

Francoise Sagan:
White Thunderbird

In France, no speed limits

WHEN FRANCOISE SAGAN brought her tousled head to New York a few years ago to arrange for her first two novels to be made into movies, she carried her leopard skin coat slung over her elbow and posed delightedly with the white Thunderbird hired for her use. "In France you may drive as fast as you like. My car will go 140 miles an hour," she explained. "But here, I understand, you have speed limits."

Her first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse*, was written in a month. Her others have required a little more labor but sold more rapidly. Only four weeks after its Paris publication, her third novel, *Dans un Mois, Dans un An*, had sold three-fourths as many as her second, *A Certain Smile*, had sold in a year and a half. Total sales have already run into several millions, an ironic victory for a young defeatist, counterpart of America's Deadbeat Generation which has become spokesman for the multitudes simply by being louder than they were. The words which Sagan uses most often in her third novel (*Those Without Shadows*, in its translated version) sum up critical opinion of her: "What a mess!" she keeps saying; "a dreadful feeling of waste." In April of 1957, the 22-year-old girl had turned over her fast Aston-Martin on a road where five others had died; and the critics could not have cared less, but the readers loved her as movie-goers had loved Jimmy Dean for dying in a hot-rod.

Curled up on her bed of pain, she cried, "God deliver me from my physical sufferings. I'll take care of the moral ones." Perhaps she should have asked for more. Having convalesced, she continued to live and write as she had before.

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HER RISE to notoriety came so fast that it has shown her inadequacies, her lack of poise poignantly. She was a 17-year-old college girl from a substantial bourgeois family when she sent a novel, written between examinations, to a strange publisher. In a few years she has made hundreds of millions of francs on her little books. Her fan letters include many insulting her person and style, and many begging for money which she has already wasted without counting. For her fabulous royalties she had only a half-furnished apartment on a Seine quai and \$48,000 owed the tax collector (but then, in France as in Manila, who pays taxes?).

Before her marriage, recently, to Guy Schoeller, bands of young people used to follow her, living on her expense account, borrowing cars and sweaters, and keeping the change when they went out for a newspaper. Without being asked, they choose her company; she has never had to worry about money, so . . . From some she had hopes of communicating, of reaching out beyond her solitariness; but she is surprisingly naive, even gullible, and her acquaintances have used her badly. Actually she has always dressed modestly—a black sweater, a light coat; she is well-mannered and reticent, receptive, somehow charming. But only her parents are her disinterested friends.

Guy Schoeller, nearly 20 years her senior, has inherited a considerable fortune from his father, director of Hachette, powerful French publishing and distributing syndicate. He is also the proud father of a girl whose mother he divorced over ten years ago. Fashion mannequins particularly seem to have enjoyed his public company. He was off, big-game hunting in Kenya when his forthcoming marriage was first announced. Love, from such a man, does not come as simply as writing a best-seller.

THE FRENCH critic Françoise Giroud has described Sagan's personal problem as that of the present young French women "who want to keep their newly won independence and at the same time to surrender it for a few hours every day to a 'strong man.' Either the strong man refuses this episodic role or he accepts, thus proving he is not strong at all, and becomes a disappointment."

Françoise Sagan has another limitation. "Life is like music," she says. "It should be possible to hear it twice." But even Sagan is mortal.