satire too, satire that arises, at the very least, from the unpredictable circumstances in which the elegant and inelegant alike happen to die.

But Mr. Hillerman does not allow himself satire or irreverence or even vulgarity. He is writing across a particularly troubled ethnic divide, the one separating Anglos from Indians, and no matter how he demurs, his

huge black smiles painted around their mouths, their hair jutting upward in two long conical horns, each horn surmounted with a brush of what seemed to be corn shucks. Koshares. The sacred clowns of Pueblo people. . . . Two of them now stood at the parapet of the building, pointing downward at the line of kachinas, gesturing wildly. The other two, a fat man and a youth with a weight lifter's body, were carrying a ladder. They swung it recklessly, knocking first one and then the other of their partners head over heels, to the delight of the audience. They managed to get the ladder over the side, with the wrong, narrow end down. A mock battle ensued. . . . The crowd was laughing, shouting encouragement. The drums kept their steady rhythm. The kachinas danced on, sublime spirits oblivious of such human imperfection.

From "Sacred Clowns."

novels have the cautiousness of anthropology, the decorousness that comes when you don't want to presume too much upon an acquaintance. In "Sacred Clowns," we see the clowns dancing at a fictional pueblo ceremony as if through a veil, clowns who in reality are every bit as raucous, profane and funny as Shakespeare's.

The Hopis have long been sensitive about having their culture represented. Photography is forbidden in the vicinity of their villages, and in the last year or two many of their dances have been closed to outsiders. That is certainly their right. But in a curious way, Mr. Hillerman has expanded the prohibition in his novels. He has taken laughter — one of the Navajos' strongest traits — away from them. Like many visitors to the reservation, he indulges a kind of preferential vision. He chooses to portray the spirituality of the Navajos and Hopis and merely hints at the often brutal conditions of life on the reservation.

**P**OLITENESS is the prevailing mood of a Hillerman mystery, a politeness that is partly the stern decorum of Jim Chee, through whom Mr. Hillerman has instructed Anglo readers in some of the social proprieties of the reservation, but which is also the author's understandable unwillingness to offend the people who have been his hosts.

There has always been a tendency in American literature to portray the landscape of the Southwest — really, of the West as a whole — in moral terms. That tendency, falsifying as it is, lends itself well to a murder mystery. Mr. Hillerman has set himself the more difficult task of suggesting the spirituality of the Southwestern landscape, as well as its delicate beauty. It is hard not to applaud his efforts, especially when you consider how choked the Southwest is with bad artists who are trying to do, in pastels and acrylics, what Mr. Hillerman does in only black and white.

But in that landscape, so we have been persuaded by history, Anglos look like clods. They are either exploiting the land or romanticizing it in a way that somehow misses the true character of its spirituality in American Indian culture. Throughout his novels, Mr. Hillerman honors the mystical union of Indians and the earth in his own peculiar manner. When it comes time to ask "Whodunit?" the landscape is always part of the answer. But in "Sacred Clowns," as elsewhere in Mr. Hillerman's work, the white guys are guilty. It seems to me that in a murder mystery, as in life itself, guilt rains down a little more equitably on us all. □