

A book of unsloved mysteries

AUTHOR: PATRICK MODIANO

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

PATRICK Modiano, the French language novelist and winner of the 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature, is an enigmatic character whose novels are moody, laconic and sometimes dreamlike. Avoiding the limelight, he has written more than 30 pieces of work including novels, children's books and screenplays. With his characteristic modesty, he ended his Nobel Prize acceptance speech delivered in Stockholm on December 7, 2014 with the words, "Yet it has to be the vocation of the novelist, when faced with this large blank page of oblivion, to make a few faded words visible again, like lost icebergs adrift on the surface of the ocean." Many of Modiano's novels fall under the genre of "mystery" and he lets the reader piece together the puzzle he lays out in very few words.

Honeymoon, a slender masterpiece translated from French by Barbara Wright, begins in a hotel in Milan, Italy, in the middle of August. The narrator Jean B. is an "explorer" and a documentary filmmaker who travels to exotic places across the globe. There are two mysteries in the novel, one about Jean and the other links to a woman named Ingrid whom he knew many years before. Mystery one involves Jean who while making plans to go to Brazil to shoot his next film but decides to go into hiding from his friends and his wife, Annette. He flies to Milan to hide for a few days and there he learns that a woman had committed suicide a few days before in the same hotel where he was staying. The name of the woman, Ingrid, rings a bell, since as a young traveller he had met a couple, Rigaud and Ingrid, who lived modestly on the Riviera. The narrative

then goes back and forth between Jean's life in Paris where he moves from one cheap hotel to another in an attempt to live an anonymous life and solve the mystery of Ingrid's suicide. In this pursuit, which is almost akin to that of a detective trying to solve a murder, Jean appears to have found his calling. As he was flying back to Paris, he is nostalgic and says, "...During the return journey I let myself drift into a state of euphoria such as I hadn't experienced since my first trip to the Pacific Islands when I was twenty-five."

The plot then moves to Paris during the German occupation of France from 1939 to 1944, a recurrent theme in Modiano's novels. He is recognized in the Nobel Prize announcement for this characteristic of his work. Modiano was honored, "for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation". While he was born in 1918, a few months after Paris was liberated by Allied Forces, Modiano had a fascination for the happenings in Paris during the Occupation. He alludes to his preoccupation with Paris under Occupation in his Nobel Acceptance Speech,

"That Paris of the occupation was a strange place. On the surface, life went on 'as before' - the theatres, cinemas, music halls and restaurants were open for business. There were songs playing on the radio. Theatre and cinema attendances were in fact much higher than before the war, as if these places were shelters where people gathered and huddled next to each other for reassurance. But there



are bizarre details indicating that Paris was not at all the same as before. The lack of cars made it a silent city - a silence that revealed the rustling of trees, the clip-clopping of horses' hooves, the noise of the crowd's footsteps and the hum of voices. In the silence of the streets and of the black-out imposed at around five o'clock in winter, during which the slightest light from windows was forbidden, this city seemed to be absent from itself - the city 'without eyes' as the Nazi occupiers used to say. Adults and children could disappear without trace from one moment to the next, and even among friends, nothing was ever really spelled out and conversations were never frank because of the feeling of

menace in the air."

In the story of Ingrid we get a taste of what life was like under French Occupation. Ingrid and her father, an Austrian-born Jewish doctor, are under constant fear of being caught by the Germans since they did not have proper papers. She befriends Rigaud and then they spend some time in Southern France. The title of the book came from the play used by Rigaud and Ingrid when they were in the French Riviera during World War II. They would regularly tell anyone who asked that they were on their honeymoon, to divert attention from Ingrid who was only a teenager although she looked older.

There are many mysteries that remain unsolved in this novel. Two of

them are the cause behind Ingrid's decision to take her own life and the forces that push Jean into a situation where he does not want to have any connection with his wife Annette, his friends, and other acquaintances. We learn early on that he suspects that his wife is sleeping with his longtime friend Cavanaugh, and that he is having a mid-life crisis. But, is there something else that causes him to walk away from everything he worked for, a career that he enjoyed, and the life in Paris that he loved? The puzzle is not easy to solve since even after he goes missing, he is living in Paris, and visiting some of the same places where he grew up and spent his former life in. It is not clear that he did all of this just to stay away from his cheating wife and to start a new career as an amateur investigator. When his friend Ben Smidane, who finally found him in Paris and was attempting to bring Jean and Annette back together under the same roof, tells Jean that he was leaving the next day for the Indian Ocean for several months, he replies,

"You're lucky to be still at an age to go away... This had escaped me. Just like that. I too would have liked to go away instead of going around in circles on the periphery of this town like someone who can no longer find any emergency exits."

And then, we never learn why Ingrid took her own life. The early life of constantly being on the move during German occupation and the trauma that it caused might have been a factor. But then we find her living a comfortable life, in French Riviera with Rigaud and driving fancy cars. Rigaud might have been a few years older than him, but he was very

respectful of her situation. Ingrid would constantly disappear for a few days to see her father an Austrian-born Jew who was also living a fearful life. And then there is the question of whether her father was taken away by the Germans and then released or killed. All we know is that she finds out from the hotel 'patron' (the manager) that "...very early one morning, about the middle of December, some policemen had gone up to look for her father in his room, and taken him away, he didn't know where."

But Modiano offers the readers a few clues here and there to assist them solve the mysteries. For example, an acquaintance Smidane undertakes a search for him at the request of his wife and after meeting him attempts to persuade him to go back to her father in his room, and taken him away, he didn't know where."

"Jean, I find your attitude disconcerting." He finally says, "It's very simple. I just feel tired of my life and my job," and continues, "One starts out full of enthusiasm and the spirit of adventure, but after a few years it becomes a job and a routine..."

As to why Ingrid took her own life, he reaches a conclusion that is akin to why she decided to move away from his everyday life. The last few lines of the books are very philosophical, and reflects Modiano's existential creed.

"Circumstances and settings are of no importance. One day this sense of emptiness and remorse submerges you. Then, like a tide, it ebbs and disappears. Then, like a tide, it ebbs and disappears. But in the end it returns in force, and she couldn't shake it off. Nor could I."

The reviewer lives in Boston, and is a regular contributor to this section.



The story of an invincible fisherman

AUTHOR: ERNEST HEMINGWAY

REVIEWED BY IQBAL HOSSAIN

THE *Old Man and the Sea* is one of the masterpieces by Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961). Ernest Hemingway is an iconic American novelist who was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. *The Old Man and the Sea* is the tale of a combat between an elderly, veteran fisherman, Santiago, and a huge species of fish called marlin. The novel opens by conveying the message to the reader that Santiago has spent 84 days without getting hold of a fish, considered "salao", the most inauspicious sign of ill-fate. He is so unfortunate that his young companion, Manolin, has been prohibited by his family to go on fishing with Santiago and has been instructed to go on fishing expeditions with other fishermen who have been able to catch fish all the time. Manolin enters Santiago's makeshift hut each night, polishing his fishing gear, cooking meals, chatting about American baseball and his favourite player, Joe DiMaggio. Santiago tells Manolin that the following day, he will sail across the sea and propel his boat into the Gulf Stream, north of Cuba in the Straits of Florida to make further efforts to catch fish with a pluck of confidence that this time he might be able to end his ordeal of "failure".

On the eighty-fifth day of his futile fishing pursuit, Santiago thrusts his skiff into the Gulf Stream, throws his fishing lines into the water and by midday, his bait is swallowed by an enormous fish which he supposes to be a marlin. While trying to tug the marlin out of water, the huge fish rather pulls Santiago towards the sea water. Santiago passes two days and nights struggling with his fishing line and trying desperately to tackle the strength of the monstrous fish. He regards this situation as a state of battle and he determines not to give up till his last breath. He gets injured and feels pain throughout his age-worn body but the toughness of his mind keeps up his spirit.

On the third day, the marlin begins swimming around Santiago's boat. Santiago gets exhausted and arrives virtually at the end of his physical power. He applies the last bits of his corporeal force to beat the fish and stabs it with a harpoon. Santiago ties up the wounded marlin to one side of his skiff and starts moving back to the shore, with the hope of claiming a high price for the enormous fish once he reaches home safely.

However, while sailing back to the shore, sharks are enticed by the smell of the marlin's blood. Santiago kills a great shark with his harpoon, but the weapon slips out of his hands and drops into the sea. He improvises a new harpoon by hooking up his knife with the end of an oar to drive away other sharks. He manages to kill five sharks and pushes the rest away from his boat. But the sharks come back once again and before dusk the sharks eat up almost the whole marlin. Just a skeleton of the marlin remains

comprising some bones, its tail and its head. Finally, as Santiago reaches ashore before the dawn on the next day, he somehow staggers to his shack, carrying his fishing gear and other equipment with him. He falls asleep as soon as he lies on his bed. A good number of fishermen huddled next morning to take a look at the skeleton of the gigantic marlin which is still bound up with Santiago's boat. One of the fishermen measures it to be 18 feet long from its nose to tail. Visitors at a close-by coffeehouse came out and they thought it's a shark. Manolin, anxious about Santiago, rushes to Santiago's shack and finds him sleeping. He gets that day's newspaper



and some coffee for Santiago. As Santiago wakes up, he tells Manolin about the tough time he had at sea the day before and they both agreed to go on fishing together once again. When Santiago goes back to sleep that night, he dreams about his youthful days. In his dreams, Santiago visualizes some lions on the seashores of Africa.

The Old Man and the Sea is about a man's irresistible enthusiasm to overcome the hurdles of life. Being old does not mean being weak—that is the message we pick from this novel and thus this novel upholds the glory of human exuberance.

The reviewer is a student of English literature, Metropolitan University, Sylhet.

Migrant workers are just not numbers...

AUTHOR: SHAHIDUL ALAM

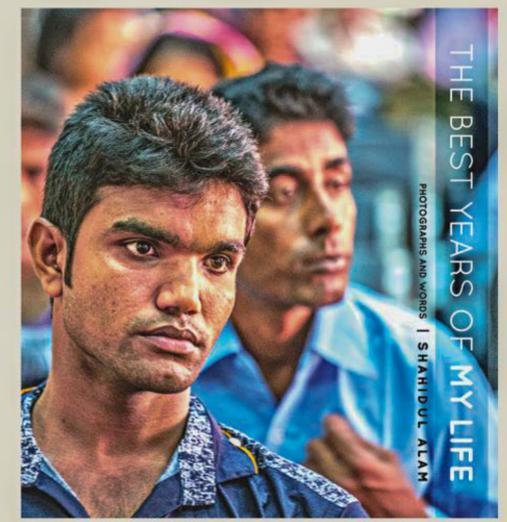
REVIEWED BY BAREESH CHOWDHURY

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ABOUT a year and a half ago, Shahidul Alam told me about how he wanted to do a project on migrant workers going from Bangladesh to Malaysia. At the time, migration had just become a hot topic in the news, both with the escalation of the Syrian refugee crisis and also with the discovery of migrant camps and mass graves of migrant workers near the Malaysian-Thai border. The "Asian Migrant Crisis" as it was then termed eventually vanished from the headlines and banished to the back of our heads to gather dust as something that happened in a far away land. Since then, Shahidul Alam has worked tirelessly and efficiently in putting together his book on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, titled *The Best Years of My Life* - a collection of portraits and stories of workers, employers, government officials, activists and manpower exporters that he encountered during his research, covering nearly every step of the labour supply ladder. He delves into successes and the hardships faced by poor Bangladeshi migrants as they chase opportunity and a better future in tepid and cruel conditions in Malaysia, as well as showing the benefits to a country like Malaysia that has been gained from the influx of Bangladeshi labour. He analyses various structural and institutional problems and hurdles that exist for these migrants and how social mobility acts as such a determined driving force for these people to sacrifice, to display unimaginable selflessness, for the sake of their families that they were forced to leave behind.

As the author is a renowned photographer, it was important to see the photos in Alam's book, as much as reading the stories. What's most striking though is possibly the lack of striking in the pictures. These are not heavily stylized, dramatic black and white or decked out with light flares, but the photos themselves carry an air of, for lack of a better word, matter-of-fact-ness. And that's what hits hardest. The implicit acceptance that hundreds and thousands (millions worldwide) of poor Bangladeshis are routinely swindled by *dalals* and sent to Malaysia where they live in decrepit conditions, work like modern day slaves, are abused by their employers and treated without the smallest modicum of respect, and we, especially we, of the privileged classes, accept that as a fact of life for these people. Alam's pictures show regular people, and what appear to be regular lives, and yet, that is what is so troublesome about the apathy toward this class of people. The words on the pages routinely mention multiple horrible things happening to migrant workers on their journeys chasing economic progress - passports taken, arrests, having to pay bribes, being in debt, beaten and abandoned - but the pictures of Abul Hossain, Masud Rana and Nazrul Islam do not exhibit this. This, I feel, is an important show of respect in the creative direction of Alam. To simply show them as people, is already a challenging affront to the comfort of dismissing migrants as numbers and far-away occurrences.

Two photographs in particular stand out to showcase the scale of the issue. The first is a panoramic shot of the line at the Bangladesh High Commission of migrant workers waiting for new passports. In the interview with the High Commissioner, he says the High Commission receives anywhere between 2000 and 3000 (sometimes



exceeding that number), whereas the High Commission is only equipped to process about 300 people a day. It is also revealed that the middlemen are really the ones the workers have contact with, rather than the embassy. This is an important example of the administration's failure to take care of its citizens working abroad, something that also translates to our incapability create safer, legal avenues of sending labour abroad. This vacuum is then filled by the *dalals*, and already vulnerable human beings are further forced to pay to seek employment (rather than the other way around).

The second photograph is a haunting wide angle shot of the grave markers near the Malaysia-Thailand border. Taken in bright daylight, with blue skies and fluffy clouds in the background, it makes it all the more painful to look at. In straight lines, packed together in uniform markers, the grave sites are disturbing and quite hard to look away from. It is a stark reminder of the risks that these people take, literally putting their lives on the line, to pursue a shot at a better life - sometimes not even for themselves.

The idea for Alam's book, *The Best Years of my Life*, is simple, and incredibly necessary - he endeavours to attach a human face to what is a human problem, yet so often lost in the effect of quantification and statistics. This book is so very timely, purely because it screams out loud that these are real people, not just data, not just numbers. The risks they take, the challenges they face, the hopes they harbour and the sacrifices they make are distant narratives to us who are privileged enough not to have had to lead the lives migrant workers lead. Alam tries to remind us that these narratives are not so distant, and through the use of his portraits, pushes a greater understanding and more importantly, a greater empathy to this extraordinary human struggle.

The reviewer is an occasional contributor to this page.