

FATALE

By Jean-Patrick Manchette

Afterword by Jean Echenoz

Translated from the French by Donald Nicholson-Smith

\$12.95 US / \$14.95 CAN

978-1-59017-381-7 paperback

Jean-Patrick Manchette (1942–1995) was a French crime novelist credited with reinventing and reinvigorating the genre. His books, with their rattling and radical style, transformed the classic crime narrative into a brutal—though nonetheless entertaining—indictment of post-war complacency. He wrote ten short novels, three of which—*3 to Kill*, *The Prone Gunman*, and, now, *Fatale*—have been translated into English.

Jean Echenoz won France’s prestigious Prix Goncourt for *I’m Gone*. He is the author of four previous novels in English translation, including *Cherokee*, winner of the Prix Médicis. He lives in Paris.

Donald Nicholson-Smith’s many translations include Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. He lives in New York City.

This is the first English translation of this major work from the master of the French thriller

“In France, which long ago embraced American crime fiction, thrillers are referred to as polars. And in France the godfather and wizard of polars is Jean-Patrick Manchette . . . [H]e’s a massive figure. . . . There is gristle here, there is bone.” —*The Boston Globe*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

To some extent, the reader knows what to expect from *Fatale* as soon as he or she has read its title: here will be a story about a femme fatale, a sexy, mysterious, and dangerous woman who will wreak havoc on the lives she touches. Jean-Patrick Manchette’s protagonist, Aimée Joubert—probably not her real name, we learn from the narrator, but the name she chooses to call herself upon arriving in the sleepy town of Bléville—is all this, to be sure, but she is also much more than any reader could anticipate.

As Aimée settles into Bléville, ingratiating herself into the village’s small circle of high society—but still maintaining a significant emotional distance from those she meets—she quickly learns the townspeople’s darkest secrets, becoming a human repository of incriminating information. Her actions, as deftly penned in Manchette’s wry narration, are subtle enough to seem normal to her neighbors; and though the reader knows she’s planning something, it isn’t until the novel’s dizzying climax that we learn what Aimée has been up to all along. *Fatale* is a near-perfect crime thriller: suspenseful, darkly funny, and centered on an unforgettable character unlike any other in modern literature.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Jean-Patrick Manchette uses a misdirection strategy in the first chapter of his novel—it concerns a group of hunters the reader will never meet again, whose hunting trip is interrupted when a woman named “Mélanie Horst” kills one of them. Why do you think Manchette chooses to open the novel this way? What was your first impression of the femme fatale? Was it borne out by the rest of the events in the novel?
2. Mélanie Horst, who becomes Aimée Joubert, is described in the first chapter as a thin thirty or thirty-five-year-old woman with “long brown hair . . . dark brown eyes and delicate features,” and “small and even” teeth [p. 4]. Though the narrator describes her actions and possessions later with a great level of detail, this is as specific as the description of Aimée gets. What did you imagine she looked like? Who would you cast in the role of Aimée, if you were to make a film of the novel?
3. The narrator explains of Bléville’s newspapers that “One of them championed a left-capitalist ideology; the other championed a left-capitalist ideology” [p. 13]. Did you find this description funny? Is the book in general funny? How would you classify its narrative style?
4. How does Manchette characterize the townspeople of Bléville—the realtor Lindquist, the Moutets, Dr. Sinistrat, the businessmen Lorque and Lenverguez, the insouciant Baron Jules, the journalist DiBona, and the rest? Did you find them to be sympathetic characters? Did your attitudes towards them change as the novel went on?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Day of the Owl, Leonardo Sciascia (introduction by George Scialabba)

The Man Who Watched Trains Go By, Georges Simenon (introduction by Luc Sante)

Nightmare Alley, William Lindsay Gresham (introduction by Nick Tosches)

Novels in Three Lines, Félix Fénéon (translated and with an introduction by Luc Sante)

Don't Look Now, Daphne du Maurier (selected and with an introduction by Patrick McGrath)

Boredom, Alberto Moravia (introduction by William Weaver)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*

Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*

Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*

James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB: FILMS

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946) directed by Tay Garnett

Double Indemnity (1944) directed by Billy Wilder

Nikita (1990) directed by Luc Besson

5. What did you make of Aimée's visit to her mother's house [p. 35]? Does the gift she brings her mother prove that Aimée is capable of caring about someone? What about when Aimée says, "I hate you. God, I wish you would die!" behind her mother's back, where her mother can't hear?
6. At the beginning of Chapter 9, Aimée cuts out an article about the death of the hunter she killed in Chapter 1 and files it with other clippings, presumably pertaining to other murders she's committed [p. 37]. Why do you think she keeps these records of her killings? Is she driven by guilt? Pride? Compulsion?
7. When Aimée first tries to shoot Baron Jules [p. 66] and discovers she's only grazed his head [p. 67], why doesn't she shoot him again right away? Why does she reveal her plan to him? Were you surprised when Aimée began to cry while describing her plan [p. 68]?
8. "There is always one fat real asshole who wants to kill another," Aimée explains to Baron Jules, insisting that the idea of killing is already in their heads [p. 70]. Do you think her justification is sound? Without Aimée's influence, would the men in these small towns have been driven to kill their neighbors eventually anyway?
9. After Aimée attempts to turn herself in at the police station, were you surprised by Lorque's offer to nonetheless carry out the rest of the deal with no consequences for Aimée [p. 79]? Were you surprised that the town's corruption extends all the way to Commissioner Fellouque? Do you think Aimée truly wanted to be caught and punished for her crime?
10. In their final confrontation, Lorque demands to know what "one outrageous thing, one truly criminal thing" Baron Jules had in his files to incriminate Lorque [p. 89]. Does this mean Lorque has hired a hit on Baron Jules without even knowing what information he might be protecting by doing so? Do you think the same holds true for the others? Do you think any of them actually had any secrets in their files scandalous enough to warrant killing a man in order to protect them? Why does Aimée say she "couldn't care less" about what was in the files? Why didn't she read them?
11. As Jean Echenoz notes in his afterword, Aimée's sexuality in the novel is a curious thing: "Twice we see her repel male advances with amusement, and the sole allusion to her sexuality is of an autoerotic kind" [p. 97]. Yet Aimée depends in large part on her femininity in order to pull off her cons, which only target men. How does Aimée relate to sex? Has she transcended it somehow? Does she lack the basic emotional equipment necessary to have a healthy sexuality?
12. At the end of the novel, does the narrator's description of Aimée "in high heels and her scarlet evening gown . . . climbing a snow-covered slope" suggest that she's died [p. 93]? Whether or not you think she dies, do you believe Aimée gets what she deserves? What about the rest of the characters? Throughout the novel, did you "root for" Aimée as a kind of antiheroine? Did you stop? If so, when?
13. In the novel's last sentence, the narrator breaks away from Aimée's story and makes eerie use of apostrophe: "SENSUAL WOMEN, PHILOSOPHICALLY MINDED WOMEN, IT IS TO YOU THAT I ADDRESS MYSELF." What does Manchette mean by this? What bearing does it have on the novel?

NYRB Classics is an innovative list of outstanding books from many eras and all around the world. It includes both acknowledged masterpieces and hidden gems of literature with introductions by distinguished contemporary authors. NYRB Classics offers a wide-ranging and endlessly surprising selection of books including novels, short fiction, mystery, suspense, history, autobiography and memoir, and poetry. Visit www.nyrb.com to learn more about NYRB Classics and to discover, or rediscover, a host of wonderful books.