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Booklover: Freedom of Speech

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Patrick Modiano was awarded the 2014 Noble Prize for Literature in October “for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation.” Soon after the announcement, I began searching for one of his books to read for “Booklover.” Suspended Sentences: Three novelas, was the choice I made for my holiday reading. Travel, parties, family, and general holiday activity did not afford me the time for delving into these three stories. Then the attack on the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo located in Paris, France shocked the world. Modiano is described as an author who has spent his life examining the Nazi occupation and its effects on his country. Although this attack originated from a different type of extremist thinking, the timing of this horror with my interest in Modiano’s work was not lost on me. François Hollande, the President of France, said of Modiano: “he takes his readers right to the deep trouble of the occupation’s dark period. And he tries to understand how the events lead individuals to lose as well as find themselves.” It was time to read and so I began.

After Image, Suspended Sentences, and Flowers of Ruin are the translated titles for the three novelas. Mark Polizzotti is credited with the translation. In his introduction he describes, “A feeling of indirection pervades many of Patrick Modiano’s writings, and the three short novels in this volume are no exception. For all the specificity of detail — locations catalogued with loving precision, particular casts of light and shadow — one can’t escape a sense of hazziness, as if everything were shrouded in gauze or viewed through a Vaselined lens. The narrative voice adds to this impression, the protagonists often placing themselves just to the side of the situation they’re describing. Like the prose in which they couch their stories, these narrators maintain a slight remorse, as if full engagement with one’s surroundings carried the threat of great pain, or mortal danger.”

Of the three, After Image particularly resonated with me. It is an out-of-focus story about a focal product. Modiano even confessed about his own writings: “The more obscure and mysterious things remained, the more interested I became in them. I even looked for mystery where there was none.” The story begins simply: “I met Francis Jansen when I was nineteen, in the spring of 1964, and today I want to relate the little I know about him.” The illusive illustration of Jansen by the narrator sets up a page-turner where the reader is lead to believe that maybe in just the next paragraph all will be revealed. And it never is; the joy of reading the illusion, the mystery in itself, is the end game that Modiano sets up. Jansen is a photographer. He uses his Rolleiflex to capture a moment with minimum intrusion. When the narrator meets him Jansen has packed his life’s work into three leather suitcases and is moving to Mexico. The narrator offers to catalogue his photographs as he appreciates the documentary value of them and believes Jansen should be recognized at some point for this. A sense of déjà vu began to creep into my reading. The story line, albeit fiction, had a very familiar tone.

Finding Vivian Maier is a documentary released in 2013 about a young man’s discovery of the works of Vivian Maier. Bidding on a storage locker of vintage photographic material for a book he was writing for Arcadia Publishing, John Maloof discovers a box of negatives. Maloof had become interested in the preservation of Chicago’s Northwest side where he lived and was writing about it with Daniel Pogorzelski. The box of negatives did not produce any material for their book Portage Park, but it provided the catalyst for Maloof’s immersion into finding Vivian Maier, the solitary nanny who took over 100,000 photographs of street life and left two storage lockers stuffed with clues to assist in the ultimate archiving, preservation, and presentation of her life’s work by Maloof. To connect you back to Modiano’s Jansen character — Jansen used a Rolleiflex, and, like Maier, he would capture street life in an intimate, minimally intrusive manner. Pa- toche, the narrator in After Image, describes Jansen’s work: “I only have to look at his photos to rediscover the quality he possessed in art as in life, which is so precious but so hard to acquire: keeping silent.” A description one might also bestow on Maier’s work.