

“I rescue them from the void one final time before they sink back into it forever.”
—Patrick Modiano, *Flowers of Ruin*

An Introduction to *Suspended Sentences*, by Patrick Modiano

In 2014, Patrick Modiano, the acclaimed French author of more than thirty works of fiction, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Each of the three linked novellas brought together in *Suspended Sentences* reflects upon a bygone Paris as recalled by a narrator—based on Modiano himself—haunted by events he was too young to comprehend at the time.

Now in his mid-forties, the unnamed narrator of *Afterimage* stumbles across a photo of himself taken in 1964 when he was just nineteen. He had been sitting at a café with his girlfriend when Frank Jansen approached, asking to photograph them for an American magazine. The narrator, an aspiring writer, agreed and developed a casual friendship with the older man.

While visiting Jansen’s studio, the narrator sees pictures of his host with celebrated war photographer Robert Capa and film actress Colette Laurent. Yet Jansen seems detached from his past and wants “to come down with amnesia” (p. 9). The narrator begins to catalog Jansen’s earlier work, thousands of photos that—like Jansen and the Paris he knew—will soon vanish.

Patoche, a diminutive of the name Patrick, was a mere schoolboy of ten at the time of the incidents he recounts in *Suspended Sentences*. When their actress mother goes abroad, Patoche and his brother are entrusted to theatrical friends who live together in a town just outside Paris. Annie, a beautiful former acrobat who takes Patoche under her wing, prepares him for life’s uncertainty, warning that “accidents can happen very suddenly in life” (p. 117).

The household receives a steady stream of visitors, from Frede, the androgynous mistress of ceremonies at a Parisian nightclub, to Richard Vincent, the owner of a flashy American convertible. As an adult, Patoche randomly encounters reminders of that hazy time and of his Jewish father’s involvement with a man called Eddy Pagnon, “who was shot after the Liberation with members of the Rue Lauriston gang” (p. 108).

Incorporating aspects of a noir thriller, *Flowers of Ruin* revolves around two mysteries: the 1933 double suicide of a young engineer and his wife, and the true identity of a man calling himself Pacheco, who may or may not be Philippe de Bellune, “a man wanted for colluding with the enemy” (p. 167) during the Nazi occupation.

Once again, the unnamed narrator interweaves his meandering quest with details of his father’s association with Eddy Pagnon and the Rue Lauriston gang during the war. Winding through Paris decades later, the narrator reflects upon vanished landmarks and admits, “I feel a certain guilt, the reason for which remains vague: a crime to which I was an accomplice or witness, I couldn’t really say” (p. 195).

Beginning with his first novel in 1968, Modiano has created a unique cartography of Paris, delineated by memory and evoking a city forever changed by the upheaval of World War II. Exquisitely exhibiting both his dominant themes and his signature limpid prose style, the three tales in *Suspended Sentences* offer a superb introduction to the Nobel laureate.

Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. What does Jansen mean when he talks about “squaring the circle” (p. 7)?
2. Why might Lemoine—the bowls player the narrator sees in the Jardins du Luxembourg—not want to admit that Jansen had once taken his photograph?
3. In his introduction, translator Mark Polizzotti explains that the French title of *Afterimage* literally translates to “dog of spring” (p. xii). What is the pointer that follows Jansen home meant to signify?
4. Identity is a fluid concept in *Afterimage*. Modiano blends aspects of himself with his narrator, who feels himself blurring with Jansen, whose history echoes that of Modiano’s father. What does this instability convey?
5. Why do Annie’s blue jeans arouse the suspicion of the principal at Jeanne d’Arc school?
6. What does the marquis de Caussade’s former chateau represent to Patoche? To his father? Does Patoche blame Annie or any of the others for involving him and his brother in a criminal act and later abandoning them?
7. As an adult, Patoche goes to Roger Vincent’s old apartment and asks whether the concierge knows anything about Vincent. The concierge directs him to the garage across the street, “but I didn’t go ask at the garage. . . . I had spent so many years looking for garages in Paris that I no longer believed in them” (p. 113). Considering his recent search for the garage where Eddie Pagnon worked, what might he mean by this statement?
8. Why is the narrator of *Flowers of Ruin* obsessed with knowing whether or not Pacheco is who he claims to be?
9. Does the narrator feel at home in contemporary Paris? Why does he choose to stay?
10. What are some of the ways in which Modiano appropriates the tropes of noir storytelling in *Flowers of Ruin*?
11. In both *Suspended Sentences* and *Flowers of Ruin*, Modiano makes numerous lists of people and places. What effect do these lists create?

12. Coincidences occur frequently in Modiano's work. Discuss an instance of coincidence in one of these novellas and what it means within the larger story.
13. The Nazi Occupation of France—and specifically, the actions of Modiano's Jewish father's during that time—haunts the author's work. Is there an event that similarly pervades the American national consciousness? Is every large city as haunted as Modiano's Paris?
14. Compare the way in which Modiano addresses the complexities of postwar Jewish identity with an American author of the same era.
15. Each novella has a strong autobiographical aspect. Why might Modiano choose to write fiction rather than memoir? What does fiction allow that memoir does not?
16. If this is your first time reading Modiano, how did your understanding of his work evolve from the first to the last novella in this volume? Although the stories were written over the span of five years, Modiano considers them linked. What might be lost if one were to read them as separate and distinct works?

Patrick Modiano was born in France in 1945. He published his first novel in 1968 and was awarded the Prix Goncourt for his novel *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* in 1978. He was honored with both the Grand Prix National des Lettres and the Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca before being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2014.