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Fahnderwachtmeister (Detective Sergeant) Jakob Studer

Friedrich Charles Glauser, 1896-1938

“I’d like to develop the man into a type of homey Swiss detective”¹

In early 1935, Friedrich Glauser described to girlfriend Berthe Bendel a new project he had started with Detective Sergeant Jakob Studer: a crime novel that would take place in a Swiss village and capture the Swiss milieu. Though Glauser had already included a policeman named Studer in a handful of short stories, the character came into sharper focus in the 1936 novel *Wachtmeister Studer* (literally *Sergeant Studer*, later translated as *The Thumbprint*). A 1939 film version starring the beloved Swiss actor Heinrich Gretler introduced a broader audience to this unassuming homegrown detective, and periodic television rebroadcasts of the movie secured Studer’s status as an enduring cultural icon for the German-speaking Swiss.

To understand the popularity of Detective Sergeant Jakob Studer, one has to appreciate the cultural and political context in which he appeared. When the inspector from the Berne cantonal police arrived on the scene, detective fiction in the German-speaking world was dominated by translations of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Wallace. Glauser was familiar with these authors and their works, but he preferred Georges Simenon’s Jules Maigret crime novels. Emulating Simenon’s attention to atmosphere, character, and detail, Glauser took what had been seen in Switzerland as a foreign genre and made it seem homespun. His success in merging international and domestic popular culture was confirmed by contemporary critics who dubbed Studer the ‘Swiss Sherlock Holmes.’

The political climate of Switzerland in the mid and late 1930s was conducive to the success of this local investigator. As Adolf Hitler's expansionist rhetoric intensified, the Swiss government emphasized a cultural and political legacy distinct from Germany's, pre-empting any claims that Switzerland should be annexed to the Reich. In time, Studer's rustic Swiss identity was appropriated by the state-sponsored *geistige Landesverteidigung*, or 'spiritual defense of the homeland,' as one of many examples of how the values of the two nations diverged.

Studer's Swissness is a blend of understated professional competence, ethics, and personability. He studied with the well-known criminologists Hans Groß in Graz and Edmond Locard in Lyon, and, in a personification of Swiss multilingualism, speaks German, French, and Italian along with his native Bernese dialect. But lest he seem a hidebound agent of the law, Studer is an outsider in the police system. His involvement in some "business with [a] bank" before the Great War caused him to fall out of favor and to suffer a demotion.² Forced to start over from the bottom and now nearing retirement, Studer remains driven by his strong moral compass. On more than one occasion, the Sergeant resists the temptations of power or money to persist with a thankless investigation.

Though he often avails himself of his criminological training, Studer also relies on his interpersonal skills to solve cases. The detective knows what language to use in order to build trust with his interlocutors, or to remind them of his authority. He listens to the way people talk to judge the veracity of their statements, he examines their social networks, and he takes in their milieux as carefully as other investigators might secure more tangible evidence. As Studer observes: "It's not so much facts I need as the air these people breathe, so to speak."³

The Sergeant's career spans five novels written between 1936 and Glauser's death in 1938. *The Spoke* (1941 [2008]) and *The Chinaman* (1939 [2007]), like *The Thumbprint*, take

place in fictive Swiss villages. Here, Studer's investigations frequently reveal the putative Swiss idyll as irrevocably compromised: corrupt community leaders and oppressive social ties are only the most obvious expressions of a deteriorating social fabric. At times, Studer himself comes across as a crusty traditionalist annoyed by social pretensions, women who wear too much powder, tepid coffee, and pulp fiction. Yet the Sergeant is also critical of outdated, inhumane social institutions and is capable of profound empathy. When he witnesses a moment of tenderness between a murderer and his wife, the detective reflects, "things in life were always different from the way you imagined. A man might be brutal, but not all the time, at others, apparently, he could be quite different..."⁴

In *Fever* (1938 [2006]) and *In Matto's Realm* (1937 [2005]), Studer is sent to other locales the author knew from experience: in the former, an outpost of the French Foreign Legion; in the latter, a psychiatric clinic. *In Matto's Realm* has drawn critical acclaim for its multi-layered exploration of the human psyche, in which even Studer's investigative powers fall short. After his solution to the crime is exposed as faulty, Studer must concede: "Suddenly everything was clear. He felt ashamed. He had understood nothing"⁵ It is Dr. Laduner, acting director of the clinic, who accurately reads the forensic and psychiatric clues of the case and solves the mystery; Studer fails both on both counts.

If Studer's initial popularity stemmed from his Swissness, later generations of readers—for whom the patriotism of the 1930s seemed unpalatable if not downright embarrassing—appreciated Glauser's subtle social criticism and accorded him a place in Swiss literary history. The Bernese Police Commissioner Hans Barlach, a postwar creation of fellow countryman Friedrich Dürrenmatt, is unthinkable without Sergeant Studer. New editions of Glauser's novels along with graphic novel and radio play adaptations have enshrined Studer as the personification

of the 1930s Swiss zeitgeist, and assured him better name recognition than his author. The Studer novels began appearing in English in 2004.

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Selected Bibliography

Wachtmeister Studer (1936 [*The Thumbprint* 2004])

Matto regiert (1937 [*In Matto's Realm* 2005])

Die Fieberkurve (1938 [*Fever* 2006])

Der Chinese (1939 [*The Chinaman* 2007])

Krock & Co. (1941 [*The Spoke* 2008])

¹ Friedrich Glauser, *Briefe 2. 1935-1938*, ed. Bernhard Echte (Zurich: Arche, 1991), 8.

² Friedrich Glauser, *The Thumbprint*, trans. Mike Mitchell (London: Bitter Lemon Press, 2004), 22.

³ Glauser, *The Thumbprint*, 75.

⁴ Glauser, *The Thumbprint*, 179.

⁵ Friedrich Glauser, *In Matto's Realm*, trans. Mike Mitchell (London: Bitter Lemon Press, 2005), 257.