rather than a full-fledged account, is evocative of speed. True, Duras, whose family once lived in Indochina, looks back on an affair she had at age 15 with poor French colonists in Indochina, as a succession of images jumping to and fro. Again, the setting is East Asia (Saigon, for example), the atmosphere dark and an Asian, and it is the atmosphere that dominates the narrative. Ten years old by now, but only recently translated into English, is Primo Levi's Il Sistema Periodico (The Periodic Table). Though it hasn't become a bestseller yet, there can be little doubt that it will eventually be considered a classic. In any case, it should win Levi the audience which, for good reason, his countrymen Italo Calvino and Primo Levi (who likewise bestsellers, let alone major bestsellers. But L'Amant (The Lover), by French author Marguerite Duras, is such a rare find. An unprecedented success in France, it has since conquered most European countries, with the total number of copies sold reaching well into seven figures. In June, the hardcover edition entered the American market, and a paperback version is due soon.

Much like Duras' work, the book's narrator, the daughter of the iron obtained in a chemical analysis constitutes the book's major merit, and is a branch of the German military police). For example, it is be-

ner, a painted portrait. This is a branch of the German military police (which is really for Sicherheitsdienst, a branch of the German military police). Still, the impact of The Assault survives Mulisch's blunders like this.

The Periodic Table of the elements of the periodic table become powerful metaphors, and chemistry a representation of human endeavor in general. The chapters of The Periodic Table each concentrate upon a single chemical element. For example, tells the story of Levi's struggle with his feelings, and simultaneously with the material and spiritual plight of his family, conveys a sense of tragedy in the book which, although less morbid than Duras' work, is shadowy. Squashed between more widely translated versions, Schoenhof's (1280 Minuit, $9.95) and Editions de Minuit, $9.95) and Il Sistema Periodico (Einaudi, $16.95).

Michel Bas

Marguerite Duras at age 15, from the cover of The Lover.

The Periodic Table is not a captivating book in the usual sense of the word; rather, it establishes a bond of sympathy with its reader. (This, incidentally, may partially explain why its fascination takes a while to catch on.) It makes you read with the kind of interest you would have for the experiences of a good friend.

Occasionally, it is nostalgic, without being sentimental. Surprisingly, even the most negative experiences — like those connected with the War, part of which Levi spent in Auschwitz — are narrated with resignation and suppressed bitterness, rather than overt indignation or rancour. Levi's style contributes heavily to this effect; calmly paced, it is devoid of any rhetoric.

I am not a chemist, but after reading The Periodic Table I almost regret it, for Levi makes a convincing case for his science. As he says in Silver, the job of a chemist is merely a particular case of the job of living; and his implicit plea that everyone connected with the War, part of which he lived nearby except for the attack, the Nazis execute a family for the assassination of a collaborator by the Dutch Resistance in occupied Holland. In reprisal for the attack, the Nazis execute a family living nearby, except for the youngest son, whose subsequent fate we follow. As he grows older he gradually discovers the complex ramifications of the event. Thus emerges a thrilling example of the fatality of coincidences, a compelling paradigm of the frailty of human life.

The honor of translation is so rare in Dutch literature that the Dutch press has scrutinized the English version almost as closely as the original. A consensus has been reached on the quality of the translation; it is wretched. For example, it is beyond comprehension why we were spared an even vaguer familiarity with the historical context of the book, enough to vitiate social democrats for the original abbreviation S.D. (which is really for Sicherheitsdienst, a branch of the German military police). Still, the impact of The Assault survives Mulisch's blunders like this.

For those interested in reading the un-translated original, in English version, the price is $12.38 (Mass. Ave.) or Editions de Minuit, $9.95) and Il Sistema Periodico (Einaudi, $16.95).

\textbf{Michael Bas}

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arts

"New" books from Europe - a roundup

The Lover, by Marguerite Duras; Pantheon, $11.95. The Periodic Table, by Primo Levi; Schocken, $16.95. The Assault, by Harry Mulisch; Pantheon, 113.95.

Books with literary pretensions are rare these days, let alone major bestsellers. But L'Amant (The Lover), by French author Marguerite Duras, is such a rare find. An unprecedented success in France, it has since conquered most European countries, with the total number of copies sold reaching well into seven figures. In June, the hardcover edition entered the American market, and a paperback version is due soon.

Such success inspires curiosity, and creates expectations. Unfortunately, having read the book, I cannot but confess feeling disappointed. This is, Duras' major claim to world renoun was the 1959 Resnais film L'Amour, for which she wrote the script. Thus far, Duras' major claim to world renown was the 1959 Resnais film L'Amour, for which she wrote the script. Thus far, Duras' major claim to world renown was the 1959 Resnais film L'Amour, for which she wrote the script.

According to the subject of this illustrious predecessor.

The book which, although less morbid than Duras' work, is shadowy. Squashed between more widely translated versions, Schoenhof's (1280 Minuit, $9.95) and Editions de Minuit, $9.95) and Il Sistema Periodico (Einaudi, $16.95) are the most important postwar writer (as Proust was in his publicity campaign), I wouldn't dare say. There can be no doubt, though, that he is among Holland's most consistently interesting authors. Most of his books (and the best among them) relate to World War II and its aftermath. With his Jewish mother and a father conscripted for collaboration with the Nazis, Mulisch, if anybody, is a child of the War.

The Assault revolves around the 1945 assassination of a collaborator by the Dutch Resistance in occupied Holland. In reprisal for the attack, the Nazis execute a family living nearby, except for the youngest son, whose subsequent fate we follow. As he grows older he gradually discovers the complex ramifications of the event. Thus emerges a thrilling example of the fatality of coincidences, a compelling paradigm of the frailty of human life.

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