FOREWORD TO THE FRENCH EDITION:

MODIANO, OR LIGHTNESS

Over the past three decades, Patrick Modiano has built a body of work on the most consequential of themes: the theme of memory, of the ghosts that circulate through the postwar world and among its survivors.

He does not approach this theme with a polemicist's plume or avenger's sword. Rather, he treats it like a research component or analytical tool, rendering it via allusions, enigmas, measured accents. He does not offer up heroes or advance toward a goal. He proceeds by questions rather than affirmations.

In this tightly woven ensemble—for Modiano's writings never succumb to facility or digression, never stray from the line he established as of his first volume, *La Place de l'Etoile* (leaving aside his slight deviation into film with *Lacombe Lucien*)—*Such Fine Boys* occupies a place apart, first by its structure, a suite of brief narratives, like interconnected short stories; then by its implicit reference to the author's personal experience.

Of all Modiano's novels, this is at once the clearest, the purest, and the most complex. Each of his major themes appears in it, linking this book with both his previous volumes and those that followed. This is my favorite of Modiano's works, because

it's the one that best expresses the admirable lightness firing his imagination.

There are moments of exceptional power in this series of backward glances, reminiscent—as is the author's chosen title—of the art of Ivan Turgenev, in books like *Mumu*, *First Love*, or the posthumously published *Prose Poems*. With Modiano, we find the same discreet, almost casual depth, the same humor, the same solitary peculiarity. The settings radiate a muted anxiety, like the apartment of Doctor Genia Karvé, with that disturbingly nostalgic line, “Happy days once more.”

In cruel, precise strokes, Modiano brushes the portraits of lost women—or rather, *loose* women, in every sense of the word—who haunt the memory of the wartime generation: Martine, blinded by love, who falls prey to a con man named Baby; Arlette d'Alwyn, around whom floats a slight whiff of ruin.

This murky world, a world superficial to the point of irresponsibility, so self-absorbed that it tips into evil, is the world that has engendered every tragedy; it lets itself be carried by the tide of history without playing any part in it, like a straw on the waves. Though it may be as vain and insignificant as those old façades in rich neighborhoods, this is the world we enter into here, to discover its tortuous weft and often venomous charm.

It is a world that we cannot view with indifference, for Modiano shows it through the pitiless but generous eyes of adolescence. Valvert, the tony, somewhat vacant boarding school—targeted by the inevitable march of time; fated, as we know from the first line, not to survive the modern age—becomes the pro-

verbial laboratory, much like Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus*, in which the contemporary mythos was invented.

What redeems this despicable world is the presence of childhood, the childhood that remains within each of us—not a preciously preserved golden age, but the kind of childhood that knows how to observe and judge, the dark-eyed childhood that Colette writes about, which reduces adults' passions and ambitions to nil, along with their hunger for gold and their grandiose follies.

The passages of *Such Fine Boys* in which Modiano describes the tender bond between the youthful narrator and Little Jewel, who has been abandoned and abused by her overambitious mother, are among the loveliest pages written in the French language in the second half of the twentieth century.

If you haven't yet read this novel, or haven't read it in a long time, come inside without further delay, for it holds many a key to Modiano's secretive and compelling body of work.

J. M. G. Le Clézio

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