

# The New Criterion

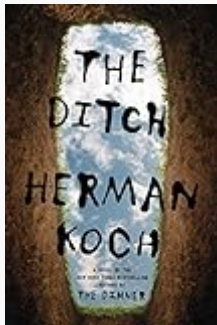
Fiction Chronicle November 2019

## First persons, singular

by Andrew Stuttaford

*On The Ditch* by Herman Koch, translated by Sam Garrett; *Family Record* by Patrick Modiano, translated by Mark Polizzotti; *Metropolitan Stories: A Novel* by Christine Coulson; and *Girl: A Novel* by Edna O'Brien.

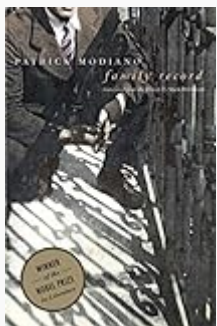
### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Herman Koch*

*The Ditch: A Novel*

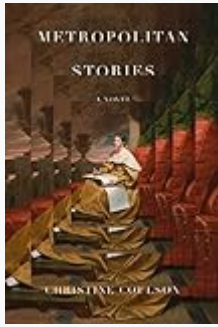
Hogarth, 320 pages, \$26.00



*Patrick Modiano*

*Family Record (The Margellos World Republic of Letters)*

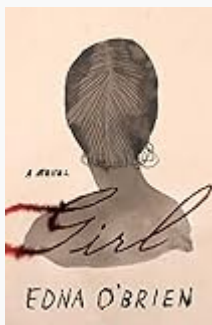
Yale University Press, 160 pages, \$16.00



*Christine Coulson*

*Metropolitan Stories: A Novel*

Other Press, 256 pages, \$23.00



*Edna O'Brien*

*Girl: A Novel*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 240 pages, \$26.00

It is both satisfying and subversive that Herman Koch, the author of *The Ditch*, was, if not exactly expelled, at least “encouraged to leave” his Montessori school in Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> While any failed attempt at “child-centered” education will warm a chilly reactionary heart, young Koch’s inability to summon up enough self-discipline to survive indiscipline must be regarded as a disappointing rejection of the conscientiousness the Dutch have traditionally, if not always correctly, been thought to possess.

“At the Montessori, they’re completely nuts,” recalls a (disreputable) former teacher in *Dear Mr. M* (first published in Dutch as *Geachte heer M*, 2014), “like some holy sect. The smile of beatific certainty. Of *faith* in that certainty. I’ll tell you, I was so glad to get out of there.”

Koch’s first novel appeared in 1989, but he only achieved prominence outside the Netherlands with his sixth, *The Dinner* (*Het Diner*, 2009), which has been translated into more than twenty languages. Part thriller, part satire, *The Dinner* is at its core a pitch-black comedy of manners centered on a clash between family loyalty, the rule of law, and conventional morality. Koch uses Paul Lohman, one of the unreliable narrators who have become hallmarks of his books, to poke fun at the Dutch elite, whether in describing the absurd pretensions of the restaurant where most of the drama unfolds or discussing second homes in the Dordogne, where his brother likes to believe he fits in:

We were introduced to the “mason” who had built the open kitchen for them, to the “Madame” who ran the bakery, and to the owner of a “completely ordinary little restaurant . . . where all the locals go.”

Mocking the bourgeoisie, even the liberal Dutch variety, from angles such as these, is nothing new, but as *The Dinner* darkens (and it does), so does much of Lohman’s musing. He veers off in directions where no *bien pensant* Dutchman (or, often, any Dutchman) should want to go, but with sufficient reminders of his earlier verve that one or two just might be tempted to do so. This may be why Koch reveals that Lohman has major psychiatric difficulties. Thinking of this type cannot be, *must not be*, entirely sane. Similarly, it is not enough for Lohman to cover up one killing; he has to incite another. Admittedly, it is of an ingrate who has become a nuisance, but even so.

In *Summer House with Swimming Pool* (*Zomerhuis met Zwembad*, 2011), Koch takes another pop at the Dutch elite: the summer house is somewhere Mediterranean, the unreliable narrator is a successful doctor, and one of the key characters is a well-known actor. Once again, much of the plot is focused on how far a parent will go to defend (or, in this case, avenge) a child. Once again, the story is enlivened by the narrator’s unacceptable opinions. A cynical and grimly amusing misanthrope, Dr. Schlosser is not the only physician to have found some of his patients repulsive. Then again, few, I assume, use cancer as a somewhat indolent accomplice in the murder of one of them.

*The Ditch* (*De Greppel*, 2016), Koch’s most recent novel, came out in English earlier this year. Once again, it features an upscale unreliable narrator, Robert Walter, the mayor of Amsterdam. He’s further down the greasy pole than the about-to-be prime minister who was one of *The Dinner*’s shifty diners, but is no mean *macher* himself. Here he is bonding with President Hollande over a pretty waitress, there he is analyzing the Dutch monarchy’s deteriorating bloodline with Bill Clinton.

On form, Walter is, like his predecessors in *The Dinner* and *Summer House*, abrasive, bleakly funny, and no subscriber to contemporary pieties. He detects a whiff of fascism in environmentalism, jeers at organic meat, and rages at those who would ruin the approaches to his city with wind turbines—“feeble sails on a stick.”

As in *Summer House*, there is a funeral, but this time the narrator is only indirectly responsible for the departed’s exit (a suicide) and is less than impressed by it: “suicides . . . rarely stand out by virtue of their exceptional backbone.” They are neither “the smartest of the bunch” nor the dimmest: “a pinhead with an IQ of zero is too stupid to even come up with the idea. Or too lazy.” As for that indirect responsibility, well, “people with [the dead man’s] personality structure would all end up at the cash register of the hardware store sooner or later, to pay for their length of rope.”

In the Netherlands, some suicides are more equal than others. When the mayor’s ninetysomething father says that he and his son’s mother are going “to cash in their chips” after the summer, Walter protests “a little—for form’s sake, I admit . . . but from the very start I couldn’t deny that it sounded like an attractive idea to me. A life without parents. Orphaned at sixty.”

Intent on giving the bourgeoisie a battering (ridicule alone is not enough), Koch has peopled these novels with a tough, amoral crowd, sophisticates who indulge their sociopathy further than they should, outwardly respectable people who leave a respectable number of dead bodies in their wake. Mercifully, the preachiness is mostly overwhelmed by the nastiness and is, at most, a mild annoyance for a reader in search of nihilist fun.

Perhaps sensing that the principal storyline in *The Ditch* (Walter's obsessive suspicion that his wife is having an affair with an insultingly unprepossessing alderman) isn't up to the standard set by the *The Dinner*, *Summer House*, or, for that matter, the twists and turns of *Dear Mr. M* (a somewhat different confection despite its mounting air of menace and reference to the Dordogne), Koch flings one or two other subplots into the mix. They aren't terrible, but the result is a narrative that is more muddle than cocktail, a misstep largely offset by the strength of Koch's style.

And not just his style: beneath the exquisitely sour, fractured surface of all four of these novels something even more intriguing is fomenting—ethnic and social tensions caught for now only in glimpses through the cracks. They are warnings that the society in which Koch's protagonists have flourished is crumbling, warnings they generally do their best to ignore or even try to laugh off.

Walter is told that he has been added to a hit list of a type that Koch, writing in the land where Theo van Gogh was butchered by an Islamic terrorist, doesn't have to explain:

The death list formed a clear parting of the waters between those who mattered . . . and those who were apparently so insignificant that they could be left alive. Seeing my own name on the list . . . had precisely that effect on me. *I matter*, I thought to myself. *I've become a target*.

Indeed.

**I**t says something that *Family Record* (*Livret de Famille*), a 1977 book by Patrick Modiano, another purveyor of unreliable narrators, has only now been translated into English.<sup>2</sup> Modiano was famous in his native France well before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2014, but when the news from Stockholm broke, the reaction among les Anglo-Saxons was: "who?" "Practically no one here has heard of him," wrote Alexandra Schwartz in *The New Yorker*. Throwing in a detail that would have delighted Modiano—who regularly uses addresses, telephone numbers, and names to insert a deceptive impression of solidity into his spare, elusive tales—the *New Statesman*'s Leo Robson noted that the London Library was

among the very few institutions that will let you take home a copy of *Missing Person*, the translation of Modiano's Goncourt winner *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (1978), and yet nobody [had] troubled to do so between 1981 and 1998.

The slowness of *Livret de Famille*'s trudge towards translation is made all the stranger by the notability of its place in the Modiano canon. With the principal exception of *Pedigree* (2005), "a memoir" of his early life, the fragments of purported autobiography that drift through Modiano's work are more literary device than history. Sometimes accurate, sometimes embellished,

sometimes bogus, they are often no more than aspects of a decades-long effort to decipher his cold, neglectful, evasive parents, and, in particular, his father, a man on the margin, a man of many autobiographies. By contrast, some of the stories in *Family Record* come close to, if not the whole truth, then perhaps within a Chinese whisper or three of it.

Even the title suggests that this is so. The *livret de famille* is issued by the French state on marriage or on the birth of the first child to an unmarried couple. It's a book that the family is obliged to keep up to date, detailing subsequent children, divorce, deaths, and so on. *Family Record* opens with Patrick (as, for simplicity's sake, I'll refer to the Modiano stand-in whose recollections, real or otherwise, make up this book) rushing to a town hall to record the birth of his daughter in his *livret*, to cement her place (and to reinforce his) in the country where they lived:

We had left blank the lines for "son of" to avoid the morass of my civil status. The fact is, I don't know where I was born or what names my parents were using at the time. . . . My father appears under an assumed name because the wedding had taken place during the Occupation.

In fact, as he relates in *Pedigree*, Modiano was born "at 11 Allée Marguerite in Boulogne-Billancourt," a month or two after the war in Europe came to an end. That his father was married under a false name is hardly a surprise. He was Jewish, and had never registered as such (he never wore the yellow star). Despite this, he seemed known to elements within the occupation authorities, while somehow managing to survive. And there had been close calls: in *Pedigree*, Modiano tells of how his father and his girlfriend, described as "Hela H., a German Jew who had been engaged to Billy Wilder"—for a man at the margins, Modiano's father, Alberto, met some remarkably well-connected people—were picked up in a raid on a Parisian restaurant in 1942. Lacking papers, they were taken to the Office of Jewish Affairs, an agency run, tellingly, by the French, not the Germans, in the Rue Greffulhe. In a moment of confusion, Alberto managed to escape. In *Family Record*, Hella Hartwich (a former lover of Wilder's, incidentally, rather than a former fiancée) escapes with him. In *Pedigree*, Hela H. is released the next day, "probably" with the help of a friend of Alberto's. If the two had not gotten away, they would have been sent to the internment camps at Drancy or Compiègne. The former was run by the French, the latter by the Germans, but in either case they were nothing more than way stations on the route to extermination.

In *Pedigree*, Modiano writes that he has frequently wondered who that friend of his father's was, and goes on to relate how Alberto had been arrested again, in the winter of 1943, but "someone" had freed him. The city of light had become a city of grays. "Hunted simply because someone had classified him as a specific kind of prey," Alberto had been transformed into an outlaw. In *Dora Bruder* (1997), an immensely moving work of historical reconstruction revolving around the last years of a Jewish girl sent to her death in the east, Modiano explains how his father was forced "to live on his wits in Paris and vanish into the swamps of the black market," something for which both his temperament and a degree of pre-war experience equipped him rather better than many of those hiding in the shadows.

Alberto had more of an excuse than many to deal with the devil. His activities appear to have included transactions with the Sicherheitsdienst and the Carlingue, “the French Gestapo,” which was headquartered in Paris. A number of its more prominent members had been professional criminals before the war; others were simply cops on the take. However enthusiastic they may or may not have been about the construction of Hitler’s New Order, they had no intention of abandoning their old ways, especially when it came to contraband.

The gray also seeped into Luisa Colpeyn, Modiano’s mother (“a pretty girl,” he wrote in *Pedigree*, “with an arid heart”; a tough one too, she died in 2015 at the age of ninety-six). Colpeyn was a Flemish actress who began her film career with the Belgian director Jan Vanderheyden, a Fleming content to work in the movies during the German occupation, as was she. Colpeyn moved to Paris in 1942 to join the German-funded Continental Films, where, after an unsuccessful screen-test, she was given a job writing Dutch subtitles for their productions. Yet within a few months the girl who had been happy to go along with what seemed to be the winning side had become involved with Modiano’s father, hitching herself to the occupiers’ “prey” as he moved from alias to alias and address to address in a city where the foundations had dissolved into sand.

Unusually for a work by Modiano, *Family Record* is broken up into a number of distinct stories. They are mostly shards of autobiography, or imitations of autobiography, set in the postwar decades, sometimes only tangentially—and sometimes not even that—related to the occupied Paris Modiano never knew, but has never forgotten. All, however, are set in territory he has made his own:

I was eighteen, working in a bookstore in Rome, when I was introduced to Fats by a French girl a bit older than I who performed at the Open Gate, a cabaret on Via San Niccolò da Tolentino. A brunette, with slanted eyes and a lovely, candid mouth, called Claude Chevreuse, at least professionally.

You don’t want to read on? Really?

The connections between the tales can be gossamer, maybe linked only by a wink. Fats confesses to Patrick how he used to fear winding “up the same as Louis XVI, Nicholas Romanov, and Maximilian, the ill-starred emperor of Mexico.” In the next story, Patrick’s Uncle Alex takes him to inspect a property in the countryside that might lend him the Frenchness he believes he lacks (“Your father and I are men from nowhere, you understand”). Already worried that he does not “look French enough,” Alex (a version of Modiano’s Uncle Ralph) is mistaken in a restaurant for the Russian-born (and Jewish) actor Gregory Ratoff, something he angrily denies, saying that he is “French.” As flexible with monikers as his brother, he claims to be called François Aubert, as Gallic a name as anyone could ask for. But that is also (a coincidence?) the name of the photographer who took pictures of the cleaned-up corpse and rather tattier relics of poor Maximilian of Mexico. New York ghouls can see examples of both at the Met.

Uncle Alex’s tale may follow Fats’s, but it precedes it chronologically. Modiano treats time as well as memory as if they were putty. Thus, in another story, a Russian émigré, a former member of the

nobility who has fallen on hard times, collapses and dies in a restaurant (not the only diner to do so in *Family Record*):

His life had begun in Russia, in Saint Petersburg, in the year 1913. One of those ochre palaces on the river. I traveled back in time to that year and slipped through the half-open door into the large sky-blue nursery. You were asleep, your tiny hand sticking out of the crib. Seems that today, you went for a long stroll up to the gardens of the Tauride and had a good appetite at dinner. Mlle. Coudreuse told me so.

But the war years cannot be avoided. The occupation is a thread that runs through much of Modiano's work. It was, Patrick maintains in *Family Record*, "the compost from which I emerged" (a notion Modiano returns to in *Pedigree*).

In a story set in Switzerland, Patrick suddenly decides that the voice of a radio announcer from Geneva belongs to D., "the most heinous figure in occupied Paris," almost certainly a reference to Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, Vichy's second Commissioner-General for Jewish Affairs.

It was, remembers Patrick, D. who had interrogated his father and Hella that night after the *rafle* in the restaurant: "I knew his pedigree." But D., born, like Darquier, in Cahors, and like Darquier someone who had spruced up his name with a fake aristocratic suffix, is slightly younger and had enjoyed a touch more professional success before making a career out of politics and genocide. Moreover, D. is in Switzerland. Darquier fled to Franco's Spain and never left.

Actually, Darquier and Alberto's paths probably never crossed. In *Pedigree*, Modiano specified that his father's interrogator that night in Paris had been "a certain Superintendent Schweblin." Jacques Schweblin vanished in 1943, possibly into Buchenwald, after falling out with the Germans. Yet in *Dora Bruder*, Modiano maintains that his father "was positive that he had recognized [Schweblin] at the Porte Maillot, one Sunday after the war." Was memory fooling with a Modiano rather than the other way round?

Patrick becomes "less and less certain" that the man he is planning to confront with the words "still at Rue Greffulhe?" was D. And even if he was, Patrick concludes, "it would mean nothing to him anymore":

Memory itself is corroded by acid, and of all those cries of suffering and horrified faces from the past, only echoes remain, growing fainter and fainter, vague outlines.

That would bring D. a peace of sorts, however undeserved, but peace eludes Patrick. Earlier in the same story, he claims that his memory

stretched back before my birth. I was certain that I'd lived in Paris under the Occupation because I recalled certain individuals from that time, as well as small, disturbing details that weren't in any history book. Still, I tried to fight the heaviness that pulled me backward, and dreamed of liberating myself from my poisoned memory. I would have given anything to be an amnesiac.

At the conclusion of *Family Record*, Patrick writes, seemingly enviously, of his baby daughter's untroubled sleep ("she didn't yet have any memory"), but his lust for Lethe does not convince. Just pages before, Patrick recalls how standing in his father's old apartment "evoked still more distant memories: the several years that matter so deeply to me, even though they precede my birth." They are memories that cannot be memories, but they work well enough for Modiano, too, a writer preoccupied not only with memory, its layers and its lies, but also with trying to understand his past and the way in which it will be forever intertwined with those "several years," his country's darkest.

And so, in another story, Patrick recalls how:

[T]he sound of my footsteps echoed beneath the deserted arcades of Rue de Rivoli. I stopped at the edge of Place de la Concorde. This fog worried me. It enveloped everything—the streetlamps, the lit fountains, the obelisk, the statues representing French cities—in a blanket of silence. And it smelled of ether.

Modiano's is not a quest for unconsciousness.

Sadly, neither Maximilian's shirt nor his neatly packaged corpse make an appearance in Christine Coulson's delightful and sharply observed *Metropolitan Stories*, a collection of tales set in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, but it would not have been too much of a surprise to encounter one or both within its covers.<sup>3</sup> Maybe the emperor, liberated from both wooden coffin and frozen image, might have turned up at the Met's cafeteria, known, we learn, for themed cuisine such as "Mexico!" Or maybe the imperial shirt might have been spotted, drifting down the museum's corridors in search of a seamstress.

Coulson worked at the Met for more than a quarter of a century and is evidently smitten by the place, but hers is not the sort of book that a long-term veteran of an institution that takes itself very, very seriously might have been expected to write. Coulson's erudition is worn lightly, and any worry that the Met's self-importance has rubbed off on her is quickly banished by the author's sly wit:

It was still the Age of Socialites, a post-Bonfire of the Vanities, pre-celebrity era. A pageant of rich women with hard hair and important jewelry. . . . When the partygoers entered the museum that evening, a miniature graveyard greeted them: a long table spread with hundreds of perfectly spaced envelopes the size of business cards, alphabetically arranged—one for each guest—and set atop a dark linen tablecloth. The pristine white rectangles rested on their half-opened flaps, a name carefully calligraphed on the front and a table number tucked within. It looked like Arlington National Cemetery for mice.

As the evening progresses, the event is joined, to the astonishment of none of the staff, by Jacob Rogers, "legendary jerk," legendary donor, legendary locomotive magnate, and ghost. He "had been kicking around the Met since he died in 1901," and "often showed up at the museum's black-tie dinners" to "taunt and tease the guests." On this occasion, however, a *second*, unexpected ghost redeems the night—and not just the night—on a note of loveliness that lingers long after that page



is turned.

Art, once a respectable craft, has been elevated into a cult, and artworks have been transformed into objects of veneration, if not always understanding. The museums in which they are housed have become cathedrals, where the faithful gather to gawp and to genuflect. Coulson replaces incense with magic. Her Met is one where ghosts are part of the crowd, where long corridors lead to another time.

The exhibits themselves are aware that their present often does not measure up to more storied pasts. Bruce Chatwin's Baron Utz, that monomaniacal hunter of Meissen, warned that "in any museum the object dies of suffocation and the public gaze," but in Coulson's they do not. They remember, they dream, and sometimes they come to life. A charcoal sketch of a woman, buried beneath oils for centuries, pushes past "the surface of Tintoretto's painting into the museum. It was like passing through a puddle, slipping into the dark water, and coming out the other side." She heads for the staff cafeteria: "no *palazzo*, this place."

Sometimes the artwork is summoned to help out. Karl Lagerfeld is coming to call, and the Met is informed that he will be bringing his muse. The museum's director wonders "why he himself had never thought of such an accessory," and decides to put that right, no easy task: she should be exceptional, but he cannot be outshone. The process commences with the classical: *The Three Graces*, marble figures "naked, headless and inextricably linked together," are rejected—"they shuffled out clumsily, the stuttering steps of the conjoined, silent in their headless disappointment." Fortunately, the quality picks up, albeit unevenly:

A sullen Corot in a long, burlap vest and plain skirt . . . could only look down and to the side, as if she were cheating on a math test. But she was French and from a favored department, so despite these limitations she had her (very brief) viewing.

The concluding story begins with the aftermath of a death initially used by Coulson to illustrate the nature of the Met's curious family, and then to take her narrative away from an approximation, just, of the everyday to the realm of the "wholly unimaginable." The dead man's secrets—each more impressive than the one that preceded it, and none of which I shall reveal—are methodically unpacked by "a young, eager woman who worked in the Merchandise Department," until she reaches the final revelation:

Her heart began to race, signaling both her own confusion and the feeling that she had wandered into something at once deeply poetic and profoundly complicated.

So she had.

**I**n *Girl*, Edna O'Brien, an eighty-eight-year-old Irishwoman first published in 1960, the year in which Nigeria won its independence, takes over the voice of Maryam, a Nigerian kidnapped with her classmates by jihadis (referred to as the "Sect," but obviously Boko Haram):<sup>4</sup>

I was a girl once, but not anymore. I smell. Blood dried and crusted all over me. . . . My insides, a morass.

Such mass abductions began in the early years of the present decade, most infamously with the seizure of over two hundred and seventy girls from a school in Chibok, the girls of #bringbackourgirls. O'Brien wanted her say about atrocities such as these, and she was not going to let age, distance—the octogenarian traveled to Nigeria to interview survivors of jihadist captivity—or possible claims of “cultural appropriation” stand in her way.

Maryam and the other new captives are repeatedly raped:

When it was over we staggered back, sore, baffled. We couldn't speak. We were too young to know what had happened, or what to call it.

They soon learned.

Cruelty is completed by humiliation. An assault on Maryam is filmed on cell phones, a reminder, as if one were needed, that technology can give barbarism an extra twist. Religion both inflames and excuses the savagery. The infidels are trash, after all. Conjuring up images of paradise, an “emir” tells the girls that they must turn to Allah, but if they do not “we will not shirk from punishments.”

A girl has her tongue cut out. Maryam wonders what “crime” she had committed. A beautiful woman is stoned to death for adultery:

She was like some ghoulish now, a mimicry of who she once had been, bleeding on one side and shredded on the other. The men roared in triumph. It was evident that she was almost gone . . .

Comparatively early in the book, Maryam, her baby (fathered by the “husband” allocated to her by the Sect), and a friend escape amid an air raid on the camp, but the ordeal is far from over. Maryam gradually makes her way out of the heart of darkness back into the world she had once known but to which, she discovers, she can never truly return. Her liberation is celebrated by the government, but whether Maryam herself, “tainted” by her time in captivity, will truly be welcomed back is a different matter altogether.

*Girl* is beautifully written in a clear, blunt prose punctuated with passages of unexpected lyricism:

A whine, a whistle, then rumbling as if the earth were turning itself inside out. Our army had come to rescue us.

I could not see the plane as it was too high up, but out of the vapourish darkness, sheets of lightning were streaming down and the whole yard is a blaze of colour. It was not yet dawn.

Such passages, I suspect, are intended, at least in part, to avoid any suggestion of pretense: this book is not, in any literal sense, the first-person account it purports to be. O'Brien underlines this

idea by quoting from a prize-winning essay that Maryam wrote at her school. It is an essay of some brio (“Birds did not roost there, but at certain times sang some song that was both inexplicably sweet and melancholy”), but for the most part made up of short, simple sentences:

In our country we depend on trees for our lives. For shelter in rain and for shade in sun. For food of many kinds.

It is an essay written by a bright young girl, and it reads rather differently from the rest of the book of which she is supposedly the narrator. Handing Maryam that role places her properly center-stage. By rejecting any attempt to tell her story in language that someone entering her adolescence might use, O’Brien leaves herself free to tell this story in a way that Maryam could not, even if given the chance.

After all, as Maryam is driven to a public meeting with Nigeria’s president after her escape, an aide reminds her to smile and briefs her “on what to say and on what to withhold. People did not wish to hear gruesome stories. ‘Nothing negative . . . nothing negative,’ she kept whispering in my ear.”

Over a hundred of the Chibok girls are still missing.

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1 *The Ditch*, by Herman Koch, translated by Sam Garrett; Hogarth, 320 pages, \$26.

2 *Family Record*, by Patrick Modiano, translated by Mark Polizzotti; Yale University Press, 160 pages, \$16.

3 *Metropolitan Stories: A Novel*, by Christine Coulson; Other Press, 256 pages, \$23.

4 *Girl: A Novel*, by Edna O’Brien; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 240 pages, \$26.

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**Andrew Stuttaford** is the editor of *National Review’s* Capital Matters.

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