

'Modesty Blaise / Queen of Pulp'

Years ago, my sister gave me a copy of *Modesty Blaise* by Peter O'Donnell: an early, Sixties edition with the miscast (and, in the film, strangely blond) Monica Vitti on the cover. The book is cracking now and deeply yellowed, but I re-read it regularly, for sustenance, succour and pure pleasure. It's not just exciting escapist fiction with hilarious sartorial quirks ("Modesty wore a navy crimplene two piece...") – it's full of humanity, wit and sweetness too. Unlike her contemporary, Bond, Modesty is not cold or amoral. Granted, she kills people, but only when they really ask for it; she protects those weaker than herself and still respects them.

Why is she the perfect heroine? Envy? – she has no family, nationality, birthday or name – so gets to choose them all; she retires after a short career of morally palatable crime (usually stealing jewels from nastier criminals), and now guiltlessly idles away her time in exotic places, pursuing numerous hobbies with unlimited enjoyment, wealth and skill. She has a great friend and lieutenant in the redoubtable Willie Garvin. She is stunningly beautiful and fluent in Arabic. She can crawl for miles on her elbows and toes (try it). And – always in the cause of the great British government – she kicks serious butt.

There is also – believe it or not – wisdom here. Tempered by suffering as a stateless war orphan, she has learnt to deal with pain and fear. What she does not have, she does not hanker after. She enjoys a game of scrabble and a cup of tea as much as flying her private plane to Antibes. She lives for the moment. She has inner peace to go with the drop dead glamour. It was for this reason that, when I was packing for my first flight after an agoraphobic age, it was that copy of *Modesty Blaise* that went in my hand luggage. I knew she'd see me right. And she did.

My literary delight? After that, it cannot be other than *Modesty Blaise* by Peter O'Donnell, or, once you've read that and hunger for more (as you will), Modesty and Willie back again in the equally wonderful *A Taste For Death*.