

## Bonjour tristesse

PARIS. Fast cars, fast pen, fast life and death. Writer Françoise Sagan, pixie face of a taboo-breaking postwar generation, rocketed to wealth and world fame in 1954 at age 19. Her novel, *Bonjour Tristesse*, termed “a masterpiece of cynicism and cruelty,” led admiring Catholic writer François Mauriac, to call her a “charming little monster.”

The monster could write like an angel. When she died a few weeks ago at 69, destroyed by poverty, illness, debts, tax arrears and lawsuits, she left all France in tears. Front pages and magazine covers pictured her wide-eyed innocence throughout the decades. Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë told a million street-revellers that his all-night *Nuit blanche* festival belonged to her. National politicians rushed to grieve – and to seize a piece of history.

Sagan (a name borrowed from Proust to spare her rich family embarrassment) wrote her totem-novel sitting in a café in the summer of 1954. On May 7, France had suffered a spirit-shattering defeat at Vietnam’s Dien Bien Phu. Elites and authority drew contempt.

A year before, Brigitte Bardot had burst on the scene, defying parents, fashion and society. Bikinis swayed on beaches. Jean-Paul Sartre and de Simone de Beauvoir smoked cigarettes and cynicism at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The world-weary times sought a focus for rebellion.

*Bonjour Tristesse*’s 17-year-old heroine supplied it. She chronicled her dashing father’s womanizing, and, with premature sophistication and careless brutality, plotted heart-breaking manipulations. The book gripped readers by its clear-eyed scheming, then found scandal in the author’s age. A girl who made love without being in love? Only boys did that.

Her image shocked even more because she was a “girl of good family.” She was “well-raised” (the ultimate French compliment) and spoke beautiful, slightly old-fashioned French. This only spiced up her extravagances: expensive sports cars, lovers of both sexes, constant night-clubbing, hobnobbing with sometimes dubious friends (many famous), treating her life as trivial. Among many who never read her, she passed as just another airhead -- famous for being famous.

Fame too soon and bad advice were her downfall. Her father, learning she had earned a fortune for her first novel, didn’t tell her to save. He told her to blow it all quickly before it corrupted her. She did, impulsively. She gave it away (including cars) to friends, leaving a box of free cash on her mantel for visitors. She even sent money to unhappy women for nose jobs.

Later get-rich schemes involved her in shadowy oil deals in Kazakhstan and dealings with strange men like wealthy Corsican speculator and racing-car driver “Dédé-la-Sardine.” Influence-seekers abused her innocence to get to top people: she was close to at least two French presidents (Georges Pompidou, François Mitterrand), and could probably call, and meet, anyone in France.

Fame drove her to alcohol: whisky gave her courage to face journalists. Her escapism drove her to highway speeding. A near-fatal accident got her hooked on drugs, including cocaine. Never able to keep track of accounts, she faced years of agony in the bankruptcy courts, fighting off the dreaded *fisc* (the tax department).

Even in her late-life miseries, she could be hilarious. “Make people laugh. Laugh at yourself... Whether sweet or sardonic, laughing is the dazzling, irresistible proof of our freedom.”

This from a girl kicked out of convent-school for claiming that “God is a big rabbit.” Incurable teenagers, she and singer-lover Juliette Gréco made jokes an endless badminton game.

Decade after decade, at breakneck speed, Sagan churned out novels, plays, screen-plays and articles. Quality roller-coasted, but she always kept her signature style. At its best, it was fluid, shimmering, inevitable. At her every stumble, critics’ dipped pens in acid. They couldn’t forgive her for so much talent, and for writing so much, so quickly, so almost carelessly.

Like many ever-young creators whose troubles eclipsed their creations, Sagan will gain younger fans now devouring her media praise. For artists, early death (even at 69!) can be a smart career move. Sagan has left enough masterpieces – three or four novels, a movie or two – that she will keep a place.

But for French and foreign admirers of her halcyon days, her death closes the mythic time of Montparnasse. Near his end, she would take a blind Jean-Paul Sartre there to La Rotonde to cut his meat, both giggling as they escaped Sartre’s “dragon-lady,” de Beauvoir.

As with Mitterrand, the tender complicities of old man-young woman warmed those next-to-final years. Destitute the last few, she camped in her old Normandy house, lent back to her by a kind owner. She sat forlorn and a little befuddled in her wheel-chair, her loneliness deepened by a chattering TV set.

She had only wanted to “write very good books.” She couldn’t understand where all the money had gone, and why the *fisc* was still so vindictive.