

## Chapter 8: *The Comedians from Seeds of Fiction: Graham Greene's Adventures in Haiti and Central America 1954-1983*

**Bernard Diederich**

### *The Comedians*

In a letter dated 20 December 1965 Graham finally broke the news. He preceded it by alluding to the Dominican upheaval. “I was afraid that something might have happened to one of you during the revolution—a revolution which alas I could not attend!” Then, sounding slightly sheepish, at the end of the letter he announced: “I’ve got a novel about Haiti coming out at the end of January, of which I am sending you a copy in the hope that it may arrive. I’m sure you will find a great many errors there, but perhaps you will be amused by the last chapter, which reflects our visit to the bauxite works. Forgive the errors for the sake of the intention.”

In the midst of the Dominican civil war, in spite of the erratic postal service, *The Comedians* arrived at our home. It was a thrilling moment, mixed with apprehension. This book, I hoped, would affect Haiti’s future or at least Papa Doc’s tyranny. The pen could indeed be mightier than the sword. I felt that much depended on the little parcel I held in my hand that afternoon. I examined its careful wrapping and waited a moment before tearing open the package and showing it to my wife. The book’s cover was several shades of green. The brief blurb on the inside jacket flap said it was Greene’s first

novel in five years and noted that “Like one of its predecessors, *The Quiet American*, it is a story about the committed and uncommitted.” Graham opened the book in the form of a letter, both as a salute to his old publisher A. S. Frere and as a way of establishing its geographical location. “Poor Haiti itself and the character of Doctor Duvalier’s rule are not invented,” he wrote, “the latter not even blackened for dramatic effect. Impossible to deepen that night.” The UK edition had been published by The Bodley Head of London. In his tiny script Graham had written: “For Bernard—hoping you will not find this too much of a travesty—with love, from Graham. Christmas 1965.”

Unconsciously I lifted the book to feel its weight, as if it were a precious metal. Then I sat down, forgot about deadlines and news reports, and devoured *The Comedians*. I didn’t sleep that night. Graham had given us a novel in which fiction was reality. There had been no need to worry. He had protected everyone concerned. There was not one breach of confidence. I was reassured he was honorable and compassionate. He had given the poor people of Haiti something that Papa Doc had deprived them: a voice. The horrors of the Papa Doc dictatorship and its gratuitous brutality were there. Graham had managed to capture, in this imaginary love story, the 1963–1964 climate of Duvalier’s terror and its surrealism. Only those who had lived through that terror could appreciate the accuracy with which he painted it. The dark comedy left me depressed, and for several nights after rereading the book I suffered painful flashbacks of my last years in Haiti.

The comedians of the book’s title are not the Haitians but the *blans* (whites), a term synonymous in Haiti with

foreigners—whom Graham introduces sailing to Haiti aboard the *Medea*, a Dutch ship named after the jealous sorceress of legend. Their names are as vacuous as their moral philosophies—Brown, Jones, and Smith. However, Jesuit-educated Brown is well read, citing Wordsworth and Baudelaire, and he reads Henry James’s “The Great Good Place” at the Trianon—Port-au-Prince’s gingerbread landmark clearly patterned after the venerable Grand Hotel Oloffson—during a long Sunday afternoon.

But comedy in *The Comedians* is of the bitter kind, about dark human emotions. There are no belly laughs, just a deep sadness at watching a country sink into a living hell because of the cruel and capricious contempt for human life of its despotic leader and his sadistic Tontons Macoutes. Papa Doc does not make a personal appearance in the book, but his presence permeates the air like some awesome, terrifying vulture. Graham achieves this by portraying Duvalier as the Voodoo god Baron Samedi, guardian of the dead. As such, he casts a demonic shadow that darkens all.

Graham uses a first-person narrative. Brown, the book’s anti-hero and main protagonist, was left by his worldly mother to be raised by Jesuits. He even contemplated becoming a priest at one stage but lost his faith and became a cynical, jaded, middle-aged beachcomber-type. He refers to God “as an authoritative practical joker.” Determinedly uncommitted, Brown wants to remain uninvolved in any social or political cause (which was so true of many foreigners and effete Haitians living under the dictatorship). But Brown’s cynicism does not prevent him from knowing what is going on around him. He returns to Haiti unable

to sell his hotel, which his well-traveled mother has ended up with in Port-au-Prince.

Aboard the *Medea* there is also “Major” Jones, who is sailing under false pretenses. He is a con man in the British genre, at times a charming cad but a pathetic figure nonetheless. He boasts of having battled the Japanese in Burma during the Second World War when in fact—as he confesses to Brown in a Haitian cemetery toward the end of the book—he was an actor performing far behind the front lines (which reminds me of Noël Coward). In Haiti Jones has high hopes of striking it rich by making a lucrative arms deal with corrupt government bureaucrats. Unfortunately, as the winds blow, so do the officials: Jones’s letter of introduction is to an official whose current address is the national prison.

The only committed members of the group of seafarers traveling to Port-au-Prince are Mr. and Mrs. Smith—a noble-minded but naïve and elderly American couple who have not the slightest idea what Haiti is like under Papa Doc’s dictatorship. As evangelical vegetarians (he was the presidential candidate on the US Vegetarian Party ticket) the Smiths absurdly seek to set up a vegetarian center in Haiti that they hope will “one day remove acidity and passion from the Haitian character.” Still, they are likeable, and Graham shows that there are good Americans as well as quiet ones.

From the moment the *blans* descend the gangplank in Port-au-Prince, they move deep into the terrifying darkness of Papa Doc’s regime and his eerie hell on earth. (Graham told me more than once after his 1963 visit that he had never elsewhere confronted the type and extent of evil that pervaded Papa Doc’s Haiti. The place, Graham said, reeked of

malevolence—a malevolent dictator, a malevolent secret police, and a malevolent system.) Upon disembarking Brown is given an effusive greeting by the ubiquitous Petit Pierre, the most recognizable character in the book after the all-pervasive Papa Doc. Because Petit Pierre seems to have escaped being beaten up or worse, he is suspected of having connections with the Tontons Macoutes. But Brown questions whether it is true because “there were occasionally passages in his gossip-column that showed an odd satirical courage—perhaps he depended on the police not to read between the lines.” It is also true that in a dictatorship any survivors are suspect. In his portrait of Petit Pierre, Graham adds that he was “always gay. It was as though he had tossed a coin to decide between the only two possible attitudes in Port-au-Prince, the rational and the irrational, misery or gaiety; Papa Doc’s head had fallen earthwards and he had plumped for the gaiety of despair.”

Brown heads off in the country’s customary nightly black-out to the eerily majestic Hotel Trianon only to find a corpse in the hotel’s pool, which has no water. The body is that of Dr. Philipot, Papa Doc’s Secretary of State for Social Welfare, who has chosen suicide at Brown’s mother’s hotel, slashing both his wrists and his throat rather than face death at the hands of the regime’s terror specialists, the Tontons Macoutes. Although Brown is unmoved by this distasteful discovery, the incident eventually draws him into Haiti’s drama and even affects his sex life. While making love to Martha, the wife of a South American ambassador, Brown sees in his mind’s eye Dr. Philipot’s corpse again and is rendered impotent.

On a visit with the Smiths to see the cabinet minister who has replaced the

unfortunate Dr. Philipot, Brown observes: “Above his head hung the portrait of Papa Doc—the portrait of Baron Samedi. Clothed in the heavy black tail-suit of graveyards, he peered out at us through the thick lenses of his spectacles with myopic and expressionless eyes. He was rumoured sometimes to watch personally the slow death of a Tonton victim. The eyes would not change. Presumably his interest in the death was medical.”

The dictatorship is exemplified by Captain Concasseur, who took pleasure “in breaking limbs” and “missed nothing through those dark glasses.” It was he who mutilated and emasculated Joseph, Brown’s servant at the hotel. Typical of the regime’s entrepreneurial insanity is the construction of an ice-skating rink in the mountains at Kenscoff, overlooking Port-au-Prince. (This was actually a short-lived project undertaken by a businessman connected to the Duvalier regime during that time.)

Except for the unworldly Smiths, who are oblivious to their murderous surroundings, the cynical, uncommitted foreigners see themselves only as players in a cosmic bad joke. Life to Brown is a form of dark comedy with the actors and actresses—comedians all—directed by the Almighty. Brown’s world therefore lacks any profound purpose. Even so, the comedians’ superficial environment is so totally dwarfed by the frightening enormity of Papa Doc’s Kafkaesque darkness enveloping them that they appear laughably trivial and insignificant. “We are only the sub-plot affording a little light relief,” Brown tells Martha, commenting on Dr. Philipot’s suicide. “We belong to the world of comedy and not to tragedy,” he tells her on another occasion. He has no moral moorings and is not even able to sustain his romance with Martha. Their affair is

growing cold, and besides being married she is the daughter of an executed Nazi war criminal. She mentions her harsh father, the Germán, to Brown who says, “Cruelty’s like a searchlight. It sweeps from one spot to another. We only escape it for a time.” And elsewhere he observes, “Haiti was not an exception in a sane world: it was a small slice of everyday taken at random. Baron Samedi walked in all our graveyards.” Later when he calls on the British *chargé d’affaires* to help the imprisoned “Major” Jones whose deal is dead, Brown says he “felt a little like the player king rebuked by Hamlet for exaggerating his part.” He is unaffected even by the death of his mother Maggie Brown, a brave, worldly woman—Madame la Comtesse de Lascot-Villiers. She leaves him the hotel, and he treats Marcel, her Haitian lover, as just another member of the cast of the theatre of farce. Before she dies the Comtesse says to Marcel: “I know I’m an old woman and as you say a bit of an actress. But please go on pretending. As long as we pretend we escape.” But Marcel cannot escape. He is no comedian; he cares. Filled with grief, he too commits suicide in the hotel. Suicide, Brown worries, is bad for business. On the other hand, there is no business.

It is the book’s Haitian characters who try to inject some transcendental life into the comedians like Brown, who is the equivalent of a Haitian zombie in that his moral and spiritual decay has been caused by a loss of faith—in God—that makes him resemble the walking dead.

The towering figure of commitment is the Haitian physician Dr. Magiot. The antithesis of Papa Doc, Magiot is a Marxist but one attuned to the gentler bourgeois Victorian age in which Marx

himself lived—a time when Marxism had a human face. Like the Hotel Trianon, Magiot is almost a relic from a bygone era. He helps bring about Brown’s slow regeneration. Brown first encounters Magiot crouched over the body of the ex-social welfare minister “in the shadow cast by my torch like a sorcerer exorcising death” and gradually succumbs to his influence as a sort of father confessor.

Graham, through a letter of introduction from the French Roman Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, met the Haitian physician Dr. Camille Lherisson, a big man with an even bigger ego who had been Minister of Health in the Magloire government for a brief time. He was Graham’s opposite. Graham shunned the public spotlight, while Lherisson bathed in it. The high-profile physician had been one of the first Haitian doctors to be sent abroad by the Rockefeller Foundation. Under Rockefeller auspices he received a scholarship and undertook his postgraduate work in biology at McGill University, Montreal. (The Rockefeller Foundation had granted scholarships to a number of Haitian doctors to specialize in various medical fields abroad. Dr. François “Papa Doc” Duvalier studied public health at the University of Michigan for a semester on a Rockefeller scholarship. There he learned a great deal about racial discrimination in the United States, if not about democratic values. Indeed, because of color prejudice in the United States, most Haitians granted foreign scholarships had earlier been sent to Canada.)

Engaging and physically impressive, “Bibi,” as Lherisson was known to his friends, was attending physician to some of Haiti’s oldest families. He was a devoted doctor who had saved lives but

who had become increasingly egocentric with age. He had finely chiseled features and could be described either as a dark mulatto or a light-colored *griffe* (one of the many shades of color between mulatto and black). Apart from a wandering eye, philosophy was another of his passions. He spoke English well and made a deep impression on Graham, who had difficulties with any language but his own. Lherisson's moment of fame, at least locally, had come during the last six days of September 1944 when, as president of La Société Haïtienne d'Etudes Scientifiques (the Haitian Society of Scientific Studies) he organized an international conference on philosophy. It was an extraordinary event for Haiti, made more so by the fact that it was held while the Second World War still raged. In retrospect it might appear that Haiti had priorities other than a five-day discussion on Kant and the anti-intellectual mysticism of Luther, "Object of Sensible Intuition According to Kant" and "Object of Physics-Mathematics" by Eugene Babin. Lherisson himself spoke on the philosophy of mathematics. The star of the event was the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, whom Lherisson introduced as "*notre cher et grand ami*" (our beloved good friend). It was Jacques Maritain who Graham said had helped him publish his first book in France, *The Man Within*, and who had suggested he meet Dr. Lherisson.

As things turned out, Lherisson became the model for Dr. Magiot in *The Comedians*. This choice of a model was a shock to me. There were numerous Haitians who could have been the model for Dr. Magiot. It was not until August 1980 that Graham told me who the inspiration was. He told me this as he and I waited for Panamanian strongman General Omar Torrijos's personal jet to

take us to Managua, Nicaragua. Graham lamented the demise of the late Hotel Oloffson bartender Caesar and his famous rum punches. His musing took him back many years. "Did you know Dr Camille Lherrison?" he asked. "I had him in mind when I created the character of Dr Magiot in *The Comedians*." Of all the heroic figures I believed were possible models for Dr. Magiot, Lherrison had never crossed my mind. Up to that moment Graham's powers of observation and judgement had seemed extraordinary to me; now I was not so sure. I was shattered. All I could say in getting over my astonishment was that Graham had got Dr. Lherrison's color wrong.

"He was black," Graham said, his lips puckered up, seeming to hold back his words as he usually did whenever he spoke with force and conviction.

Lherrison was a right-wing mulatto. He was an elitist doctor. He couldn't be the black Marxist Magiot. "It is a good thing Lherrison's dead," I said. "This conversion of color and ideology would have killed him."

"But he was black," Graham insisted, looking at me as if I was the one who was colorblind. When I didn't say anything more, he insisted: "He was very dark, black!"

Unknown to even his mulatto friends, Lherrison had entered Graham's narrative as a noir. They would consider it the ultimate irony, given the color caste system in Haiti, for a man as pompous as Lherisson to be turned by an author who despised pomposity into a "tall elderly negro with a Roman face blackened by the soot of cities and with hair dusted by stone."

Graham could see that I was upset about his choice of a model for Dr. Magiot, so later he sent me a copy of an article he had written four years earlier

for the *Sunday Telegraph* magazine in which he had identified Lherrison not by name but by color in the following effusive terms:

A man I liked above all who was the model for Doctor Magiot in *The Comedians*, a novel I never dreamed then that I would come to write. He was a doctor and a philosopher—but not a Communist. For a time he had been Minister of Health, but found his hands too tied, so he resigned (something which would have been very dangerous to do under Duvalier). Every other year he visited Europe to attend philosophical congresses. He was a very big man and very black, of great dignity and with old-world courtesy. He was to die in exile, more fortunately than Doctor Magiot. Who can tell?

*The Comedians* leaves no doubt that Graham is firmly on the side of the oppressed. US foreign policy is astutely criticized by Dr. Magiot, who predicts that Papa Doc will keep his “window open towards the east until the Americans give arms to him again.” Magiot notes that the fear of another Cuba, a second communist state at its back door, is reason enough for the United States to forgive Papa Doc his sins. “There will be no Cuba and no Bay of Pigs here,” says Dr. Magiot.

Police Captain Concasseur says: “We are the true bastion against Communists. No Castro can succeed here. We have a loyal peasantry.”

While the *blan* comedians are self-centered and only half-alive, the Haitians they meet at least exhibit purpose. A young poet, Henri Philipot, nephew of the dead minister, decides along with Dr. Magiot to take up arms against Papa Doc. Together they have commitment enough to spare, and they try to breathe some spiritual life into the

comedians. But overcoming Brown’s cynicism about life is not easy. The Smiths’ vegetarian scheme also withers. They too get caught up in the violence and corruption of Papa Doc’s Haiti, but at least they care about something. As they sail off to neighboring Santo Domingo, Brown concludes that they are not comedians after all.

Pineda, the cuckolded Latin American ambassador, likewise mirrors the book’s title: “Come on, cheer up, let us all be comedians together. Take one of my cigars. Help yourself at the bar. My scotch is good. Perhaps even Papa Doc is a comedian.”

Henri Philipot, the would-be guerrilla, replies to the Ambassador: “He [Papa Doc] is real. Horror is always real.”

The Ambassador rejoins: “We mustn’t complain too much of being comedians—it’s an honourable profession. If only we could be good ones the world might gain at least a sense of style. We have failed—that’s all. We are bad comedians, we aren’t bad men.”

In his way Graham pays just tribute to the role of Haiti’s folk religion, Voodoo. “Certainly I am not against Voodoo,” Dr. Magiot tells Mrs. Smith; “How lonely my people would be with Papa Doc as the only power in the land.” Voodoo, Magiot says, “is the right therapy for Haitians.”

And it is Voodoo (Graham, who attended a Voodoo ceremony in 1954 gets it right) that the young poet Philipot turns for help when all else fails him. “The gods of Dahomey may be what we need,” he concludes.

Of Philipot, Brown notes: “Governments had failed him, I had failed him, Jones had failed him—he had no Bren gun; he was here, listening to the drums, waiting, for strength, for

courage, for a decision.” Voodoo did not fail him. Brown attends the Voodoo ceremony above Kenscoff, high in the mountains, and the description of the service is remarkably well done for an author who had attended only one Voodoo ceremony in his life—and that more than seven years earlier.

In a letter to Catherine dated 30 August 1954 from the El Rancho Hotel, Graham scribbled down his impressions of the Voodoo ceremony he had attended the night before, which had “lasted until 3 in the morning.” The letter, reproduced in *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters* edited by Richard Greene, is headed with a request to Catherine: “Will you keep this letter in case I need it to refresh my mind?” In fact, the rite Graham described in his letter was typical of the ceremonies that catered to the tourist trade.

The importance that Haitians attach to sanctifying the dead came through in *The Comedians*. Haitians worship their ancestors. (A body-snatching by Duvalier’s police recounted in *The Comedians* is based on an event following Duvalier’s 1957 election when a kidnapping took place during the funeral procession of ex-candidate Clément Jumelle.)

“Major” Jones, the charming cheat and boastful liar who is pursued by Captain Concasseur, tries to escape dressed as a Haitian woman and takes asylum with Ambassador Pineda. Jones is finally conned by a jealous Brown who believes he is having an affair with Martha. This is a chance to put his phony wartime experiences to use. Undergoing a spiritual transformation and shedding his comedian’s mantle, Jones dies a hero’s death with poet Philipot’s guerrilla band. As the guerrillas withdraw from Haiti across the border into the Dominican

Republic—our 1965 trip along the Dominican-Haitian border served Graham well in this last chapter of the book—Philipot, carrying the corpse of the torture-victim Joseph, reports that Jones has vowed to keep Papa Doc’s pursuing soldiers at bay until the others have had time to reach the border road. Philipot and his guerrillas are interned in an abandoned lunatic asylum near Santo Domingo, not unlike the Haitian guerrilla camp that Graham and I visited in 1965. Brown, now not so remote, concedes that he would like to erect a stone where Jones died: “I shall get the British Ambassador, perhaps a member of the Royal Family.”

Father Bajoux, our melancholy traveling companion during the three-day border trip, enters Graham’s novel as the Haitian refugee-priest who says Mass at the Franciscan church in Santo Domingo. Father Bajoux and I had told Graham about the Mass said by Bajoux on 27 April 1964 in memory of those killed during the bloody repression in Haiti the year before. After Mass the Kamoken posed for their photograph together outside the church. Toward the end of *The Comedians* Philipot leads his disheveled troops from the lunatic asylum to attend another Mass, this one for Joseph, limping no more from Concasseur’s blows, and for Jones “whose beliefs were not known” but who “was included out of courtesy.” Besides the guerrilla survivors there are Brown, Martha, and her family. In the sermon the priest, a liberationist, condemns the indifference of the Browns of the world as evil. Graham’s description fits Bajoux as “a young man of Philipot’s age with the light skin of a métis.”

Thus Graham was continually questioning faith, ideology, and human behavior. Shortly after *The Comedians* was published the Roman Catholic

Church fell into a state of ferment, especially in Latin America, and 1968 was the year of the Second Vatican Council. The age-old image of the implacable, intolerant, and inflexible Catholic Church was being buffeted by the winds of social change. The bishops of Latin America had met in Medellín, Colombia and promised to sever the Church's centuries-long alliance with the region's military and entrenched élites. Graham was well aware of these events and was devoted to Pope John XXIII, the most popular pontiff in the century.

Graham had written in his foreword:

A word about the characters of *The Comedians*. I am unlikely to bring an action for libel against myself with any success, yet I want to make it clear that the narrator of this tale, though his name is Brown, is not Greene. Many readers assume—I know it from experience—that an 'I' is always the author. So in my time I have been considered the murderer of a friend, the jealous lover of a civil servant's wife, and an obsessive player at roulette. I don't wish to add to my chameleon-nature characteristics belonging to the cuckold of a South American diplomat, a possibly illegitimate birth, and an education by the Jesuits. Ah, it may be said, Brown is a Catholic and so, we know, is Greene ... It is often forgotten that, even in the case of a novel laid in England, the story, when it contains more than ten characters, would lack verisimilitude if at least one of them were not a Catholic. Ignorance of this fact of social statistics sometimes gives the English novel a provincial air.

"I" is not the only imaginary character: none of the others, from such minor players as the British chargé to the principals, has ever existed. A physical trait taken here, a habit of speech, an anecdote—they are boiled up in the kitchen of the unconscious and emerge unrecognizable even to the cook in most cases.

Poor Haiti itself and the character of Doctor Duvalier's rule are not invented ... The Tontons Macoute are full of men more evil than Concasseur; the interrupted funeral is drawn from fact; many a Joseph limps the streets of Port-au-Prince after his spell of torture, and, though I have never met the young Philipot, I have met guerrillas as courageous and as ill-trained in that former lunatic asylum near Santo Domingo. Only in Santo Domingo have things changed since I began this book—for the worse.

The few Haitians privileged to read the book were eager to identify the players. I myself was increasingly persuaded that Brown, the principal character and narrator, was a composite, blending together slight resemblances to several real-life individuals, including the Hotel Oloffson's American operator at the time of Graham's 1963 visit. This Caribbean entrepreneur appeared blithely uncommitted as far as Papa Doc's dictatorship was concerned and seemed to care only about the effects of media reports on the country's tourism and specifically his clientele. And in spite of Graham's sweeping disclaimer, other characters in the book brought to mind certain actual people and settings. "Major" Jones is reminiscent of many wheeler-dealers who were attracted to Haiti by the dictatorship's need for guns. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, the elderly

vegetarians, evoked a similarly idealistic but naïve American couple who were the only other guests besides Graham and the Italian casino operator at the Hotel Oloffson in August 1963.

Henri Philipot closely resembled Fred Baptiste, the commander of the little guerrilla band that invaded Haiti from the Dominican Republic as poorly armed as any guerrilla group ever was. Years later Graham confirmed to me that Fred Baptiste and Hector Riobe, another young Haitian who fought the regime, had inspired the young idealist Philipot. Graham also revealed that the individual he had in mind when he created Captain Concasseur was the intimidating officer who stared at Graham during his long hours in 1963 waiting in the Caserne François Duvalier, the Port-au-Prince police headquarters, for a permit to travel to the south of Haiti.

Graham used the graveyard he found on his 1963 trip to south Haiti as the stage for the dramatic scene in *The Comedians* when the two main characters, Jones and Brown, “come alive.”

“You expected a witch to open the door to you or a maniacal butler, with a bat dangling from the chandelier,” Graham wrote, describing the Grand Hotel Oloffson as the Trianon.

Our border trip along the Dominican-Haitian frontier was not wasted as source material. The last chapter of *The Comedians* draws heavily upon it. Graham’s description of the border was remarkably accurate: “I was glad enough when we came in sight at dusk, from our grey eroded mountain range where nothing grew, of the deep Dominican forest. You could see all the twists of the frontier by the contrast between our bare rocks and their vegetation. It was the same mountain

range, but the trees never crossed into the poor dry land of Haiti.” The vaunted international border road he described as “a grand name for a track little better than the Great Southern Highway to Aux Cayes.” And he later observes, the road “was more suitable for mules and cows.”

The mean manager of the Alcoa bauxite operation at Cabo Rojo, Pat Hughson, bore more than a slight resemblance to the book’s Mr. Schuyler Wilson, “a large fat man with an anonymous face shaved as smooth as marble.” Brown’s arrival at a mining site in the Dominican Republic after having fled Haiti recalls our arrival seeking a drink and a bed; he describes the scene faithfully if not a little colorfully.

In his introduction to the US edition of *The Comedians*, published in 1966, Graham also noted: “The best I could do in January 1965 was to make a trip down the Dominican and Haitian border—the scene of my last chapter—in the company of two exiles from Haiti. At least, without Doctor Duvalier’s leave, we were able to pass along the edge of the country we loved and to exchange hopes of a happier future.”

Few Haitians living abroad read *The Comedians* for its literary value; they were interested in its political content. It was the opposite for the reviewers. Literary critics and pundits were more interested in *The Comedians* in terms of its literary merit. Much to his mirth, they forever dissected his books in microscopic detail—perhaps because of Graham’s eclectic intellectualism—and because this was his first book in five years, it received even closer scrutiny. “*The Comedians*,” Graham himself later wrote, “is the only one of my books which I began with the intention of expressing a point of view and in order to fight—to fight the horror of Papa

Doc's dictatorship." He dragged the enigmatic Dr. François Duvalier from the shadows into the floodlights of the world stage.

There were few Haitian exiles around to share my copy of *The Comedians* since, by the time it appeared, most had been forced to flee Santo Domingo because right-wing death squads had them in their gun sights. It was not until the following year that I caught up with Father Bajeux and was able to discuss the book with him. Bajeux was by then working with the Rev. Ivan Illich, who headed a liberal think tank called CIDOC (the Centro Intercultural de Documentation) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Father Bajeux had just published an all-encompassing document entitled *Un Cri pour Haiti* (A Cry for Haiti) in which he analyzed the political and economic situation under Duvalierism and called for drastic change. He was still struggling with his personal God.

*The Comedians* enjoyed wide press coverage. Photographs I had taken of Graham on the bridge over the Massacre River at Dajabón using his little Minox camera were published in both *Time* and *Life* magazines. (By then I was a full-time correspondent for both sister publications.)

When I finally closed my copy of the book and handed it to my wife, I thought this would be the end of our story and the end of Graham's Haiti period. As he did following his Indochina, South America, and Mexico periods, he would now move on to another place and another book. It was a little sad. Graham's aim in Haiti was nearly perfect. His pen had proved to be a powerful sword against Duvalier. Although it did not decapitate Papa Doc—who managed to retain power for the rest of his life—the book was

equivalent to winning a major battle against his evil tyranny.

While Graham and I were later rarely at odds on any topic, we always disagreed about Jolicoeur. He was convinced that Jolicoeur was a government informer, a spy. To me, Aubelin, like so many Haitians, was simply a brash survivor. I had known him since the early days following his arrival from Jacmel and in 1952 had made him "Personality of the Week" in my newspaper. As a social columnist, one of the first of that journalistic genre in Haiti, he wrote a column for my newspaper. If anything, he was simply over-zealous and adjective-driven.

Graham, I learned later and unbeknownst to him, was under tight Tonton Macoute and police surveillance night and day throughout his 1963 stay. He was not aware that the street people, hangers-on, and drivers around him were either Macoutes or police agents with orders to monitor his every move.

Back in Haiti, iron censorship enforced by harsh penalties, possible imprisonment, or even death kept *The Comedians* from entering the country. Haitians knew only too well that to be caught with any document or book that was unfavorable to Duvalier was suicidal. Customs inspectors were trained to weed out any literature that could be deemed to impugn Papa Doc. They examined books and even private papers carried by passengers arriving in Haiti. One man was specially assigned at the Port-au-Prince airport to censor foreign newspapers and magazines; scissors unabashedly in hand, he would clip out on the spot any mention of Haiti. Years later, after the Duvalier dynasty collapsed, the censor identified himself to me upon my return via the Port-au-Prince airport, declaring with shameless guile: "I used to enjoy your

stories” (referring to those bylined from elsewhere). It was one of the more bizarre compliments of my journalistic career.

Gradually however, Haitians learned through their *telejiol* (grapevine) and from other sources about a book called *The Comedians* written by a famous English writer. They immediately presumed that they were the comedians, and it is not unusual to hear a Haitian say, even today, “Graham Greene was right. We are *comediens*—actors!” This point of view was not without some logic. For all their earthiness, they exhibited many of the shoulder-shrugging characteristics of the uncommitted, but their masks were often more in keeping with the escapism of carnival as they endeavored to shut out reality and survive. Petit Pierre was not alone in his desire simply to stay alive.

The survivors of Papa Doc’s death chamber reasoned that they might be safe so long as they did not provoke the beast. As an old Creole saying goes, *Tout bête genin mode* (All cornered beasts bite). Graham had provoked the beast; now we waited for Papa Doc to bite.

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