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.
24 quotes from The Book of Illusions: 'We all want to believe in impossible things, I suppose, to persuade ourselves that miracles can happen.' “What matters is not how well you can avoid trouble, but how you cope with trouble when it comes.” — Paul Auster, The Book of Illusions. 22 likes. Like. “The only person I knew how to be with now was myself - but I wasn’t really anyone, and I wasn’t really alive. I was just someone who pretended to be alive, a dead mean who spent his days translating a dead man’s book.” — Paul Auster, The Book of Illusions. 18 likes. Like. “He knew that his wings could ignite at any moment, but the closer he came to touching the fire, the more he sensed that he was fulfilling his destiny. “Mr. Auster's elegant, finely calibrated Book of Illusions is a haunting feat of intellectual gamesmanship.” — The New York Times. “This noirish, layered tale will keep you guessing to the very end.” I willingly went along with Zimmer's journey and had magical experiences. ‘The Book of Illusions' has everything a reader could possibly want. Auster's prose dances those fluid steps of only a professional. He constantly surprises the reader. Just when one thinks he/she knows where Auster is going, he takes one somewhere else.