



# IN THE CAFÉ OF LOST YOUTH

by Patrick Modiano

Translated from the French by Chris Clarke

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*In the Café of Lost Youth* is vintage Patrick Modiano, an absorbing evocation of a particular Paris of the 1950s, shadowy and shady, a secret world of writers, criminals, drinkers, and drifters. The novel, inspired in part by the circle (depicted in the photographs of Ed van der Elsken) of the notorious and charismatic French Situationist Guy Debord, centers on the enigmatic, waiflike figure of Louki, who catches everyone's attention even as she eludes possession or comprehension. Through the eyes of four very different narrators, including Louki herself, we contemplate her character and her fate, while Modiano explores the themes of identity, memory, time, and forgetting that are at the heart of his spellbinding and deeply moving art.

## FOR DISCUSSION

**Patrick Modiano** was born in the Boulogne-Billancourt suburb of Paris near the end of the Nazi occupation of France. He studied at the Lycée Henri-IV and the Sorbonne. As a teenager he took geometry lessons with the writer Raymond Queneau, who would play a key role in his development. He has written more than thirty works of fiction, including novels, children's books, and the screenplay for Louis Malle's film *Lacombe, Lucien*. In 2014, Modiano won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Chris Clarke** was born and raised in British Columbia, Canada, and lives and works in and around New York City. His published translations include work by Oulipo members Raymond Queneau and Olivier Salou. He currently teaches French and is translating a novel by Pierre Mac Orlan, which will be published in 2016.

1. Modiano opens *In the Café of Lost Youth* with a quote by Guy Debord: "At the halfway point of the journey making up real life, we were surrounded by a gloomy melancholy, one expressed by so very many derisive and sorrowful words in the café of lost youth." The novel takes its title from this quote—why do you think Modiano chose this phrase to name the book?
2. What effect does the structure of the novel—four sections, with four different narrators—have on the narrative as a whole?
3. In the first section of the book, the narrator describes Louki's appearance in a photograph: "Of all of them, she's the one you notice first." Why do you think Modiano included this early comment about Louki in a photograph?
4. What do we learn about the narrator of the first section when he says, "When I look up 'bohemian' in the dictionary, I find: A person who leads a wandering life, without rules or worries about the next day. Truly a definition of those who frequented the Condé"?
5. Each narrator speaks in first person but speaks mainly about another character (with the exception of Louki, who speaks in first person about herself). How does this change the way we experience the characters?
6. Place is a recurring theme in the novel. What is the significance of "fixed points" (p. 15) and of "neutral zones" (p. 87)? Example: "There was a series of transitional zones in Paris, no-man's lands where we were on the border of everything else, in transit, or even held suspended. Within, we benefitted from a certain kind of immunity. I might have called them free zones, but neutral zones was more precise." (p. 87)

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7. Why do you think the private investigator (narrator of the second section) vows to protect Louki's identity, saying, "Jacqueline could count on me. I would give her the time to put herself out of reach for good" (p. 53)?
8. What do we learn about Louki in the section that she narrates? What did you make of her admission that, "I was never really myself when I wasn't running away" (p. 76)?
9. Describe Louki's friend Jeanette. What role does she play in the novel?
10. What is the significance of Jacqueline Delanque being renamed Louki?
11. Discuss Guy de Vere's quote about Louki: "I never understood why...When we really love someone, we've got to accept their role in the mystery." (p. 109)
12. What was your reaction to the conclusion of the book?

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