

## BOOKS

# Desperately seeking Modiano

The slim, surreal novels of an elusive Nobel Prize-winner will soon seduce a wider audience, says *Duncan White*

Who the hell is Patrick Modiano? On October 9 last year, this

obscure French novelist had the temerity to win the Nobel Prize, baffling the anglophone literary world. Only a handful of his books had been translated into English and few of them were in print. Who was this nobody usurping the rightful claims of writers we had actually read?

Embarrassingly, it turned out that he was formidably prolific, with some 30 books to his name and a dedicated following in France. Modiano was simply a French thing we didn't consume, like snails.

Now, though, at 69 years of age, Modiano is on the menu. Old translations are being reissued and new ones are in the works. The publication of *The Occupation Trilogy* next month will allow an English audience to read his celebrated 1968 debut, *La place de l'étoile*, for the first time. The edition also includes his second and third novels, *The Night Watch* (1969) and *Ring Roads* (1972), both of which were published in English in the early Seventies but which have now had their translations revised by Frank Wynne (who also translates *La place de l'étoile*).

In France, he gets on the bestseller lists and is one of those rare writers who combine literary seriousness with commercial success. You can see the appeal: his books come in at under 150 pages and draw on the conventions of detective fiction to create suspense.

*Missing Person*, which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1978, is perhaps the quintessential Modiano novel. Like a classic film noir, it begins in the offices of a private detective agency, but it turns out the mystery we are trying to solve is the true nature of the narrator's own identity. Resolution, however, is always fugitive.

The motivation for this careful excavation of the past is the

attempt to answer that familiar question: who the hell is Patrick Modiano? "I write to discover who I am, to find an identity," Modiano said in a 1976 interview. That search inevitably leads back to the most shameful period in French 20th-century history. He has described himself as "a product" of "the dunghill of the Occupation", and early in his career he even claimed to have been born in 1947, rather than 1945, to distance himself from its corruption. In his work, however, he has repeatedly, even compulsively, returned to the Occupation in the attempt to understand himself better.

The Occupation brought his parents together. His mother, Luisa Colpeyn, was a Flemish actress who left Brussels for Paris during the war and ended up writing Dutch subtitles for Continental Films, a studio established by the

**His search to find himself invariably leads back to the Occupation**

Nazis (her most impressive role after the war was in Godard's *Bande à part*). Albert Modiano was a Sephardic Jew whose family were originally from Tuscany but had settled in Salonika. During the Occupation, Albert worked the black market, and it is not clear how much his illegal activities involved collaborating with the Germans or if they earned him a measure of protection. He certainly refused to wear the yellow star. The one time he was picked up by the police in a random shakedown he managed to escape in the confusion caused by a power cut.

Albert and Luisa met in the cosmopolitan demi-monde that thrived in the *années noires*. Not long after the liberation of Paris, Luisa became pregnant with Patrick. His younger brother, Rudy, was born two years later. An intense fraternal bond was forged in the absence of their parents. In his 2004 memoir, *Un pedigree* (of which a translation is to be

published in September), Modiano recalls his mother as "a pretty woman with a dry heart" and his father as distant, never speaking of his wartime experiences. The boys were sent to live with friends and hired help around the country. Modiano shuffled from school to school, frequently expelled for indiscipline. Rudy died at the age of 10, from leukaemia (Modiano dedicated his first eight books to him). At 15, Modiano ran away from home and, shortly after, his father walked out on the family.

Despite his chaotic education, Modiano still qualified for an elite high school in Paris and later the Sorbonne. He lasted one year at university before dropping out to become a writer. By then, he was already attending literary parties on the Left Bank, thanks largely to the novelist Raymond Queneau, who had been his maths tutor. Through such connections, he was able to publish his first book with Gallimard, France's most prestigious publisher, at just 22.

*La place de l'étoile* is Modiano's most famous book, but also his least typical: a frenetic, hallucinatory picaresque, jumping abruptly between time frames, locations and narrative perspectives to leave the reader dizzy and disoriented. It tells the life and adventures of Rafael Schlemilovitch, a French Jew born at the end of the war. He is raised by English governesses and at Swiss boarding schools before a vast "Venezuelan inheritance" from an uncle allows him to adopt a grand lifestyle.

The novel is a fragmented history of French anti-Semitism, and the title itself is a pun: both the location of the Arc de Triomphe and, more abstractly, where Jews were forced to wear the yellow star (*l'étoile*). Schlemilovitch writes essays about French Jewish writers who were collaborators, such as Robert Brasillach and Drieu la Rochelle. As he does so, he appears to become one of them, writing anti-Semitic pamphlets among the pro-fascist Action Française crowd in the Thirties. The novel's style clearly parodies France's most famous anti-Semitic writer, Céline.

Things swiftly become even stranger. Schlemilovitch works in Switzerland as an agent in "the white slave trade", selling French girls to Brazilian brothels; later, in Normandy, he becomes the lover of a French marquise straight out of Proust. In Vienna, he is pursued through the streets by Hitler disguised as Captain Hook, but is spared Auschwitz, having set up a brothel to cater for high-ranking Nazis. He becomes the lover of Eva Braun and a confidant of Hitler, as "official Jew of the Third Reich". Schlemilovitch tries to escape to Israel but is arrested, tortured and seemingly executed – then wakes up on a couch in Vienna being psychoanalysed by Freud.

The novel is self-consciously outrageous (Modiano himself removed some offensive passages from later editions) and its ironic pitch is unrelenting. Conventions and pieties are torn to pieces in a manner befitting a book published in Paris in 1968.

If *La place de l'étoile* launched Modiano's career with a "big bang", his next two novels trace

the cooling and maturation of his distinctive style. *The Night Watch*, a surreal, cyclical nightmare, is about a double agent working for both the French Gestapo and the resistance. *Ring Roads* concerns a young writer in search of his father, whom he finds running black market deals in sinister company on the outskirts of Paris. In his introduction to *The Occupation Trilogy*, William Boyd makes the case that the 1974 Louis Malle film *Lacombe, Lucien*, for which Modiano wrote the script, should be considered the fourth part of the series. In the movie, a teenage boy from the provinces makes his way into Paris to volunteer for the resistance, only to be rejected and end up working for the French Gestapo.

Even after the trilogy and the screenplay, Modiano could not stop himself returning to the Occupation. In 1988, he came across a missing-person notice in a Paris newspaper from December 1941. The mystery of 15-year-old Dora Bruder prompted him to write a novel, *Honeymoon* (1990), in which he imagined her escape and life after the war. He then began to research what had actually happened to her, patiently sifting through every bureaucratic scrap for clues. He found only one other official mention, on a list of names deported to Auschwitz. His account of the search, *Dora Bruder* (1997), is profoundly moving in its generosity and futility.

"I always have the impression that I write the same book,"

**Crossing over: Patrick Modiano is still little read in the English-speaking world**

Modiano said after winning the Nobel Prize. "Which means that it's already 45 years that I've been writing the same book in a discontinuous manner." While his books are certainly repetitious, it is his gift to make this into a virtue: the more Modiano you read, the more seductive his work becomes. This is why it's important to have as much translated as possible. It is cumulative reading that makes his books so hypnotic and compulsive.

*The Occupation Trilogy* by Patrick Modiano, translated by Frank Wynne, is published by Bloomsbury (£18.99, ebook £7.47). To order a copy from the Telegraph for £16.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515



WESLEY MERRITT

# The hidden hands that make masterpieces

Harper Lee is not the only writer to benefit from the forensic eye of an editor, says *Sameer Rahim*

Whether or not you believe that Harper Lee's newly published novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, adds to our understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or feel betrayed that the hero Atticus Finch has been revealed as a Ku Klux Klan member – or even both – it is important to remember that the book is neither a sequel nor a prequel but a first draft of the novel that later won a Pulitzer Prize and sold 40 million copies.

Lee submitted her manuscript to a New York publisher in 1957, where it came into the hands of the editor Tay Hohoff, a chain-smoking veteran who had joined the firm of JB Lippincott 25 years earlier. Hohoff said she "found many things wrong" with Lee's book, but recognised that "there was also life". She worked closely with Lee, suggesting she draw the action away from the Fifties back to the Thirties and retell the story of Scout's childhood from the young girl's point of view. Hohoff, who died in the mid-Seventies, did not co-author *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but she did make it possible for Lee to write the best novel she could.

Hohoff is far from unique. Contrary to the myth that authors work best in splendid isolation, the truth is that editors or close advisers have often quietly shaped great books. James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* would not be half so entertaining had it not been for the assistance of Shakespeare scholar Edmond Malone. The novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton advised Charles Dickens to change the ending of *Great Expectations* from one where Pip and Estella definitely don't get together to one in which, in that wonderfully ambiguous final line, Pip sees "no shadow of another parting from her".

The 20th century brought the rise of the professional, interventionist editor. In 1924, Maxwell Perkins received a manuscript from F Scott Fitzgerald. The author suggested that the title he had chosen – *The Great Gatsby* – might need some work. How about "Trimalchio in West Egg"? Luckily, Perkins and Fitzgerald agreed to keep the original. As their correspondence shows, though, Perkins made pertinent suggestions, including rounding out Gatsby's character as well as better telegraphing his dodgy business affairs. Perhaps Fitzgerald would have seen the



DONALD UHRE/ROCK/GETTY IMAGES

**Work in progress: Harper Lee's success was made possible by her editor**

wood for the trees anyway – but Perkins helped him along the way. Some authors resented the increasing power of these gatekeepers. Herbert Read asked TS Eliot whether editors weren't just failed writers. Eliot replied: "Perhaps, but so are most writers." It was a cute response from a man whose most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, had been edited by Ezra Pound, and who edited other poets and novelists as part of his job at Faber & Faber.

In 1953, Eliot's young colleague at Faber, Charles Monteith, plucked a novel from the slush pile titled "Strangers from Within". It began with a nuclear war and the hurried evacuation of some schoolchildren who eventually crash on an island. Monteith thought the book should lean straight to the island scenes and he asked William Golding, then an unpublished schoolteacher, to take another look. The result was *Lord of the Flies*.

It can often help if a writer and her editor have different sensibilities. Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison says that in Robert Gottlieb she found not the "ideal reader" but the "ideal editor". Precisely because of his distance from her material about African-American lives, he could tell her when he thought she was preaching rather than dramatising. Morrison, an accomplished editor herself, did not need a red pen through her sentences. In a *Paris Review* interview from 1994, Gottlieb said, "A writer of her powers and discrimination doesn't need a lot of help with her prose." Rather, his job was to let her

imagination unfold. "Bob said to me, you can loosen, open up," said Morrison. An editor must be as much a psychologist as a prose technician – rather as a sports coach gets his athlete in the right frame of mind for a race.

Some editor-writer relationships are more fraught. When Raymond Carver published his short story collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in 1981, he was praised for his minimalist prose. What reviewers didn't realise was that although the raw material was Carver's, his editor Gordon Lish was extremely influential in creating that distinctive style. Lish edited the manuscript so aggressively that it halved in length; remarkably, he rewrote 10 of the 13 endings.

Carver pleaded with Lish to have his own words back: "My very sanity is on the line here," he wrote to him. "If the book were to be published as it is in its present edited form, I may never write another story." Eventually he accepted what he called this "surgical amputation". Readers can now compare the first draft with Lish's version: 20 years after Carver's death in 1988, his wife helped to print *Beginnings*, the original uncut stories. It's doubtful, though, that the unedited book will become as popular as the one produced by that combustible collaboration.

Some authors you wish had been taken in hand more firmly. David Foster Wallace was brilliant in so many ways

**An editor must be a psychologist as much as a prose technician**

but he seemed to suffer from hypergraphia – an addiction to writing. His 1,079-page novel *Infinite Jest* was even longer in its original form and he only submitted to cuts with great reluctance. But I reckon it could still go down another 200 pages. (I for one wouldn't miss the wheelchair-bound Quebecois terrorists.) When Wallace was writing for magazines he had to be reined in for reasons of space. His hilarious essay about going on a cruise, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again", is even funnier in the shorter, punchier version published by *Harper's Magazine* as "Shipping Out".

We have yet to see whether *Go Set a Watchman* will damage Harper Lee's reputation. But what it has revealed is how a wise, parental figure taught an immature talent to come to full-fledged maturity. Perhaps in looking for a model for the noble Atticus Finch of *Mockingbird*, we should look no further than Tay Hohoff.

Read Gaby Wood's review of *Go Set a Watchman* at [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk). To order this book from the Telegraph for £13.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515