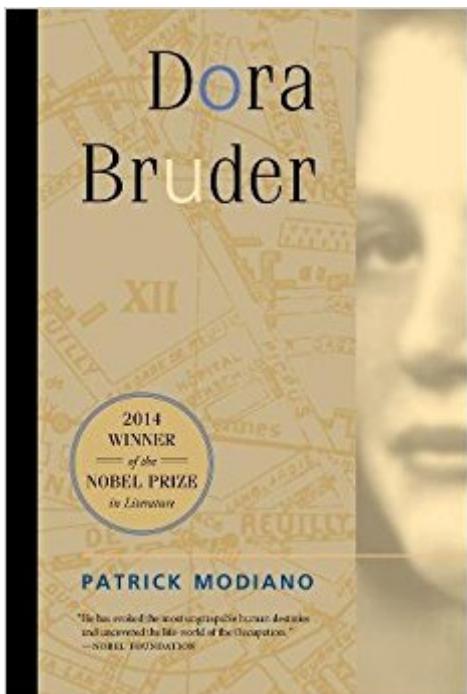


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# Dora Bruder



## Synopsis

In 1988 Patrick Modiano stumbles across an ad in the personal columns of the New Year's Eve 1941 edition of *Paris Soir*: "Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1 m 55, oval-shaped face, gray-brown eyes, gray sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes." Placed by the parents of Dora, who had run away from her Catholic boarding school, the ad sets Modiano off on a quest to find out everything he can about her and why, at the height of German reprisals, she ran away from the people hiding her. There is only one other official mention of her name: on a list of Jews deported from Paris to Auschwitz in September 1942. What little Modiano discovers about Dora in official records and through remaining family members becomes a meditation on the immense losses of the period: lost people, lost stories, and lost history. Modiano delivers a moving account of the ten-year investigation that took him back to the sights and sounds of Paris under the Nazi Occupation and the paranoia of the Vichy regime. In his efforts to exhume her from the past, Modiano realizes that he must come to terms with the specters of his own troubled adolescence. The result, a montage of creative and historical material, is Modiano's personal rumination on loss, both memoir and memorial.

## Book Information

Paperback: 128 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1st edition (November 7, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520218787

ISBN-13: 978-0520218789

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 60 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #88,133 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #103 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > European > French #150 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Jewish #189 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Religious & Inspirational > Jewish

## Customer Reviews

In 1988, French novelist Patrick Modiano happened upon a notice in a 1941 Paris newspaper placed by the parents of a 15-year-old Jewish girl, Dora Bruder, who had disappeared from the Catholic boarding school where she was being hidden. The notice stuck in Modiano's memory, and

it launched him on a quest for information about the girl's life that resulted in Dora Bruder. Modiano's lengthy investigation turned up only tiny scraps of information about Dora--but every scrap made the mystery of her disappearance more haunting. Most strikingly, Modiano found her name on a list of Jews deported from Paris to Auschwitz in 1942. "It takes time for what has been erased to resurface," Modiano explains. "It took me four years to discover her exact date of birth: 25 February 1926. And a further two years to find out her place of birth: Paris, 12th arrondissement. But I am a patient man. I can wait for hours in the rain." Eventually Modiano's search forces him to come to terms with his own difficult adolescence. Yet this book defies categorization in both history and memoir. It is something more complex, and harder--a poetic acknowledgment and a philosophical refutation of common and terrifying human fates: being isolated, forgotten, and lost. --Michael Joseph Gross --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A hauntingly fetching book, centered on one teenage girl's avoidable death. Modiano's novel *Out of the Dark* (1998) is also a short, nostalgic work fixated on a woman. This work is even darker, in that it weaves research, logical speculation, and emotive imagination around a Jewish girl who runs away from the convent school that is hiding her and soon disappears in Auschwitz via Drancy. Modiano's obsessive search began about ten years ago when he saw an old 1941 newspaper notice about a missing 15-year-old girl named Dora Bruder. Using the powerful description that makes him a noted novelist in his native France ("the black interminable wall, the penumbra beneath the metro arches"), Modiano goes to the listed address and to many uncooperative offices to follow the paper trail, the bureaucratic banality of evil, that leads to Bruder's bolting from her tedious but safe hiding place during the Nazi occupation. The tragedy took place in parts of Paris familiar to the author, though much has changed in 50 years, "and it takes time for what has been erased to resurface. What resurfaces through months of patient investigation are details about Dora's parents and his own Jewish father, who abandoned the family, with speculation placing Dora and his father in the same predicament. Beyond the guesswork, like describing Mr. Bruder's likely battles during five years with the French Foreign Legion, Modiano comes up with a few photos of Dora and her family and interviews a few survivors that knew the family. The author combines empathy and facts to see the suicidal ecstasy of Dora running away and hiding out on the wintry Parisian streets until her documented arrest and transport to oblivion. Not a Holocaust memoir or historical fiction but a skillful reconstruction of a life that strides the two genres. (3 b&w photos, 2 maps) -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I really wanted to quote the final paragraph of Modiano's novel, which is infinitely more moving in its simplicity than anything that comes before. But I will desist, and leave it for the reader to discover -- not because it gives away secrets, but because it does the opposite, preserving a secret for all time. It is the one gift he can offer to the tragic subject of his writing, a teenage Jewish girl living in Paris at the time of the German Occupation. So failing that, let me come upon it obliquely, as Modiano himself does. Near the beginning of his book, the author recalls visiting the hospital of the SalpÃ©triÃ©re in search of his ailing father, whom he had not seen for many years: "I remember having wandered for hours through the immensity of this vast hospital, looking for him. I went into ancient buildings, passed through wards lined with beds, and questioned nurses who gave me contradictory information. I ended almost doubting my father's very existence as I walked back and forth in front of that majestic church and those unreal buildings, unchanged since the 18th century. They made me think of *Manon Lescaut* and the time when they served as a prison for prostitutes, under the sinister name of General Hospital, before they were deported to Louisiana. I must have pounded those paved courtyards until dusk. I never saw my father again." [translation mine] This paragraph has nothing to do with Modiano's main subject, which is to trace the last months of this girl before her eventual capture. And yet it has everything to do with his motivation and method. It could be said that his entire oeuvre has to do with the search for his father and his failure to find him -- or at least to understand how he could have survived the Occupation as a Jew, unless as a black-marketeer and collaborator with the Germans. His method of inserting himself into the settings of his story, his precise accumulation of detail, his command of the parallels with history and literature, make him into an archaeologist of shame, very much in the manner of WG Sebald, though with documents in place of photographs. The one exception is the winter scene on the cover which sums up the desolate atmosphere of the book in a single shot.\* Like his *Prix Goncourt* novel, *À RUE DES BOUTIQUES OBSCURES*, but unlike his recently translated trilogy *À SUSPENDED SENTENCES*, I read this in French, and feel it was absolutely essential to do so. Not for Modiano's style, which is direct rather than literary in tone, but the number of original documents he uncovers, whose untranslatable bureaucratic language treats the management of horror as a day's normal business. Modiano's trigger is a mention in a 1941 newspaper that a 15-year-old schoolgirl named Dora Bruder has disappeared. The author knows the area in which her family lived, and revisits the once-familiar streets to soak in the atmosphere. I read with Google Maps zoomed in to various areas of Paris, walking vicariously through the unfamiliar quarters, imagining how they must have felt in 1941. What intrigues him is that Dora's disappearance does not coincide with the round-ups of French Jews, which did not begin until later the following year. So

why did she vanish? Indefatigably, he looks through records, searching for information. And remarkably, he finds a lot. Unlike the other four Modiano books I have read, which work obliquely by mystery and suggestion, this one is almost full-frontal. There is no question what ultimately happened to Dora Bruder, and the details make painful reading. Fact after fact after fact, not revealed in order, but squeezing Dora's life between them as in a slowly closing trap. Soon, there are no secrets left. Except one -- and that is the stroke of poetry that turns this painstaking history into a work of art. [\*I will give more information on this and a couple of other matters in the comments.]

Within the large oeuvre of Patrick Modiano, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2014, "Dora Bruder" stands out in having a historical figure as its protagonist. Dora, after whom a passageway in the 18th arrondissement of Paris was recently named, was born in the capital, the sole child of Jewish emigres. When 15 years old in late 1941, her family reported her missing from her Catholic boarding school, and it is possible that she was but a few years older when her life ended during the war years of Nazi occupation. Dora was rounded up in the deportation of French Jews and sent to Auschwitz. But then the canvas on which the outlines of Dora's life was painted goes blank. "Dora Bruder" is arguably Modiano's most haunting, unforgettable, and beautifully written book. And this is notable because few people who had known Dora still lived in 1988 when the author--his interest piqued by a December 1941 missing persons notice in "Paris-Soir"--began his research. Intimate details of the young Jewish girl's days and pleasures, snippets of conversation, and even records penned by her hand were all totally lacking. Yet Modiano makes me weep for the loss of Dora. Modiano achieved this thanks to his skill for reading the neighborhoods and buildings of the Paris that Dora knew and his tenacity in unearthing documentary information preserved over decades by the obsessively bureaucratic security services of France. That the reader is able to join Modiano in walking in Dora's shoes results from his having traced the exact streets and metro lines she likely used. American readers reviewing Modiano's books are sometimes puzzled and dismayed by the amount of time devoted to naming the capital city's streets and providing precise locations for even the most trivial of events. In this case, however, the author's attention to such details reveals how much one can glean by revisiting the physical environments in which a person lived. A further sense of reality regarding Dora's life is imparted by text that describes the atmosphere, and even the weather, of Paris as Dora would have known it. Take, for example, a paragraph that runs from page 73 to 74. "One way not to lose all touch with Dora Bruder over this period would be to report on the changes in the weather. The first snow fell on 4 November 1941.

Winter got off to a cold start on 22 December. On 29 December, the temperature dropped still further, and windowpanes were covered with a thin coating of ice. From 13 January onwards, the cold became Siberian." It was at this time that Dora had run away from school. Interleaved with writing about Dora Bruder, Modiano provides information about his relationship with a distant father, a Jew who escaped Nazi deportation and survived the occupation as a black marketer. Further material is offered documenting Modiano's own experiences as a young man and, as the author is wont to do, the chronological sequencing of this information follows a scrambled sequence. For those new to Modiano's work, this pattern is sometimes confusing, but for those of us now well along reading the author, it offers a charm all its own.

Modiano describes his dogged pursuit of what happened to a young Jew caught in the nightmare machinery of occupied France and the German killing machine that was the Holocaust. He embarks on his quest upon reading a 1941 notice in a wartime newspaper (*Paris Soir*) seeking information about a missing child. He finds out unexpected things. He sometimes finds only blind alleys when information leads nowhere. He makes educated surmises to interpolate. He traces Dora Bruder to her death in Auschwitz. It is a short but moving book. Modiano does for Dora Bruder something like what Daniel Mendelsohn did for his relatives the *JÃ¶rgers* in "The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million" -- though without the detailed specificity of what Mendelsohn finds out. Still, the impulse is more or less the same: to see that these people's fates are known and their deaths do not remain obscure. Modiano's motivation is a moving and humane impulse. It recalls the inscription at the *MÃ©morial des Martyrs de la DÃ©portation*, the monument that De Gaulle dedicated in 1962 on the Île de la Cité in Paris: "Ils allèrent l'autre bout de la terre et ils ne sont pas revenus." ("They went to the other end of the earth and they have not returned.") Like the *JÃ¶rgers*, Dora Bruder did not return, but, like Mendelsohn, Modiano followed her and found out where she went. So her life, though it ended bitterly, has not been lost without a trace. Modiano's work is a triumph over the German occupiers of France and their French collaborators.

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