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Pierre Assouline, *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xi+276. Notes, bibliography and index. Translated from the French by Charles Raus. \$24.95 U.S.(pb). ISBN 978-0-19-539759-8.

Review by Hugo Frey, University of Chichester.

This publication is an English language translation of the groundbreaking biography of the creator of the *Tintin* comic strips, Hergé, the pen name used by Georges Remi (1907-1983). It affords those readers who cannot consult the original French work the opportunity to discover the twists and turns in the life of a famous literary figure.[1] Assouline describes how each of the Tintin books came to fruition by working through them in chronological order. In addition, he explores how Hergé achieved success in the 1930s with his original and entertaining strips, continued working under the Nazi occupation of Belgium, then, during the liberation fell under suspicion of collaboration. Next, Assouline describes how Hergé recovered his career as a comic strip artist to win fame around the world in the late 1950s. For example, in 1957 Marguerite Duras wrote about Tintin for *France-Observateur* and Roger Nimier provided the preface to the first academic book devoted to *Tintin*, Pol Vandromme's *Le Monde de Tintin*. [2]

The biographer captures the many ambiguities of a fascinating, if troubled, life. Hergé's comics thrilled, amused, reassured, and brought pleasure to generation after generation of readers. Meanwhile, Hergé worked with right-wing and extreme right-wing friends and mentors in the conservative Catholic press and at *Le Soir* when it was under the control of the *Propaganda Abteilung*. In the post war period he suffered from psychological difficulties that plagued him just when his professional life seemed to be in control and to be enormously successful. Loved and admired by his millions of readers, in private he was a tormented character, not least when confronted with divorcing his first wife. Quite brilliantly Assouline conveys all of these ambiguous facets of Hergé's life. The original French biography is a work of reference for all of us who occasionally write in this field of cultural history. Assouline had access to the private archive, and papers, belonging to Hergé and so his treatment is an indirect means of gaining a flavour of that documentation. It is considered by many people to be the definitive work on its subject.

For Hergé's widow, Fanny Rodwell, Assouline's biography was too critical a work. It established too negative a picture that did not convey the whole man. Subsequently, another thorough biography was published, written by a former student of Roland Barthes, Benoît Peeters.[3] However, in fairness, Assouline was not the first person to suggest that Hergé's life story was more complicated than the neat drawings that he produced with such regular efficiency for long periods of his life. Prior to the biography Peeters had pointed out aspects of Hergé's contribution to the Nazi-controlled press in his reasonably informative book, *Le Monde d'Hergé*. Hergé had also given his own account in an important set of interviews.[4] He had been painfully aware of the complexities of his own life, and he was especially sensitive about anyone judging his actions from during the war. For what it is worth, after 1945, he had maintained friendships with others who had collaborated at *Le Soir* and he entered into correspondence with the leading former literary-collaborator, Robert Poulet, who had moved from Belgium to Paris and who worked as a far right-wing journalist.[5] Assouline had revealed many of these controversial aspects in his biography and he had even dared to poke fun at them. For instance, he titled the chapter dealing with Hergé's

struggle to remake a career between 1945 and 1950 as “Les années noires”, a term that is usually used for the Nazi occupation of France. In turn, he titled the section of the biography devoted to Hergé’s war years as “L’âge d’or.”

Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin is a valuable contribution to the limited number of English language works available on its subject. Clearly, it far surpasses some of the faintly ridiculous publications written by fans of the comics that tend to gloss over issues that taint the artist’s reputation. As the blurb on the dust jacket implies this book will become the essential guide to the man whose work has inspired a forthcoming film directed by Steven Spielberg. It deserves to be read by undergraduates studying on history programmes at university, as well as the interested general reader. It is helpful for people without the requisite language skills to consult the original publication in French.

In Hergé’s cartoons the devil is sometimes in the detail, a clever touch here, some neat innovation there. The same is true of this English translation, but in its case unfortunately so. On page iv of the book one learns that Oxford University Press has offices in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Chile, etc. Also that their website is to be visited at www.oup.com and that “Oxford” is a “registered trademark of Oxford University Press.” Finally, at the end of the standard legal rubric that one would expect to find, there is this brief note: “This first English-language edition retains the core but not the totality of the original French edition.” No explanation is made in the work as to who has made the editorial decisions that established the new, significantly shortened, text.

One is left to speculate if that was the unenviable task of translator, Charles Raus, or if Pierre Assouline played a role. Nothing more is said in the beginning of the book, no explanation is offered as to how the new text was created. It is frustrating that this key statement on the publication is so concealed and that it is left to the reader to discover it in the small print. Surely a short introduction to the work that explained matters would have been preferable to hiding what quickly becomes apparent to the informed reader. Such a new preface would have given Assouline and Raus the opportunity to discuss why and how they thought it helpful to invent a “core” and to explain if they considered that the new English-language Hergé was significantly different from the earlier one. It is important to add that at the end of the book where acknowledgements are presented by Charles Raus he does thank several people for helping him. Here, he expresses his gratitude for “the razor sharp editing of Tim Bent, and, in particular the extraordinary and patient support of Joellyn Ausanka, who lets nothing slip by her” (p. 262).

A fuller new preface would have been also an appropriate device to explain precisely which source text has in fact been translated, the first Plon edition of *Hergé* (1996) or the definitive version of the book, the “corrected” publication that was brought out by Gallimard for the Folio paperback series, also in 1996. Logically, it should be the latter work since it is presented as the finished study, revised following comment and correction from informed parties such as scholar, Philippe Goddin, and former colleague of Hergé, Bernard Heuvelmans. Although no clear explanation is given in the book under review it does include a translation of the acknowledgements that were presented in the Folio-Gallimard edition. This would suggest that *The Man Who Created Tintin* is inspired by that revised and corrected work, although the publishing rubric at the beginning of the Oxford translation mentions the Plon house, however, this might be only for copyright reasons.[6]

Concision can be a good thing and some readers will be grateful not to have to plough through yet another lengthy tome. I appreciated that too, at first... However, the excisions that have been made are drastic. Important material is omitted and the reader is misled about key data because it is now missing. Detailed information that is historically significant about Hergé’s life and work that featured in the definitive Gallimard-Folio edition is dropped. Sadly, though less significantly, the titles of two *Tintin* stories are unnecessarily confused with each other.[7] All the good work that is achieved by the translator Charles Raus falls by the wayside as the reader becomes fascinated with locating what elements of

the biography are no longer considered significant. The reading process turns into a game of assessing the quality of Tim Bent's "razor-sharp editing" and this is a real shame because the history presented here is important and it merits analysis for several other better reasons. However, this is impossible because so much original text has been cut out that this means no other intellectual work can begin to take place, even for a casual reader such as myself.

And, here is the real problem about the title, Tintin scholars and devotees are not at all casual: they are so-called "Tintinologists" who spend decades discovering the smallest new details about their preferred subject, they compare different versions of the strips, debate and dispute new interpretations, and are generally fascinated by information about Tintin and all small new historical details. They are collectors and cataloguers, some hold tenure in French Studies at well-known universities (Miami, Louisiana), some create websites and write blogs about their hero, Tintin, and his creator. They have often spent all of their childhoods pouring over the meticulous clean clear-line drawings that Hergé gave to the world. This is not a clientele who will be at all inspired to purchase a biography that is a "core" that has been established by "razor sharp" editing. They will spot far more missing material than this humble reviewer ever will.

Let us briefly note two examples of the problems caused by the excisions that are both easily stumbled on. They occur in the chapter detailing Hergé's war record, "The Golden Age." On page seventy-two of the Oxford publication there is the following quotation from an anonymous letter that was written to Hergé by a Catholic reader requesting that Hergé avoid working for *Le Soir* during the Nazi occupation. The quotation from the letter reads as follows:

"Permit me, sir, as the father of a large family, to express my sorrow and disappointment at seeing 'Tintin and Snowy' appear in the new 'Soir'. Have you thought about the responsibility that you have assumed? Without Tintin, the new 'Soir-jeunesse' would fall flat in six weeks. With your friends it will continue because we know them, we like them and will buy the paper to follow their adventures.

Then little by little children will come under the new influence. Insidiously and deceitfully the venom of their neo-pagan religion from beyond the Rhine will be introduced in the margins of your entertaining drawings. They will no longer speak of God, of the Christian family, of the Catholic ideal...Can you agree to collaborate in this terrible act, a real sin against the Spirit?"

When one reads this same passage in the Gallimard-Folio text one discovers that the anonymous author of the letter went on to recommend Hergé backtrack from working with *Le Soir*, and he or she then suggests that thousands of Catholic readers would help him bring Tintin and his dog Milou back to life in "leur vrai milieu." The anonymous writer is confident that readers would offer money to support the costs, so long as the Tintin strip remained in the, right, traditional Catholic mode.[8] When such details are omitted contemporary history is abused. The reader of the English language biography is encouraged to believe that the correspondent wants Tintin to stop being printed under the Nazi regime altogether. This was not the case. It seems that the letter-writer wanted Hergé to carry on producing strips for the Catholic press where *Tintin* had been first disseminated. One could spend hours in a seminar on historical methodology debating how the meanings of history are changed by just this single alteration of primary evidence. Suffice it to inform readers of this review that Assouline-in-English truncates an original primary source and consequently its meaning is modified.

Hergé's politically significant strip during the war was *L'Étoile mystérieuse* (1943) Generally speaking, it is an anti-Semitic adventure story in which Tintin and his friends confront an American-Jewish enemy named Blumenstein. *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin* deals with

this aspect appropriately, and highlights how the storyline of the strip chimed with the political values of the Nazis, as well as with anti-Semitism in Belgium (pp. 81-82). However, once again the edited English publication fails to convey sufficient detail, here regarding Hergé's important work from the deeply controversial period of his life. Thus, the English translation fails to inform readers of several frames of strip from *L'Étoile mystérieuse* that added to its anti-Semitism. Hergé had included an anti-Jewish joke sequence at the beginning of this strip, as well as portraying the clichéd villain Blumenstein. This content is not discussed in *The Man Who Created Tintin*. It would be interesting to know why this aspect of *L'Étoile mystérieuse* was believed to be peripheral for English-language readers. It is an excision that Hergé himself made by removing the offending frames from the strip when it was reprinted after the original *Le Soir* newspaper version had come out. The choice to drop Assouline's discussion of this material from the first English language publication of *Hergé* is a pitiful decision.[9] Controversy reigns when Hergé and anti-Semitism are analysed and so surely critical evidence such as his anti-Jewish comedy sequence in the *Le Soir* version of *L'Étoile mystérieuse* is essential information for readers, whatever language they are able to use.[10]

Surprisingly, some new material is included in the book that does not feature in the 1996 publication. It is noted briefly that a major international film adaptation of Tintin adventures is scheduled and that Steven Spielberg, Peter Jackson, and others have been at work on it since 2002. Similarly, Assouline, presumably it is Assouline, writes: "a special-effects company, will supply photorealistic 'performance capture' techniques, as were used in part of *The Lord of the Rings*, in an effort to retain Hergé's line drawing techniques (the clear line) and adapt them to the screen" (pp. 229-230). For someone (Tim Bent?, Joellyn Ausanka? Charles Raus? Pierre Assouline?) detailed information about a forthcoming movie was more important to include in the new printing of the biography than a full description of Hergé's work on *Le Soir* in Nazi-occupied Belgium.

In conclusion, academics and Tintinologists will need to consult the French "corrected" paperback edition alongside this work. As soon as one senses significant deviations from the French work one loses confidence in the editorial decisions behind the translation. Charles Raus has done a good job and devoted hours of his life to making a good translation but he has had little under a third of the biography to work on. Pierre Assouline is a wonderful writer and a significant figure on the French literary and media scene. Does he know what has happened to *Hergé*? Did he approve of each and every one of the changes that have occurred to the biography? Surely the combined riches of Oxford University Press and the Hergé Foundation could have stretched to fund a more complete and thorough treatment of this biography for the English language readership. Had that occurred then none of the issues discussed herein would have marred the hard work of everyone involved in bringing out the publication. Instead, one gains the chance to read a new exciting mystery: *Tintin and the Disappearance of Five Hundred Pages*.

NOTES

[1] *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin* is stated to be the translation of Pierre Assouline, *Hergé* (Paris: Plon, 1996). See frontispiece rubric.

[2] Marguerite Duras, "L'Internationale Tintin", *France-Observateur*, no. 373 (July 4 1957): 13; Pol Vandromme, *Le Monde de Tintin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959). See Assouline, *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin*, pp. 181-3.

[3] Benoît Peeters, *Hergé, fils de Tintin* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

[4] Benoît Peeters, *Le Monde d'Hergé* (Tournai: Casterman, 1988); Hergé and Numa Sadoul, *Tintin et moi. Entretiens avec Hergé* (Tournai: Casterman, 2000).

[5] For discussion of Robert Poulet see Jean-Marie Delaunoy, *Dans la mêlée du vingtième siècle, Robert Poulet* (Erpe: De Krijger, 2003).

[6] Pierre Assouline, *Hergé, Édition revue et corrigée par l'auteur* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1996).

[7] On page seventy three of the new English edition Assouline writes: 'On October 17, 1940, *Le Soir-jeunesse* began publishing the latest adventure of Tintin and Snowy, "Tintin in the Land of Black Gold".' The text then describes the plot to *The Crab with the Golden Claws*. This is an error that does not appear in the definitive edition of the French biography brought out by Gallimard-Folio.

[8] For this passage in the definitive version of the biography see *Hergé* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1996), p. 246.

[9] For full information see Assouline, *Hergé* (Gallimard-Folio), p. 276. It is missing in the *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin*, 81, end of paragraph 4. This subject is discussed in English by Benoît Peeters, "A Never Ending Trial: Hergé and the Second World War", *Rethinking History* 6.3 (Winter 2002): 261-272.

[10] When I discussed anti-Semitic caricatures in a post war Tintin adventure the essay was discussed in *Le Soir* (4 December 2008) and one Tintin fan denounced my analysis in an online blog. See Hugo Frey, "Trapped in the Past: Anti-Semitism in Hergé's *Flight 714*" in Mark McKinney (ed) *History and Politics in French-Language Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 27-43.

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