



Nicholas Hewitt. *Wicked City: The Many Cultures of Marseille.* London: Hurst Publishers, 2019. Illustrations. 323 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78738-199-5.

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Marseille occupies a curious position. It is the second most populous city in France, it is the oldest city in the country, and yet it is virtually ignored in academic scholarship. This is especially true in the English-language literature. Nicholas Hewitt's *Wicked City* is therefore a welcome introduction to Marseille for Anglophone readers. It does not, however, attempt to be an exhaustive account. As Hewitt writes in his introduction, "it is not a conventional cultural history of Marseille, still less a political or social one: rather, it constitutes a series of snapshots, like the photographs from Nadar's studio" (p. 6). As a series of snapshots, the book is difficult to summarize and certainly poses a challenge to reviewers. Primarily, Hewitt is interested in how the city has been portrayed—in literature, travel writing, film, photography, etc. But he also devotes lengthy sections to the cultural history of Marseille, from music halls to hip hop. Lastly, Hewitt regularly moves into discussions of the social, political, and economic history of Marseille, tracking the various waves of immigration, explaining the economic significance of reduced freight costs, and outlining how the relationship between municipal government and organized crime shaped the city. In short, there is a little something for everyone.

In the introduction, Hewitt sets up his taxonomy of themes. He sees two overarching, com-

peting narratives: Marseille as the good city and Marseille as the wicked city. The former is best represented by the works of Marcel Pagnol and emphasizes the bonds of community, the warm glow of the sea, and the folksy Provençal hinterland. The latter, which culminates in Jean-Claude Izzo's neo-noir trilogy, instead sees Marseille as a place of corruption, its streets filled with trash and riddled with crime. As is evident by his choice of title, Hewitt is more interested in the latter version, which he argues is the dominant view of the city. Over the course of the following nine chapters, Hewitt sets out to determine how exactly this beautiful city by the sea, for which he clearly holds a deep fondness, came to be viewed in such a negative light.

The book is organized chronologically into three parts. The first part, consisting of three chapters, begins in the mid-nineteenth century with Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) and ends in the early twentieth with the song "Ma Belle Tonkinoise." Along the way, Hewitt discusses the literary works of Émile Zola and Alphonse Daudet, the songs of Victor Gelu, and the paintings of Paul Cézanne and Georges Braque. In this first section, Hewitt sees a city on the rise. Dumas put it on the literary map with his wildly popular adventure novel, the conquest of Algeria and the expansion of the French Empire led to massive

economic and demographic growth in the city, and the immensely successful Colonial Exhibition of 1906 served as a celebration not only of the empire but also of Marseille itself. It was a time of heady excitement, with adventurers, entrepreneurs, and optimistic newcomers converging on the city that had come to be known as the "Gateway to the East."

It is in these first chapters that Hewitt establishes the major themes that run throughout the book. Above all, Marseille has been understood as a frontier, a liminal space that connects European France to the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the rest of the world. Dumas's novel, for instance, moves easily between France, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire. This version of Marseille emphasizes the port and its connections beyond France. As Hewitt reminds us, Marseille is actually closer to Algiers than it is to Paris. In addition to its peripheral geographical position, Marseille is a place apart because it is a city of migrants. Hewitt devotes a substantial amount of his discussion throughout the book to the history of immigration.

While the otherness of Marseille is most often expressed through its geography and its demographics, Hewitt argues that politics are equally important. Beginning with the French Revolution, he notes, Marseille has typically resisted centralized government authority. This led the city to join the rebellion against the monarchy but also to oppose the Jacobins, whom city leaders viewed as a centralized authority by another name. As punishment for its betrayal, Marseille was stripped of its name and referred to instead as the *Ville-Sans-Nom*. Because of this resistance to Parisian power, Marseille is "irredeemably alien" (p. 28).

Part 2 is composed of four chapters and covers the period spanning the world wars. It is in the first chapter of this section that Hewitt discusses the book's namesake: Edouard Peisson's novel *Hans le Marin* (1929), which was adapted for the cinema under the title *Wicked City*. Rooted in the Marseillais underworld of migrant labor, prostitu-

tion, and violent crime, the novel portrays a dirty and dangerous city. For Hewitt, it was in the interwar period that Marseille solidified its reputation as an "international centre of vice and corruption" (p. 93). There were several factors that contributed to the construction of these narratives. First and foremost, the interwar period witnessed a substantial uptick in immigration. Some migrants were more easily welcomed, largely because they already had a presence in the city—Spanish, Italian, and Corsican workers arriving to make up for the labor shortages that were the result of the massive loss of life sustained during the First World War. Others, however, were viewed with suspicion. The mayor infamously complained that immigrants from the East, Russians fleeing the Civil War and Armenians escaping the genocide, would bring typhus, smallpox, and the plague. The infrastructure of the city simply could not support so many new arrivals, which meant that makeshift camps were built to house refugees, while migrant laborers constructed bidonvilles on the edges of the neighborhoods surrounding the port. These changes in the city were perhaps best captured by Albert Londres, the most prominent French journalist of the period, in his 1927 book *Marseille, porte du Sud*. Visiting the docks early in the morning, Londres described a "foreign legion of employment"—Spaniards, Greeks, Syrians, Arabs, but no French in sight (p. 103).

During the interwar years, Marseille was a major transit point thanks both to the explosion of international travel and the refugee crises. As a result, the city captured an unprecedented amount of attention and was written about, photographed, and filmed by some of the most important cultural figures of the day. The subsequent chapters in this section discuss Pagnol, the literary journal *Cahiers du Sud*, Walter Benjamin, Germaine Krull, László Moholy-Nagy, and Anna Seghers. Pagnol is central to Hewitt's analysis in that he provides a counter-image of Marseille as "the good city." Born and raised in Aubagne, a Provençal village on the outskirts of Marseille, Pagnol went on

to be one of the most celebrated writers and filmmakers of the twentieth century. Pagnol made his name with the Marseille-based *Marius-Fanny-César* trilogy, plays-turned-films that went on to enjoy sustained national and international success (Daniel Auteuil remade *Marius* and *Fanny* in 2013 and Alice Waters's Chez Panisse restaurant is named for one of the characters). For Hewitt, this trilogy is of singular importance in the construction of a certain image of Marseille, an image that Hewitt characterizes as "idealised" (p. 125). He writes that the characters are drawn from comedic stereotypes, "lazy, fun-loving and devious, yet with hearts of pure gold and a deeply engrained moral code" and that Pagnol had an interest in joining Londres in a "realistic portrayal of the variegated shifting population of the Vieux-Port" (pp. 125, 126).

Hewitt's claims that Pagnol presented an idealized image of Marseille are problematic. Who is to say what is idealistic and what is realistic? Why is Londres's portrayal of Marseille necessarily more authentic than that of Pagnol? And why are the affable characters of Pagnol's trilogy labeled as stereotypes while the rough-hewn criminals and down-and-out dockers of Peisson are not? These are simply different representations of different experiences, all drawn from the same landscape, no more or no less accurate than the next. Hewitt's insistence that the wicked city is the real Marseille risks perpetuating its own set of stereotypes.

The final section is just two chapters and spans the postwar period, which Hewitt characterizes as a time of decline for Marseille. The port certainly did experience economic contraction, facing competition from deeper harbors, and as the petty delinquency of the early twentieth century gave way to organized international criminal syndicates, the city's reputation became synonymous with the heroin trade. This was also a period in which immigration shifted from southern Europe to North and West Africa, a demographic change

that deepened racial tensions. Housing shortages led to the construction of massive housing projects on the northern fringes of the city, exacerbating the already-existing geographical division between an affluent native-born South and an impoverished immigrant North. For Hewitt these transitions were best captured by Ousmane Sembène's *Le Docker Noir* (1956) and Izzo's neo-noir *Total Khéops* (1995).

Hewitt ranges widely throughout the book and while each chapter is nominally structured around one primary cultural representation of Marseille, it also includes forays in politics, economics, and demographics. There is no logic to how these detours operate; one chapter might discuss immigration, another organized crime. But this is not necessarily a weakness. Some of the most arresting passages of the text consist of short vignettes: the imaginary arrival of a passenger train into Marseille in 1939, the very real arrival of a ship in 1954 carrying defeated French officers from Saigon, and the founding in 1933 of Studio Rex by an Armenian refugee who specialized in taking photographic portraits of fellow immigrants. These snapshots of Marseille not only capture the competing narratives that Hewitt examines more deliberately in his analysis of cultural production but also remind readers that any effort to capture the essence of a city, no matter how well executed, is bound to fail. The wide variety of experiences, from Peisson's criminals to Pagnol's young lovers, are simply too varied to reduce to a single narrative.

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