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## The Underground City

H. L. Humes, *The Underground City*

Publisher: Random House

1958 and 2007, 755 pages, paperback, \$16

**H.** L. Humes—Harold Humes to the FBI, Doc to the rest of us—published two novels in the late fifties before going crazy. *The Underground City*, 755 pages on France's occupation and postwar paroxysms, made him a literary star, but as his mind left this world, so, seemingly, did his work. When Humes died in 1992, *The Underground City* had been out of print for thirty-four years.

It seemed too ignoble a fate for the man who cofounded *The Paris Review*, especially given the recent revelation that Humes's paranoid complaint—that the CIA was closing in on him—was sorta-kinda true: Peter Matthiessen, one of the other *PR* founders along with George Plimpton, was a CIA agent. Which isn't to say he *spied*—Matthiessen claims he used the CIA to pay for plane tickets to Paris—but it was the final cut on Humes's thin tether to reality. The author spent the rest of his life holding forth in college quads, dismissed as a beatnik burnout.

*The Underground City* was recently republished, and it deserves to be followed. Though populated by spies, turncoats, reporters named Striker and agents named Stone, the novel uses espionage the same way Matthiessen used the CIA: for a free trip to Paris. The plot circles around the case of Dujardin, a French officer who slaughtered an entire village to impress the German occupancy. At the novel's outset, a year after the liberation, Dujardin is on trial for war crimes, and the French Communist party has opportunistically taken up his cause, arguing that he is really a patriot being martyred by the United States, which wants to maintain control over France because they're, like, imperialists. Enter Agent Stone, Code Name Dante, the sole survivor of the massacre and the only one who can impugn Dujardin. Stone becomes a scapegoat for the Communists and a patsy for the Americans, and is burdened by the infidelity of his own memory. In the moral bedlam that followed World War II, which saw the world imagine punishments for unimaginable crimes, Stone personifies the problems of knowledge and truth, and the ways both are manipulated by those who seek to claim or maintain power.

That's the first third, anyway. The meat of the novel is a four-hundred-page flashback that follows Stone/Dante on the lead-up to the massacre. Stone functions less as a character than a proxy, sneaking us through the streets of Paris and the fields of France to more interesting fare: the wonderful Carnot, a Communist spy who skirts the blurry line between idealism and efficacy; Ambassador Sheppard, a statesman given to autumn musings on life and war; and his estranged son Berger, who is, inexplicably but delightfully, a French monarchist trying to return the Louis line to the throne. To name just a few: Humes's novel is huge, not just in page count but in seating capacity. One of its joys is the room it makes for bit players, who function as foils for the subterfuges of the main characters. In one memorable scene, Stone and Carnot argue over the fate of the French populace while Henri, the loutish brother of an operative, is locked in a closet to keep him from the booze. The stage directions are subtle, but their implications unavoidable: a world war is waging over the right for Henri to drink a bottle of burgundy a night, but those who claim to fight on his behalf don't even let him in on the discussion. It's enough to make a guy like Henri get drunk, ruin their operation, and never appear in the novel again.

Needless to say, much of this doesn't add up to anything. Humes is interested less in the intricacies of his plot than its forward momentum, and the book blows by in big bursts of prose. For instance, here comes a plane:

As it approached it increased until its hugeness made  
it seem that it would surely fall. The winglights swept  
over the brown winter grass and came rippling

toward the paved runway, as the machine felt its way down, the beams sweeping onto the wet pavement as the plane roared closer, flaps down, braking hard against the sluggish air; as it came toward the administration building its silver size and speed suddenly became real. Eating up the distance in seconds, it roared down the fleeting length of airstrip and swept immensely past the tiny group of men, one huge wheel glancing the earth a smoking kiss. The wings lurched slightly and lifted with the bounce; then there was a final yelp of rubber, and big plane was down. Overhead, the passenger flood lights went on, bleaching the staging area in brilliant white light.

And that's just a plane landing. Any writer who can bring something out of the sky and set it down like that has earned the right to prattle on about man's place in the universe for forty pages at a time, which, don't worry, Humes does.

Alas, as a street protestor warns, MEN DIE. Humes dispatches most of his characters with dignity, but the more he pushes eastward, towards a different scale of death, the less all of his philosophical gobbledygook comes off as charming. Humes only glances at a concentration camp, in a sub-drama involving a Jewish spy Stone may or may not have impregnated, and runs away before he really sees anything. For a novel so portentous in its musings on men's fate, this squeamishness at the camps is cowardly.

A lesser book would have been ruined by it. Humes recovers, and though the novel's last third is knotted by the inevitable tying of loose ends, he still finds time to take a grand drunken tour of the Paris sewer system. Wading through the organized excrement that flows beneath the city could have left the reader holding his nose at the symbolism, or knee-deep in Virgilian allusions. But Humes just lets us enjoy this unusual ride. The section is a novella in-and-of-itself, and it's brilliant: after seven hundred pages of fighting and death, this mucking around is, paradoxically, like a breath of fresh air, a reminder that life seeps on, even after the wars.

Humes's sanity lasted long enough for one more novel. After that, he was good only for theories on massage cures for heroin addicts and the government cloud that was after him, following as a believer the fictions he had so successfully conjured as an author. Or, as the reporter Striker says about the agent Stone, "He's not really a tragedian, because he's in the tragedy himself."

—Evan McMurry