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Introduction: Patrick Modiano's Dora Bruder

Abstract

After establishing a reputation as a literary enfant terrible in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Patrick Modiano is now firmly ensconced as a Grand Old Man (perhaps the Grand Old Man) of French letters and arguably as France's greatest living novelist...

Keywords

enfant, literary enfant terrible, Patrick Modiano, Grand Old Man, letter, letters, French novel, French novelist

Introduction

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Fig. 1 “Eight years ago, in an old copy of *Paris-Soir* dated 31 December 1941, a heading on page 3 caught my eye: ‘From Day to Day’ [‘D’hier à aujourd’hui’]: Below this, I read: [. . .] ‘Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1 m 55, oval-shaped face, gray-brown eyes, gray sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris’” (*Dora Bruder* 3; photo by Steven Ungar).

After establishing a reputation as a literary *enfant terrible* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Patrick Modiano is now firmly ensconced as a Grand Old Man (perhaps *the* Grand Old Man) of French letters



Fig. 2 Near the Blvd. Ornano, a commemorative plaque on the rue Hermele where Dora Bruder may have attended school: “To the memory of the children from this school deported between 1942 and 1944 because they were born Jewish, innocent victims of the barbarity of the Nazis and of the Vichy government. They were exterminated in the death camps. More than 700 of these children [lived] in the 18th [arrondissement]” (Photo by Steven Ungar).

and arguably as France's greatest living novelist. Following the publication of his "Occupation trilogy"—*La Place de l'étoile* (1968), *La Ronde de nuit* (1969), and *Les Boulevards de Ceinture* (1972), all dealing in some way with the then-taboo topics of French fascism and collaborationism—Modiano has produced some thirty books to date. The almost yearly publication of "the new Modiano" constitutes an Event, meriting considerable media attention in newspapers and magazines and discussion on radio and television.

Distinctive for his obsession with a historical period (the Occupation) that predates his birth in 1945, Modiano has consistently moved ahead of the wave, examining the Dark Years from new and troubling perspectives. Following his Occupation trilogy, he was invited to co-script Louis Malle's 1974 film *Lacombe Lucien*. Along with Marcel Ophüls' massive 1971 documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, *Lacombe Lucien* was instrumental in launching the so-called *mode rétro*, which foregrounded the nation's preoccupation with the ambiguities of collaboration with the Nazis. As historian Henry Rousso asserts in his pathbreaking book, *The Vichy Syndrome*,¹ the *mode rétro* marks an important phase in the changing memory of Vichy, which continues to stir debate and controversy today.

Interviewed elsewhere, Rousso underscores the important role Modiano has played in this history of memory, arguing that the omnipresence of the Occupation in Modiano's work cannot be explained simply as a novelist's personal obsession. Instead, Modiano's focus on the Dark Years must be understood in a larger context as "express[ing] and anticipat[ing] a national obsession." Rousso even goes so far as to assert that Modiano's writing "expresses the essence of his generation."²

But why a special issue devoted exclusively to Modiano's 1997 book *Dora Bruder*?³ The answer to this question is not self-evident at first glance. *Dora Bruder* is a slim volume, and as several of the essays here argue, not even a novel at all. If the aim of this issue were to celebrate Modiano the "novelist," other works—early successes like the novels included in the Occupation trilogy or the 1978 Goncourt prize winner, *Rue des Boutiques obscures*, or perhaps more recent fictions as *Un Cirque passe*—would seem more deserving of center stage.

But *Dora Bruder* (1997) is a beautifully written and emotionally compelling work, exemplary of Modiano's *œuvre* as a whole and crucial, we believe, to his evolution as a writer. The book tells the



Fig. 3 “And such topographical precision contrasts with what we shall never know about their life—this blank, this mute block of the unknown [...] At the time I knew nothing of Dora Bruder and her parents. I remember that I had a peculiar sensation as I hugged the wall of Lariboisière Hospital . . .”

(*Dora* 20–22; photo by Steven Ungar).

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Fig. 4 Site of the Vélodrome d'hiver, an indoor sports arena where more than thirteen thousand Jews were held in deplorable conditions after a massive roundup on 16–17 July 1942 conducted by the Nazis with the help of the French police. Most of those arrested were deported to Auschwitz and never returned (Photo by Steven Ungar).

story of the writer's search, in the present, for the traces of a real adolescent Jewish girl, Dora Bruder, who was deported from Paris to her death at Auschwitz during the Nazi Occupation of France. In *Dora Bruder*, Modiano gives new context and inflection to his fascination with the problems of memory and his obsession with the Occupation. In keeping with the memory of Vichy as it manifested itself in the 1990s, the book foregrounds the deportation of French Jews and France's complicity with the Nazi "Final Solution."

Like virtually all of Modiano's work, the book is deeply personal and even autobiographical. It is also possible to see *Dora Bruder* as a turning point in the writer's career: having first attempted to tell the story of Dora in a novel (*Voyage de nocces*, 1990), *Dora Bruder* is a factual and historical investigation, an "enquête." Making this transition in telling the story of Dora seems to have freed Modiano up to write in a more straightforwardly autobiographical mode, culminating in his most recent and overtly autobiographical work, *Un pedigree* (2005).

There is irony in the fact that the book that best sums up Modiano's *œuvre* is not even cast in the genre in which he usually writes. But as the essays here show, *Dora Bruder* is a factual account, a book dealing with memory and terrible historical events. But it is also a hybrid text, characterized by what Susan Suleiman here calls "heterogeneous discourses." As autobiographical writing, it explores the writer's troubled relations with his father, but it also deals more generally with individual identity and the need to understand the fate and experience of others in order to understand the self. As the writing of history, *Dora Bruder* clarifies Modiano's historical vision and in the process exposes his blind spots. As a literary text, it bears the indelible mark of a master novelist in its imaginative power, conception, and execution. In the absence of any of these discourses, the story of Dora could not be retrieved and told.

The essays in this volume are not meant to provide "coverage" of Modiano or even of *Dora Bruder* criticism. Rather, they engage from varying and occasionally overlapping perspectives with the book's many dimensions and implications. To a certain degree, all these essays deal with the discourses noted above. But a hybrid text invites hybrid criticism, and the contributors explore additional avenues and intersections. In so doing, some of them read *Dora Bruder* through the works of historians: for Suleiman, Alain Corbin; for Weiner, the *Annales* historians; for Golsan, Jay Winter. Some of them

read Modiano through the work of other novelists and auteurs: W. G. Sebald (Ungar); Victor Hugo and François Truffaut (Higgins). Some refer to writers of memoirs: Eva Hoffman (Greenberg), and faux memoirs (Suleiman). Still others interpret the text through philosophical writings: Paul Ricoeur (Suleiman); Alain Finkielkraut (Golsan). Finally, some contributors also explore the novel through familiar or surprising urban spaces: Paris (Green, Ungar); New York (Greenberg).

Studying *Dora Bruder* compels us to grapple with ethical dilemmas the writer's experience raises, and in doing so to retrace his (and perhaps Dora's) steps. We all take the book as a kind of springboard for our own meditations on writing, history, fiction, criticism, and Modiano. *Dora Bruder* has inspired us to go see, to walk, to photograph, to write, and to think in different ways.

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Notes

1 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard UP, 1991). Rousso has continued to discuss and analyze the memory of Vichy in subsequent works, most notably *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, co-authored with Eric Conan (UP of New England, 1998) and *Vichy. L'événement, la mémoire, l'histoire* (Paris: Folio, 2001).

2 *Patrick Modiano*, a documentary film directed by A. de Gaudemar, distributed by FACSEA-Eclairage, 1996.

3 Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Translated with the same title into English by Joanna Kilmartin (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999).



Fig. 5 “The French Republic renders homage to the victims of racist and anti-Semitic persecutions and of crimes against humanity committed by the so-called ‘Government of the Etat Français’ 1940–44. Let us never forget” (Photo by Steven Ungar).