



## **Tough Guys, Effete Snobs and Mad Women**

Introducing Europa Editions

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In the late 1960s, American publisher Kent Carroll was visiting French West Africa when he noticed something strange going on. A lot of young men were affecting a kind of ambling, big-guy gait that seemed oddly... American. Eventually, he discovered why: A John Wayne movie festival was playing, and many of the locals were strolling around town as if each and every one of them was the Duke himself. But then something even stranger happened. In the middle of the festival, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* was shown, in which Wayne is killed. Some people in the audience were so outraged by this turn of events that they dragged the projectionist into the street, beat him half to death, and then burned down the cinema. For Carroll, it was an unforgettable demonstration of the power of American culture overseas.

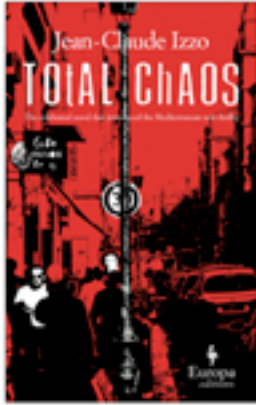


Carroll has been around and knows a thing or two about the ways cultures play across borders and seas. The former editor in chief of Grove Press and co-founder of Carroll & Graf has spent much of his life bringing the literature of the old world to the new. He's published Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Marguerite Duras, Beryl Bainbridge, Ferdinand Mount, Penelope Fitzgerald and a host of others. Some Americans, too, of course: Henry Miller, John Rechy, John Kennedy O'Toole.

Now, after a three-year absence from the publishing world, the lean, gray-haired Carroll is back in business. You could consider Europa Editions, the sprightly new publishing venture he has just started in New York, as a kind of book club for Americans who thirst after exciting foreign fiction. It's not Oprah, but Carroll thinks he's got a winning strategy: Good writing, eye-catching cover art and an eclectic list that includes new fiction from Europe and the fringes of the Middle East, along with reissues of neglected or out-of-print classics. Furthermore, he has some serious backing. Europa Editions is the U.S. imprint of Rome-based Edizione e/o, itself known for publishing fiction in translation in Europe, and it was the idea of its publisher, Sandro Ferri, to extend its mission to America.

"It was a noble idea, but it also turned out to be a very smart business idea," says Carroll in his sparsely furnished office off Union Square in New York. "Sandro's feeling was there remained a lot of first-rate books in the Middle East and Europe that just weren't getting to the U.S. and could compete with American literature and would find an audience."

Like Edizioni e/o, Europa Editions' bread and butter will be literary fiction and high-end crime novels. Of the latter, Carroll says that "European mystery and crime novels are much more political than most American ones. Whereas we tend to focus on the individual and psychology, Europeans focus on society and morality. There was a resistance from American book buyers for a long time to detective fiction from places like Spain and Italy, but that's turned around in the last five years."



Jean-Claude Izzo's *Total Chaos*, published by Europa this month, is a good example of what Carroll is talking about. Given the recent rioting in France, this aptly named noir novel, set in the grimmer neighborhoods of Marseilles, could not have been better timed. Izzo, who died five years ago at the age of 55, is renowned in Europe for his Marseilles Trilogy, of which *Total Chaos* (the title alludes to a lyric by IAM, a Marseilles-based rap group) is the explosive first volume. Though in many ways a classic cops-and-robbers yarn with a world-weary, womanizing hero, *Chaos* also takes a close look at the intercultural friction rife in one of the world's most legendarily multicultural port cities — at its housing projects, hoodlums, mafiosi, cops, politicians, racists, whores and (to an almost obsessive extent) its food. Izzo isn't very strong on plot, but his writing has a crude power that will hook readers who like their lyricism hard-boiled:

I drew up in the parking lot of L'Paternelle. A largely Arab housing project. It wasn't the toughest, but it certainly wasn't the best. It was barely ten o'clock and it was already very hot. The sun had free rein here. No trees, nothing. Just the project, the parking lot, and a patch of waste ground. In the distance, the sea. L'Estaque and its harbor. Like another continent. I remembered a song by Aznavour: Poverty isn't so hard in the sun. I don't suppose he'd ever been here, to this pile of shit and concrete.

Europa will publish the other two installments of the Marseilles Trilogy next year. (The third volume is said to track the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the French projects.) In January, it will also introduce another example of "Mediterranean noir," Massimo Carlotto's *The Goodbye Kiss*. Its hero, according to the catalogue, is not only "an unscrupulous womanizer" but also utterly "devoid of morals." The *London Review of Books* describes the book as "sexy, seedy, cynical and nihilistic, but with moments of idealism." One suspects those moments will be brief.

Europa's books aren't all about tough guys. James Hamilton-Paterson's *Cooking With Fernet Branca*, which was nominated for the 2004 Man Booker Prize, is a comedy of manners about an effete English snob who lives in Tuscany, ghostwrites biographies and whiles away the hours in his kitchen concocting criminally bizarre recipes: smoked cat with rhubarb, mussels in chocolate, baked pears in cheese sauce. Benjamin Tammuz's *Minotaur*, an Israeli novel that Graham Greene nominated as his "book of the year" when it was first published in England in 1983, is an unusual, quietly moving love story about a spy and a young English woman narrated from four points of view.

Europa has made its biggest splash so far with Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*, a novel originally published in Italy in 2002. (It topped Italy's best-seller list for the better part of a year.) Although it has appealed particularly to women, *Days of Abandonment* isn't "chick-lit." It's something darker than that — more like "abandoned-wife lit," or a Lifetime movie for women directed by Roman Polanski in his *Tenant* phase. The tale of a 38-year-old mother who spirals slowly into near-madness after her husband leaves her alone with their two children in a high-rise apartment, the novel is a terse (189 pages), gripping account of the fear, depression and psychological meltdown that befalls a woman betrayed by the person she trusts above all others — namely (to quote Janet Maslin's review in *The New York Times*) her "rat" of a husband.



"I felt over every inch of myself the scratches of sexual abandonment," the narrator writes, while the city she lives in — Turin — "seemed to me a great fortress with iron walls, walls of a frozen gray that the spring sun could not warm. On clear days a cold light spread through the streets that made me sweat with unease. If I walked, I bumped into things or people..."

"Things or people" is a telling phrase. Such is the bereaved narrator's confusion as loneliness and humiliation slowly overcome her that after a while she hardly seems able to prioritize between the needs of her dog and her children. What is substantial becomes phantasmal, while spectral childhood memories take on such resonance she can barely drive her car. Certain reviewers have criticized the pseudonymous author, whose identity is the subject of lively interest in Italy, for pulling her heroine back from the precipice at the last moment, but for me this book felt emotionally convincing from beginning to end.

Two Europa books that will be published early next year are especially worth noting. Both are about men stuck in masochistic and unrequited love affairs, though one is set in Cairo and the other in London. Patrick Hamilton's classic *Hangover Square*, an almost toxically atmospheric account of obsessive love, alcoholism and schizophrenia in 1930s England, has been out of print in America for years (it was originally published in 1941). Nick Hornby praised it highly in *The Believer* and it lives up to its billing. Imagine an endless Joy Division song in the form of a 1930s novel and you'll have some idea.

Then — speaking of songs — there's Sélim Nassib's *I Loved You for Your Voice*, a novel about the life of Om Kalthoum, the legendary Egyptian singer whose marathon concerts, often broadcast over the radio, mesmerized the entire Arab world for decades. Written in the form of a memoir by Kalthoum's lyricist, Ahmad Rami, the novel (first published in France in 1994) not only tells the story of Rami's own fruitless love for the singer, but also traces the trajectory of Egyptian politics through the latter half of the 20th century — the palace revolution of 1952, Nasser's military dictatorship, the wars against Israel of '67 and '73, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the slums of Cairo and the arrival of Islamic fundamentalism. For anyone interested in either Arab music or history, it's a fascinating read, and another reason to welcome the emergence of Europa Editions.