"A Portrait of a Soul in Ruins": Paul Auster's The Book of Illusions


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Abstract or description

Auster's consistent themes of place, identity, storytelling, imagination and illusion find their fullest expression in The Book of Illusions (2002). This essay examines Auster's geographical concerns, and shows how his characters are constantly challenged by new environments. In his earliest book-length prose work, The Invention of Solitude (1982), Auster as a writer finds the world inside him is a place to write from, while, in contrast, the central characters in Illusions find a number of selves out in the world, each influenced by the material conditions of place. By following Auster and his characters from Amsterdam to New Mexico I examine how constructions of self shift with the move from one place to another.

I then trace the lives of Auster's protagonists in Illusions, focusing on key narrative moments for each of the two main characters. Narrator David Zimmer's life encompasses literature, loss, and a conversion to the power of the image. Hector Mann's many lives include slapstick, itinerant work, and film direction. But it is while employing the artifices of acting that he achieves his most secure and persistent self. Here I trace the way in which the narratives of the lives of these two men are carefully structured, and how their intersection allows both their stories to be told.

The final section of the essay explores the relationships between storytelling and illusion. In Illusions, the central characters use film, dream, illusion and storytelling to suspend the reality of loss and to create the potential for salvation. I show that ultimately The Book of Illusions is a meditation on the nature of love and the family. It is also a statement of the power of the word over the image.

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“Portrait of a Soul in Ruins”: Paul Auster’s The Book of Illusions

Mark Brown. Chapter Eleven.

239 In the Kingdom of Shadows: Paul Auster, The Book of Illusions and Silent Film

Alan Bilton. ALAN BILTON also looks at The Book of Illusions, as an obvious starting point for his investigation of Auster’s interest in the phantasmal nature of silent film. Having identified Raymond Griffith—a spectral figure in his own right since almost none of his films have survived—as the real-life source of inspiration for the novel’s protagonist Hector Mann, Bilton proceeds to outline Auster’s continuous thematization of the fragile balance and the paradoxical interplay between presence and absence both in life and art.