

OUT OF THE DARK

By Patrick Modiano.

Translated by Jordan Stump.

University of Nebraska Press,
cloth, \$40; paper, \$12.

The unnamed narrator of the French novelist Patrick Modiano's latest book is so successful at escaping his past that he barely remembers he has one. Only Jacqueline, a fellow drifter whom he met on the Left Bank in Paris when they were both very young, remains vivid in his memory. As the action flashes back, the narrator, a university dropout, is selling used art books for a living.

Jacqueline, who intently plays pinball at the Cafe Dante, is living in a seedy hotel with a small-time gambler named Gérard. Bent on going to Majorca, where she and Gérard know an American who writes detective novels, Jacqueline hatches a plan to steal money from a gambling friend of Gérard's. Soon enough, a suitcase full of banknotes is in her possession, and she and the narrator are in full flight, passing through London on their way south. But they fall in with a shady crowd, and one night Jacqueline simply disappears. Fifteen years later, her life and the narrator's intersect once again when he sees her on the street in Paris and follows her home. Although Jacqueline pretends not to recognize him, they spend a few hours together; the next day, he discovers that she and her husband have suddenly gone to Majorca. Another 15 years pass, and Jacqueline reappears — but this time the narrator avoids an encounter. In working through these comings and goings, Modiano's existential noir novel employs a moody, atmospheric prose (smoothly translated by Jordan Stump) to create a strange love story that somehow manages to be both suspenseful and contemplative.

JENNY MCPHEE