



Born in the Boulogne-Billancourt suburb of Paris, **Patrick Modiano** has written nearly thirty novels, including *Young Once* and *In the Café of Lost Youth*, both available from NYRB Classics. Modiano is the recipient of the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature.

**Damion Searls** has translated many classic twentieth-century writers, including Proust, Rilke, Christa Wolf, and Herman Hesse. For NYRB Classics, he edited Henry David Thoreau's *The Journal: 1837–1861*, and translated Nescio's *Amsterdam Stories*, Nietzsche's *Anti-Education*, and Robert Walser's *A Schoolboy's Diary*.

## YOUNG ONCE

by Patrick Modiano

Translated from the French by Damion Searls

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“Modiano is a pure original. He has transformed the novel into a laboratory for producing atmospheres, not situations—where everything must be informed and nothing can be proved. . .

You don't read Modiano for answers. You read each Modiano novel for its place in a giant sequence: a new restatement of a single unsolvable crime.”

—Adam Thirlwell, *The Guardian*

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Young Once* is a crucial book in the career of Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano. It was his breakthrough novel, in which he stripped away the difficulties of his earlier work and found a clear, mysteriously moving voice for his haunting stories of love, nostalgia, and grief. It has also been called “the most gripping Modiano book of all” (*Der Spiegel*).

Odile and Louis are leading a happy, bucolic life with their two children in the French countryside near the Swiss mountains. It is Odile's thirty-fifth birthday, and Louis's thirty-fifth birthday is a few weeks away. Then the story shifts back to their early years: Louis, just freed from his military service and at loose ends, is taken up by a shady character who brings him to Paris to do some work for a friend who manages a garage; Odile, an aspiring singer, is at the mercy of the kindness and unkindness of strangers. In a Paris that is steeped in crime and full of secrets, they find each other and struggle together to create what, looking back, will have been their youth.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the mood of the book in the opening pages. What do we learn about the characters as they celebrate Odile's thirty-fifth birthday?
2. What was your impression of Odile's relationship with Georges Bellune? Were you surprised by the way that their relationship ended?
3. Shortly after Bellune dies, Odile and Louis meet. Describe their first meeting, and discuss whether or not you felt their first meeting influenced the dynamic of their relationship throughout the novel.
4. Louis and Odile often come into contact with students who are their age in the book. On page 115, Modiano writes, “. . . although close to them in age, [the students] seemed like strangers. What could they talk about? Nothing. They did not share the same worries.” Why do you think Modiano chose to distinguish, and separate, his characters from students their age?

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5. Did you find that fate played a role in the book? If not, how would you describe the way in which Odile and Louis come to make decisions, find work, and move throughout the city?
6. Describe Brossier and Bejardy—how did Modiano make these characters seem enigmatic?
7. On page 142, Odile and Louis notice a “big man,” Bauer, walking his dog, and later that night they run into Bauer again, this time his dog rests his head on Odile’s knee and the three have a proper introduction. What role does this man play in the book? And what role does coincidence play?
8. Bauer takes a photograph of Odile and Louis, and Louis thinks that “No doubt Bauer would stick their photo in his album, with the date, and then Odile and he and the dog would have been nothing but one wave coming after all the others” (148). How does the idea of “one wave coming after all the others” function as a theme in the novel as a whole?
9. The writer David Ulin wrote of Patrick Modiano in the *Los Angeles Times*, “[An] edge of mystery, of indirection, motivates [Modiano’s work] like an animating force. . . For Modiano, memory, experience are fluid, fleeting, and even the stories we tell ourselves are subject to change.” How do you think this idea is reflected in *Young Once*? In what ways are the stories that the characters tell themselves “subject to change”?
10. Were you satisfied with the ending of the book?

#### OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

*In the Café of Lost Youth*

Patrick Modiano  
(translated by Chris Clarke)  
ISBN: 9781590179536

*Fatale*

Jean-Patrick Manchette  
(afterword by Jean Echenoz, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith)  
ISBN: 9781590173817

*The Mad and the Bad*

Jean-Patrick Manchette  
(introduction by James Sallis, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith)  
ISBN: 9781590177204

*Alien Hearts*

Guy de Maupassant  
(translated and with a preface by Richard Howard)  
ISBN: 9781590172605

*Afloat*

Guy de Maupassant  
(translated and with an introduction by Douglas Parmée)  
ISBN: 9781590172599