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The Prisoner (The Captive)

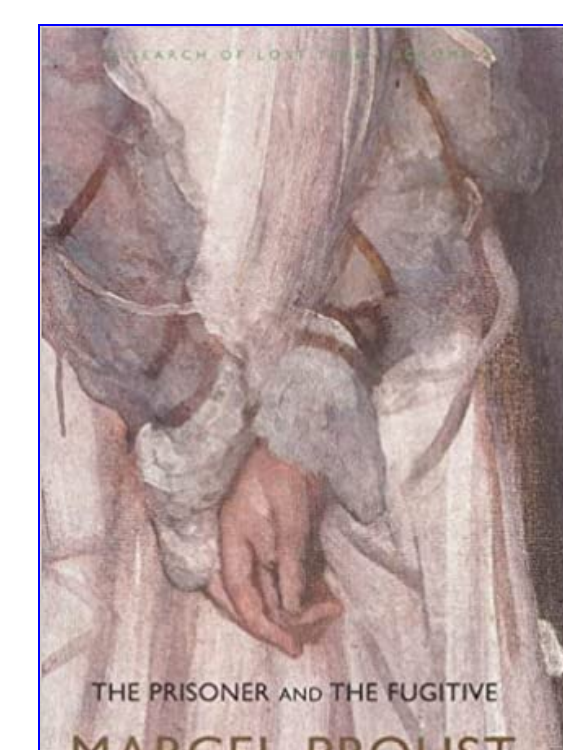
The two-minute 'Prisoner'

[Albertine](#) has come to Paris and moved in with Marcel, whose parents are conveniently absent. Charlus and Morel (who come to the Hôtel de Guermantes to see Jupien's niece, whom Morel is more or less engaged to marry) are part of his daily routine, as is the Duchesse de Guermantes, who dispenses advice on what clothes Marcel should buy for "your friend." Nobody — not Françoise, the super-judgmental servant; not Madame Bontemps, Albertine's aunt and guardian — seems to think it's the least bit odd that the girl should be living there with him.

Finding that Albertine wants to visit the Verdurins, Marcel jockeys her into staying home, and himself pays a visit to the salon, which Charlus and Morel are also to attend. The awful *Patronne* is inexorably rising in society through her ability to attract artists like Anatole France, Igor Stravinsky, and Richard Strauss. The baron is abetting her ambition, and has invited (p. 223 in the Allen Lane hardcover) **two dukes, an eminent general, a famous writer, great doctor and distinguished lawyer** (and a bunch of others, including the Queen of Naples) to this particular evening. Alas, they treat Charlus as their host, ignoring Madame Verdurin. Her revenge is swift and terrible: she turns Morel against the baron, who is crushed to the point of physical collapse.

Marcel goes home, suffering torments of jealousy because he has learned that Albertine has been lying to him about her friendships with some notorious lesbians. He writhes about this for 80 pages, until one morning he wakes up — serve him bloody well right! — and finds her gone.

Of love & jealousy, of boys & girls



Time and again, Proust tells us of tragi-comic love affairs, in which the male (Swann, Little Marcel, St. Loup, and now Young Marcel) spends his time, emotion, and wealth upon a female (Odette, Gilberte, Rachel, and now Albertine) who couldn't care less for him, and for the most part is in it only for the money. (Perhaps significantly, because she's based on an actual girl with whom Proust had boyishly been in love, Gilberte is somewhat an exception to this rule. She's a good kid; she just doesn't happen to fancy Little Marcel.) The torments suffered by these men do certainly invoke our young loves: most of us have experienced such moments of despair. Yet Proust never seems to have gone beyond them to a mutually satisfactory affair — let alone marriage! His characters are stuck forever at the stage of infatuation, in which the more deeply we love, the more cruel and the less affectionate the beloved becomes. (I should probably add that much the same is true of Charlus's infatuation with the violinist Morel.)

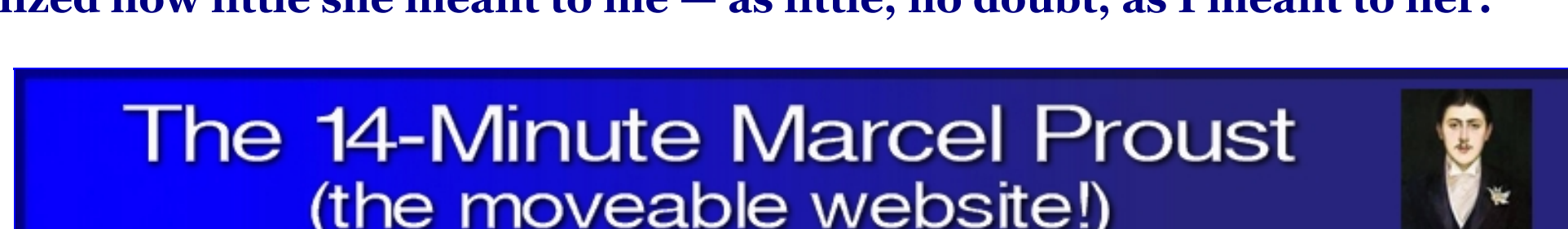
I suspect that this is because Proust's loves were all or mostly unconsummated. In *The Prisoner*, this aspect of the Marcel-Albertine affair is stated explicitly on p.84 of Carol Clark's translation for the Penguin edition: **Albertine always alarmed me when she said that I was quite right to protect her reputation by saying that I was not her lover, since, as she said, "you aren't, are you, not really." Perhaps I was not, in the complete sense, but was I to think that she did with other men all the things we did together, only to say she had not been their mistress?** A good cuddle and a bit of lubrication — that seems to have been Proust's idea of sexual love.

Even better if the beloved isn't awake! Page 60-62: **I listened to ... the sound of her sleep. So long as it continued I could dream of her and look at her at the same time, and when her sleep became deeper, touch her and kiss her.... The sound of Albertine's breathing, growing louder, could almost have been mistaken for the breathlessness of pleasure, and as my own pleasure neared completion, I could kiss her without breaking into her sleep. It seemed to me at these moments that I possessed her more completely, like an unconscious and unresisting part of dumb nature.**

So Proust's novel-within-a-novel is not so much the story of a homosexual man as of an impotent one. This comes out very clearly in the *casser le pot* episode, when Albertine (p.311) lets slip that she'd like to go out and "get broken" (*me faire casser*) what? "my jar" (*le pot*), as Marcel finally completes the sentence. *Casser le pot* was French slang for anal sex, and makes much more sense if Albertine were actually [Albert](#). If Marcel's sweetie were a man, and Marcel were impotent, then the beloved might well regret hanging around the apartment night after night, when he could go out and get himself properly buggered. (Scott Moncrieff, in his 1929 translation, mystified generations of Anglophone readers by avoiding the French altogether, and not translating it beyond "get someone to break." See location 42,323 in the modestly priced Kindle edition of [In Search of Lost Time](#) from Centaur Editions. But in the Modern Library updating by Kilmartin and Enright, page 457, *me faire casser ... le pot* does appear, with an explanatory endnote.)

As a result of this disconnection, Proust's accounts of affairs between men and women often seem unreal to me, or perhaps I should say *surreal*, except when they evoke my own Charlie Brown days. ("I saw the red-haired girl today.... I couldn't think what to say to her. So I hit her!")

Even creepier is Marcel's formula of love and rejection. When Albertine behaves, he doesn't particularly like her; when she strays, his infatuation flames up again. As Carol Clark translates, on page 21: **Every day I found her less pretty. Only the desire which she excited in others, when I learned of it and began to suffer again, in my desire to keep her from them, could put her back on her pedestal. Suffering alone gave life to my tedious attachment to her. When she disappeared, taking with her the need to alleviate my pain, which demanded all my attention like some dreadful hobby, I realized how little she meant to me — as little, no doubt, as I meant to her.**



Marcel and the Narrator

I've always thought of the central character in *Lost Time* as Marcel. On page 64 of Carol Clark's translation of *The Prisoner*, there's a hint that this is indeed the case. Writing of Albertine's awakening in the narrator's bed, she has Proust writing: **Now she began to speak; her first words were "darling" or "my darling," followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would produce "darling Marcel" or "my darling Marcel."** Apparently Proust liked the effect, because on page 140 he has Albertine beginning a note to the narrator with **"My dear darling Marcel"** and ending it **"Oh Marcel, Marcel! Your very own Albertine."**

Gotcha!

The Prisoner was the first book of the novel to be published after Proust's death, and he was working on it (and the others) until he died. So it is naturally rougher than the earlier books, with many small solecisms and contradictions that he would have corrected had he lived a year or two longer. Thus, in one of his spasms of lust, he spots a **blonde dairy-girl** whom he invites up to his room under the pretext that he needs her to carry a letter for him. As soon as he sees her up close, of course, he loses interest in the project and sends her packing with a five-franc tip. That's on page 132; by page 136, the tip has been reduced to a mere two francs.

I briefly thought I'd found a typographical error when I saw the word **appal** on p.361, only to learn that this is the preferred British spelling of *appall*.

M. Proust, meet Mr Disney....



By Proustian standards, *The Prisoner* is a short book, so it is now customary to publish it together with [The Fugitive](#) in a single volume. The British hardcover is shown above; the Penguin Classics paperback to the left. Alas, Penguin didn't do its homework on US copyright law, which in many cases (thanks to the late Sonny Bono) madly protects copyright for 95 years after the book was first published. The first four books of the *Search* were published during Proust's lifetime, so they were already in the public domain before the rock star and California congressman could mess with them; the final three, however, fell under the Sono Bono Law (aka the Mickey Mouse Provision, since its purpose was to protect the Disney company's interest in the odious mouse). As a practical matter, Penguin couldn't hope to clear the copyright claims of Proust's heirs, including but perhaps not limited to the descendants of his brother Robert.

The easier solution was to wait until 2018, when the problem would solve itself, at last with respect to *La Prissonniér*, published in 1923. When I was enjoying the Viking hardcovers a dozen years ago, the company assured me that this was its plan, but I neglected to consider that its companion volume (published as *Albertine Disparue* in 1925) would not be in the public domain for another two years. Accordingly, the US arm of the Penguin group published *The Prisoner* as a **stand-alone paperback**. It's expensive, though, and it doesn't solve the problem of completing the volume with *The Fugitive*. The better solution is to buy the British paperback, imported to the US under the [Penguin Classics imprint](#). (I have both versions on order, so can soon report on their differences.) British readers will find the same edition on [Amazon.co.uk](#).

There are a few (and pricey) hardcovers of the Allen Lane edition offered at [Amazon's UK Store](#) and also on [its US store](#). As always with Amazon, check the description, and in case of doubt inquire to make sure it's the right edition on offer, **ISBN 0713996080**. You need have fewer doubts on the [ABE booksellers' website](#) which includes the ISBN on every listing.

The Modern Library edition

The Modern Library *Search* is not a new translation but a corrective of Scott Moncrieff's work, plus Andreas Mayor's 1982 translation of the final volume, so the entire work was in train before Sonny Bono could break the mold. *The Captive & The Fugitive* are likewise published as a single volume, with the first book retaining Scott Moncrieff's title. Personally, I think the Penguin Proust is the way to go, but if you are a traditionalist you can get [the handsome paperback](#) of the Enright - Kilmartin - Scott Moncrieff volume at Amazon.com. It is also included in a [boxed set for less than \\$75](#).

Or wait for Mr Carter

Similarly, because it relies primarily on an existing translation, rather than Proust's original, the Yale University Press editions come to us free of Sonny Bono's entrapment. *Sodom and Gomorrah* will presumably be released fairly soon, but unfortunately we have no way of knowing when the Albertine books will be published.

Warning: don't rely on Amazon links or reader reviews, because the store doesn't distinguish between the Modern Library, Penguin, Yale, and 1920 public domain translations!

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