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Review: Charles Simic's American Noir (by G.H. Mosson)

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(<https://jmwwblog.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/simic.jpg>)

New and Selected Poems: 1962-2012

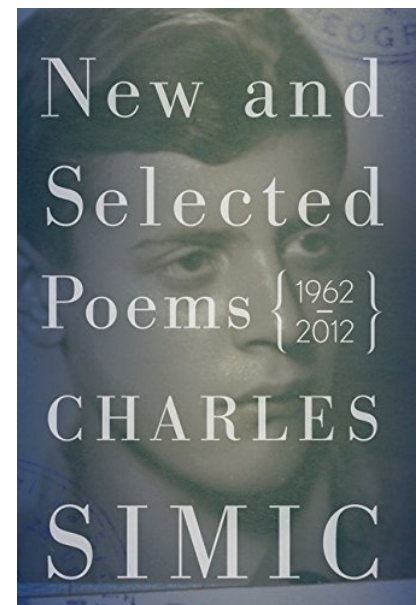
by Charles Simic

384 Pages

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American poet Charles Simic, a World War II immigrant as a child from war-torn Yugoslavia to the U.S., and the 2007 Poet Laureate of the United States, recently published a *New and Selected Poems: 1962-2012* spanning fifty years. It provides another occasion to revisit Simic's oeuvre. Simic in his poetry transforms inner trauma and existential puzzles into vivid, surrealistic fantasies. Often crafted with a plain diction, across a few stanzas, his short poems wax and wane between grim tales and dark laughs. Some might find his take narrow. His *Selected* does become repetitive after the first 100 or so pages. Yet, Simic is a master craftsman. He combines the fun of a horror genre novel with sharp existential insight. His poems again and again take deeply imaginative flights.

In one of his early poems, "The Lesson," Simic recounts his apprenticeship to a romanticism that never quite sticks. At the poem's end, Simic as narrator circles back to the magnetism of childhood memories, recalling his Uncle rushing a WWII barricade with a homemade bomb. Forgive me, says Simic as narrator, I just have to laugh. That is a good epitome of Simic's dark humor: brutal, ironic, concise, imagistic, and memorable. Simic's imagination, a surrealism set in dingy apartments or Norman Rockwell-like small American towns, focuses on the dark urges and images that shadow the

ordered, social world (if we are so lucky). In some way, Simic as a poet never escaped WWII.

Charles Simic was born in 1938 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. He grew up during the Nazi invasion—then Allied liberation—of his homeland. At the age of ten in 1948, he and his mother fled through “pitch-dark Slovenian woods . . . sneaking across the border illegally into Austria,” as Simic says in his essay, “Orphan Factory.” Simic was separated from his father. During this time, Simic’s father was imprisoned by the Nazis and then waylaid in Italy. Overall, Simic’s father was absent for ten years, he notes in a review, “O What a Lovely War!” Meanwhile, Simic and his Mom immigrated to Chicago. At the age 20, Simic moved to New York City to be a poet, as recounted in “New York Days: 1958-1964.” He lived in squalid flats and pursued the writer’s life. Looking back in that essay, Simic laughs at his thin bowl of romantic ideals. He eventually taught poetry at the University of New Hampshire for decades, until retirement. At the age of 75 in 2013, he published an updated *New and Selected Poems*.

Simic’s early work is vividly visual. He creates images of normal life twisted by a surreal, dark sensibility. The poems in *Selected Poems: 1963-1983*, for instance, offer imagination in the face of pain, and greet tragedy with laughter. There, his poetry’s cold move of comedy preserves hurt’s rawness. It also makes his work more balanced as well as bearable. Simic approaches everyday objects in poems such as in “Spoon,” “Fork,” “Broom,” and “Tapestry” with arresting originality. He’s simply exciting to read. Simic typically also excludes any tone of hindsight, thankfully, when he writes. This tone implies (without saying it) that everything turns out okay. *I am safe now, looking back in this poem*. Simic writes in the precarious present tense. His first two decades are probably his freshest work. For instance in “Solitude,” he writes:

There now, where the first crumb
Falls from the table
You think no one hears it
As it hits the floor.
But somewhere already
The ants are putting on
Their Quaker hats
And setting out to visit you

Simic’s work from the second half of his career—selected in *The Voice at 3 A.M. (1986-2003)* and of course in his new *Selected (1962-2012)*.—is consistently bleaker. Here the poetry more often is set in *film noir* scenes. These scenes sometimes feel staged. Simic’s style can become a gag, at times. Nevertheless, Simic throughout his decades produces fantastically imaginative poems, such as “The White Room,” “The Pieces of the Clock Lie Scattered,” and “Gallows Etiquette,” to name a few. The unending blues of devilish glee funny in one poem, however, becomes difficult to read in one hundred pages of poetry. His second period (1986-present) comes best to life in the narrower selection of *Sixty Poems* (2007) and shines in the prose poetry of *The World Doesn’t End* (1989), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize.

Why does Simic’s poetry bog down somewhat in his later period (1990-2015)? Possibly the energy fueling his earlier flights of imagination waned. Some other additional element feels needed to vary Simic’s heavy signature style, his gallows humor and American Noir. By the 1980s and 1990s, he has mastered a plain style, folksy diction of short lines to tackle surreal and philosophical themes set in small town America—somehow combining genre noir with transformative poetry. It works, but again and again and again.

Simic's noir approach also strikes me as narrow, in the scheme of things. Simic's persona is not flexible in expressing a range of emotions. It leans toward genre in the pejorative sense. In the *New and Selected*, the lack of variation on the big questions hides the dazzling imagination at work in poem after poem, unfortunately. The reader by mid-book knows what's coming. Maybe like the horror writer Stephen King, we come to Simic for that unique dark twinkle in his poetic imagination. However unlike King, Simic works with just a few plot lines.

In 2007, when Charles Simic was selected to be the U.S. Poet Laureate, it was an uncharacteristically dark choice. The United States was involved in two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2007. Arguably, America is still involved in both regions in 2016. Simic's elevation—intentionally or not—warns us all of the cost of war. It is a necessary reminder for an American media and culture enthralled with technology—smart bombs, guided missiles, automated “drone” attack, and minimizing “collateral damage”—of the human price of war to families, lovers, sons, mothers. Simic's autobiography—his experience of war first-hand as a very young child—has made him inherently skeptical of “War is Kind” jingoism, official explanations, and the media's glossy images and soporific slogans. His poetry makes fun of all that, again and again. His laughter has the intensity sometimes of rage, sometimes of a rat watching from an obscure hole in the kitchen cabinet.

Simic's 2005 *My Noiseless Entourage* is one of his more delightful later works. In this full-length collection, Simic balances depictions of dark energy with gentle humor more evenly. Published when Simic was 67, *My Noiseless Entourage* gives us the news of contemplative poetry told with causal simplicity. He concludes in “The Centuries” that the speed of contemporary society cannot change the essential mysterious of life. We still find ourselves, “mystified.” This is a happy emotion for Simic. In “Self-Portrait in Bed,” he paints himself as one of those Norman Rockwell grandpas, sniffing in bed, and laughing at his own earnestness. In “Shading Exercise,” Simic speaks, in a causal *ars poetica*, about how he likes to bring a dark element into a serene suburban bright day.

This street can use a bit of shade
And the same goes for that small boy
Playing alone in the sun,
A shadow to dart after him like a black kitten.

The shadow introduces a tone of threat. A “small boy” is “[p]laying alone,” an image that every parent might think of fondly, then frighteningly. A shadow “dart(s)” after the boy in a verb offering an image of violence, but just a small one. This violent image is reinforced with the bad luck often associated with “black” cats. Yet Simic also makes it cute by saying, “black kitten.” We can see here how Simic plays with archetypal images of the American experience—clichés even—but nuances it enough to make a reader feel at home yet on their toes, both uneasy with the violence (“dart”) yet almost nostalgic with the cuteness of it all.

In another deceptively slight and insightful poem from that book, “December 21,” Simic comments on the roots of war in the first decade of the 21st century. Comparing war to the myth of Cain and Abel, Simic sees the world not as good against evil, but fluid and mixed. In “The Alarm,” Simic writes about a world at war simultaneous to a world not at war. The poem has an eerie sense of showing how perception colors one's view. A passer-by might just walk past another's tragedy, never noticing. This visual scene of “The Alarm” gives you an impression of two possible scenes overlaid upon one poetic-scene, like pictorial Cubism. It captures the complexity of political events seen through politically-various reactions, all at once, intersecting yet each isolated.

Charles Simic—a empathetic poet, but not an optimist—does not expect society at large to improve. Hence—his poetry's dark humor. His poetry is a tonic, even an intentionally uncomfortable one. His style is amazing[ly] simple and clear, like Hemingway's clear window, permitting flights of fancy to soar and shine. Simic's imagination too may be an escape—black cats, dark sunglasses at night, insomnia in white rooms—brilliant in its inventiveness, a lit match of human endurance, and ominous in its social warning.

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