

## Why Jeannot Can't Read

**T**he first French book I read from cover to cover—I mean the first *real* French book, read only for pleasure, no *Vocabulary* in the back, no *Review Questions* at the end of each chapter—was *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*, by Pierre Daninos. I was living in Paris at the time, in 1955. Major Thompson is Daninos's fictional Englishman, whose comments on France and the French are an absolute delight and provide as good an introduction to reading for pleasure in French as do sexy French stories. Better, in fact, unless you're hooked on *slips*, *soutiens-gorge*, *portes jarretelles*, and other lacy delicacies.

Last year, I met Pierre Daninos himself at a party in Los Angeles. He and his beautiful wife, Marie-Pierre, were on vacation, touring the United States. The Daninoses expressed concern about what is happening to their language. They're not worried about foreign imports—what used to be called *Cocaculture*—but about the current laxity in speech and writing, the quantity of junk that passes for acceptable French. On learning that I write a column on language, Daninos told me that he writes similar columns in France.

Long ago, my French wasn't half bad, but over the years it has atrophied and is now a shadow of its former self. M. Daninos's English is, I should think, a cut or two below my French, but Mme. Daninos's English is excellent, so she and I have had some correspondence.

I was surprised to learn from her that the French are having a problem of illiteracy among their youth comparable to ours. Mme. Daninos wrote me a letter deploring the use of the *methode globale* in teaching children to read, what we call the "look-say," or "sight-word" method.

That the French would have adopted the look-say method came as a shock to me. I've mentioned before that I find it puzzling that anyone would consider look-say a particularly good method for any language that uses an alphabet rather than ideograms. To refresh the memory of anyone who might wonder what is meant by "look-say," "sight-word," and the French *globale*, it is the method Rudolf Flesch blasted back in 1955 in his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The child is not taught the alphabet and the sounds of the letters in their various combinations (the *phonic* method that M. and Mme. Daninos and I learned—and you, too, if you are

**A child taught the "look-say" method could never read "frob-alaggr-y."**

of our generation); in look-say, the teacher subjects the students to whole words until they learn those words as totalities. The students are expected to have mastered a certain number of words over a given period of time. Here's one of Flesch's examples of an excerpt from a typical modern look-say reading textbook:

"Quack, quack," said the duck.  
He wanted something.  
He did not want to get out.  
He did not want to go to the farm.  
He did not want to eat.  
He sat and sat and sat.

I think a bright, energetic youngster, faced with that sort of material, would probably find something better to do, like climbing the wall, removing the legs from his chair, or starting a scrap

with his neighbor. But if a nice, docile child reads that often enough, he'll be able, it is hoped, to recognize those words when he sees them. That will give him a reading vocabulary of 18 words. However, he will probably not be able to make out *horse*, *goat*, *chicken*, *she*, *her*, or *him*, because he hasn't encountered the words yet.

English is notorious for some of its phonetic absurdities, but by and large it functions well enough phonetically so that a reasonably bright eight-year-old, taught to sound letters and groups by the old-fashioned phonics method, will probably be able to work out the pronunciation not only of *horse* and *chicken*, but of *frob-alaggr-y*, even though I'm the only person in the world who knows what *frob-alaggr-y* means, having just coined it. (It is the grubby, rubbery residue that must be brushed off a page after one has made an erasure.)

French is so much more phonetically consistent than English that it is quite astonishing that the French should have fallen for look-say. If it makes little sense in English, it makes even less in French.

Rudolf Flesch maintained that it is largely the big money involved that keeps look-say in business, and I suppose French textbook publishers, like their American counterparts, know a good thing when they see one. What better way to make fat francs than to create a demand for millions of copies of books saying the equivalent of "Quack, quack."

So the problem spreads, and more and more Johnnies and Jeannies and Jeannots and Jeannettes can't read. If they can't read, they can't write; if they can't write, they can't reason far beyond mere scheming; if they can't reason beyond scheming, God help us all. ■

Judith Crist

# Old Formulas Never Die

Castles may crumble and crowned—or studio—heads may tumble, but that old Hollywood truism, adapted abroad and by Broadway over the years, remains: If at first you *do* succeed, you do it again and again and again . . . and nobody looks for a motive beyond the dollar sign.

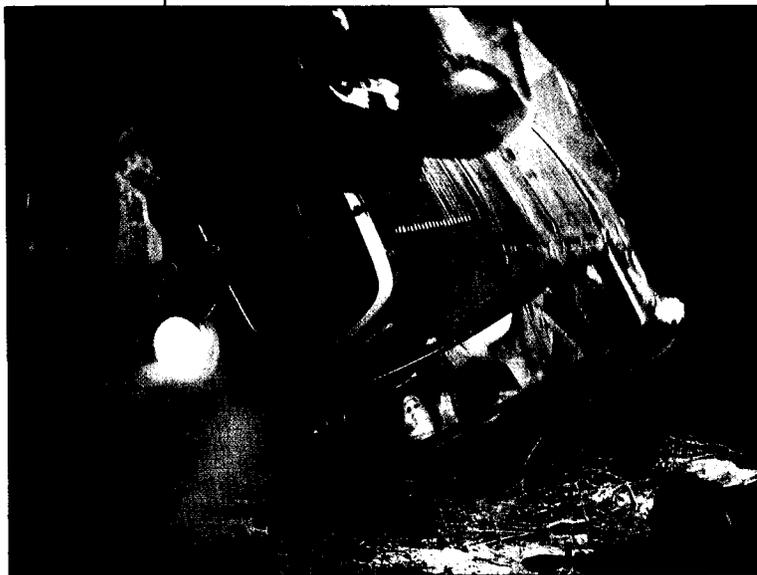
Thus in the spring of 1981 we get the fourth film version of James M. Cain's brilliantly terse 188-page first novel, **The Postman Always Rings Twice**, a tale of lust, greed, murder (to delight the tub-thumper), and retribution (to delight the moralist). MGM bought the property soon after its publication in 1934, but the sex and violence proved a bit heady for the Hays office and it was shelved until 1946. By then Cain himself had written a stage version (produced on Broadway in 1936 with Richard Barthelmess, Mary Philips, and Joseph Greenwald); a French film version, *Le Dernier Tournant* with Fernand Gravet, Corinne Luchaire, and Michel Simon, had been produced in 1939 but never shown here; and in 1942, with disregard for copyright and film rights, Luchino Visconti had made his feature directorial debut with *Ossessione*. Barred from this country until 1975, *Ossessione* is a gritty and turgid adaptation more significant as the model for the Italian neo-realist school.

By 1946 the Production Code was adapting itself to a postwar world; besides, two subsequent Cain novels

had been filmed into box-office bonanzas: *Double Indemnity*, in 1944, and *Mildred Pierce*, a year later. And so the first American film version of *Postman* was made in what James Agee described at the time as "a depth of seriousness incompatible with the material, complicated by a paralysis of fear of the front office." This he found a major interest, because "it is what can happen, especially in Hollywood, if you are forced to try both to eat your cake and have it, and don't realize that it is, after all, only good pumpernickel." Agee, who found the film "mainly a terrible misfortune from start to finish," applauded, however, its view of "the Law as an invincibly corrupt and terrifying force before which mere

ing, internalized performance, even pleased by (or unaware of) the transformation of Cain's arrogant Greek immigrant into Cecil Kellaway's jolly sub-surface-mean Englishman as the cuckolded husband-victim. And the film became a semi-classic of the tough black-and-white slick, commercial films of the Forties.

Thirty-five years later *Postman* has been given a class production, with Bob Rafelson (to be honored for *Five Easy Pieces*, if not *The King of Marvin Gardens* and *Stay Hungry*) as coproducer and director; playwright David Mamet making his screenwriting debut; Jack Nicholson our latter-day Garfield; Jessica Lange (best known as the lady in the latter-day King



A murder is staged in another remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Kong's mechanical hand, emerging, Turner-like, as an actress) and John Colicos returning the husband to his Cain-given nationality. And it has the "realism" that today's screen allows, primarily in the Depression-era setting (a flaw in the earlier film set in 1946) that motivates and underlines the characters' aspirations and frustrations and that Sven Nykvist's cinematography brings to muted and moody life.

And we can, of course, face the facts of life and Cain that the Forties couldn't. Not

victims, whether innocent or guilty, can only stand helpless and aghast." Other contemporary critics were less socially conscious, bowled over by Lana Turner's emergence as actress, satisfied as always by John Garfield's dark, brood-

only the Law and its officers are corrupt—but even the insurance companies that were Cain's particular interest. And, of course, the old Sex and Violence can get their due. The intricacies of the love-hate relationship come