



The Foundling Boy

Michel Déon , Julian Evans (Translation)

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The classic coming-of-age novel translated into English for the first time.

It is 1919. On a summer's night in Normandy, a newborn baby is left in a basket outside the home of Albert and Jeanne Arnaud. The childless couple take the foundling in, name him Jean, and decide to raise him as their own, though his parentage remains a mystery.

Though Jean's life is never dull, he grows up knowing little of what lies beyond his local area. Until the day he sets off on his bicycle to discover the world, and encounters a Europe on the threshold of interesting times. . . .

[**Michel Déon** has published more than fifty works, including *Les Poneys Sauvages* (*The Wild Ponies*) and *Un Taxi Mauve*. His novels have been translated into many languages, and he is considered one of the most innovative French writers of the twenty-first century.]

The Foundling Boy Details

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From Reader Review The Foundling Boy for online ebook

Ronnie says

Great story! I was very upset how the book ended, I did not realize there was a sequel. Thank goodness the translated sequel will be available next month. Can't wait to find out what happens next in Jean's life story.

Antenna says

A C20 take on "Tom Jones", this novel's original French title of "Le jeune homme vert", denoting the hero Jean's initial natural naivety, has been lost in translation to become, "The Foundling Boy".

Jean is discovered in a Moses basket on the doorstep of a simple, kindly childless couple. The wife Jeanne claims him as her own to bring up, taking a stand against the attempted interference of Mme de Courseau, the imperious lady of the local manor. Jean turns out to be handsome, robust, charming and irresistible to women, yet somehow manages to remain fundamentally decent and unassuming. Despite doing quite well in his school leaving exam, Jean begins to drift through life with no clear aim. He takes the opportunity to travel, mainly to England where he accepts the hospitality of some wealthy or dubious (sometimes both) characters. When he needs money to live, or wishes to stay near his parents in rural Normandy, Jean works at a variety of dead-end jobs of the kitchen porter or nightclub bouncer variety. In the process, he learns a good deal about life, human nature and love. The urge also grows to discover his real parentage: he is not too bothered about the identity of the father which may never be known, but is keen to know who his mother is. The insights jotted in his private journal reveal a certain cynicism. For instance, he notes that keeping friends separate from one another is often a good idea.

The story rambles along with so many digressions that I began to suspect the author of padding out a thin plot. Some of the early chapters are hardly about Jean at all, but rather the local landowner Antoine Courseau. Bored with his cold wife and the duties of his inheritance, Antoine keeps taking off, often at high speed, in his latest Bugatti, drawn inexorably to the warmth and light of the Mediterranean coast and to his waitress lover Marie-Dévotion. Perhaps a little shell-shocked by World War 1, Antoine seeks out old comrades-in-arms with whom he has more in common than his family.

The appeal of this book lies in its powerful evocation of time and place, in particular France on the brink of World War 2, sleepwalking into disaster with the complacent assumption that, if it comes to it, the Germans will be beaten back in a few weeks. The coverage of events in England is less convincing, as are some of the more exotic characters leading an often extravagant lifestyle such as the mysterious Prince with his black chauffeur Salah, or the conman Palfy.

The author's tendency to reveal the future fate of a particular character, or to note whether or not he/she will reappear in the story later is an irritating distraction - like having an over-enthusiastic person leaning over your shoulder to tell you what's going to happen next - and this unnecessary device tends to break any sense of immersion in the story.

Yet, despite this and the occasional "longueurs", I enjoyed many of the vivid descriptions, quirky characters, wry humour and amusing incidents enough to want to read the sequel, "The Foundling's War" - "Les Vingt Ans du jeune homme vert" in French. Written very much from a man's viewpoint e.g. of women, I suspect

this is likely to appeal more to male readers.

Mandy says

Michel Déon, born in 1919 (as is the hero of this book), is an acclaimed and well known author in his native France but little known here, and Gallic Books are to be applauded for yet again bringing an excellent French writer to a new readership. *The Foundling Boy* was first published in 1975 and is the coming-of-age story of Jean Arnaud, a foundling who is discovered late one night on the doorstep of Albert and Jeanne Arnaud, servants to the aristocratic Les Courseau family. Childless, the couple are overjoyed to adopt Jean, and he spends his childhood equally with them and their employers, who also accept him almost as one of their own. His character is thus shaped by the disparate people around him and he sometimes finds it difficult to find his own place in life.

Torn between the simple ways of his adoptive parents and the upper class mores of the big house, he sets off on a series of adventures across France and Europe, meeting a varied cast of characters on the way and having many adventures.

Well-plotted, amusing, with the occasional knowing aside to the reader, this is an absorbing and very entertaining read. Slow-paced, but with plenty of action, it is never dull and always keeps the reader interested in the vicissitudes of Jean's adventures. The novel is, however, not without its faults. There are perhaps too many sub-plots and some of the minor characters verge on caricature, but as a Bildungsroman it is successful on many levels, not least in being the portrait not only of a young man growing up but also of France itself from 1919 to the outbreak of WWII, and the novel gives an accurate and atmospheric insight into French life, customs, attitudes and history. Jean's peregrinations take place alongside important political and public developments, and although we leave him as he's about to begin life as a soldier, we can read about what happens next in the equally enjoyable sequel.

An excellent and recommended read for anyone interested in inter-war France, plus those who enjoy family sagas, this is a charming and enjoyable novel and one I am very glad to have discovered.

Lisa says

Things are torrid at work at the moment as we hurtle towards the end of the school year, so much as I love a book that challenges me in style and form and content, I just wanted a story to read in bed as I try to wind down at the end of a long day. *The Foundling Boy* has been just perfect for that. First published in 1975 but only recently translated into English, it is a beautiful coming-of-age story set between the wars in France, thought-provoking enough to be interesting, but easy reading.

As it happened, there was a rare instance of a newborn being abandoned by its mother here in Australia in the same week that I read this book. I can't comment on it because matters are in the hands of the courts and social services, and quite rightly, the privacy of this tragic act is being respected. There is an assumption that with support and care the mother and child will be reunited, and if not there will be an adoption process to find a loving family for the child. But the fact that the courts and social services are involved contrasts markedly with the situation in the Michel Déon's novel. A baby is found mewling on the doorstep of childless Albert and Jeanne Arnaud – and they simply keep the foundling, with the blessing of the local abbé Le Couec and their wealthy employers the de Courseau family. There is some rivalry for possession of the

child from Madame Marie-Thérèse du Courseau, but there is no question of any official intervention at all.

So Jean grows up in Grangeville, Normandy, enjoying the love and devotion of his adoptive parents and a close relationship with the family at La Sauveté where there are three children, Antoinette, Geneviève and Michel. Playing with the reader's suspicions about the paternity of the child, because Monsieur Antoine de Courseau is an incorrigible womaniser and it's possible that he might be the father of Jean, Michel Déon portrays Michel as a hostile rival to Jean, and Jean's would-be amorous relationship with the girls before he discovers his uncertain identity seems more than problematic. The France that Déon depicts is relaxed about sexual liaisons but presumably not about incest, and the small town setting where this might unintentionally occur brings the matter into focus. The abbé knows who Jean's parent is, but he's bound by the confessional, and the secret can't be revealed by him.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2014/12/07/th...>

Vicky says

Did not finish. The praise for this story mystifies me. Female characters seem to exist only as objects of sexual conquest. No one seems to be honest or entirely sane. It just left me depressed, so I stopped about 40% through.

Cat says

Enjoyed the hilariously judgmental omniscient narrator, who would condescendingly tell the reader whether a character's life/story was worth following or not. Also enjoyed the digressive way that Deon narrated the book, skipping from situation to situation, character to character, to paint a tableau of interwar Europe, from London to Italy, Cannes to rural France. Very French in the particular amount of time dedicated to affairs of the heart and wily women.

Anthony says

I came across this author by browsing in a Barnes & Noble and seeing the sequel to this book, called *The Foundling's War*. It looked interesting and so decided that I would read the prequel, which is *The Foundling Boy*. This was one of the most interesting and well written novels I have ever read. I never heard of the author, but after researching him, it turns out he is a well-known French author who has written over 50 works and has earned numerous awards for his writing.

This is a classic coming-of-age novel, set in France right after World War I and just before World War II. Jean Arnaud is an orphan, literally left on the doorsteps of Jeanne and Albert Arnaud, who work as caretakers at a Normandy estate. We follow Jean as he grows up and learns more about the world beyond the estate where his parents work. He travels through Europe on the eve of WW II and his encounters with others, especially a German boy he befriends, only makes the reader feel bad for Jean as we know what horrors are soon to come, especially to France.

I really enjoyed this book as I knew absolutely nothing about life in France in between the World Wars. I am

eagerly looking forward to reading the sequel.

Robert Kemp says

I found this book in an albergue while walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain. It was the perfect book at the perfect time.

Liz Barnsley says

****4.5 stars****

Coming December from Gallic Books

Thank you to the publisher for the review copy.

It is 1919. On a summer's night in Normandy, a newborn baby is left in a basket outside the home of Albert and Jeanne Arnaud. The childless couple take the foundling in, name him Jean, and decide to raise him as their own, though his parentage remains a mystery.

Though Jean's life is never dull, he grows up knowing little of what lies beyond his local area. Until the day he sets off on his bicycle to discover the world, and encounters a Europe on the threshold of interesting times .

I adored this novel. Evocative and compelling we follow Jean on a journey through life and through a very specific time in History, I was completely and utterly fascinated during the entirety of the reading experience. I have read a lot of novels set around each of the World Wars but I think this is the first for me set in a world holding its breath...and that is kind of the feeling I got throughout this story.

Jean sets off on his bicycle...what he will find we cannot imagine, and he is a perfect host on a journey of discovery. At turns irresistible, passionate, moving and eloquent you will soon find yourself lost in the pages. I say no more – if you love Historical stories you will adore this. Even if it is not your normal choice I would still recommend you give this one a try. It has a very particular feel about it and may surprise you. The sense of place is just amazing and the descriptive prose is beautiful. A character with true heart and a peek at a world now behind us makes this a heartfelt read.

When I was done I was inspired to look up some information about the author, and was surprised to find, considering the quality, that much of his work remains unavailable in English. Michel Déon is a member of the Académie française. Born in Paris in 1919, he is the author of more than fifty works. I'm kind of envious, and wish I spoke a few more languages! Hopefully Gallic will sort that out – I would love to read more from this author.

And a final nod to translator Julian Evans – thank you Mr Evans.

Shaz Goodwin says

3.5

I enjoyed the way the story began. Jeanne is dreaming ... which mirrors the reality of a baby wailing on the doorstep. The first person she goes to advice is employer Antoine du Corseau. Antoine and his life features heavily in the first half of the book. He drives for three days to visit the intriguing and absent daughter Genevieve. With the story set not long after the ending of WW1, he shares war stories with the people he meets on his stops. He's bored being back on his estate after the war and I imagine quite a few had lost their purpose in life ...

We don't find out much about Jean (apart from Antoine's son, Michel, being very jealous of Jean) at first. When he's older, his first trip is from Dieppe to Newhaven to visit Genevieve. The mysterious Genevieve is absent and he spends time sightseeing with the chauffeur. When he travels again, he meets some interesting characters in Italy and England! Palfrey leads an interesting life and certainly added colour to the story.

During both Antoine's and Jean's travels we're exposed to this time period in history – the art, politics, cars and sports. I found this interesting.

There are loose ends that need tying up (we do find out one important thing – I hadn't guessed exactly although the clues are there) and we find out that there is another book.

The Foundling Boy is written with a dry sense of humour (which I enjoyed). It was easy to get a feel about life on a French estate and the places travelled to. Villefranche sur Mer is one of my favourite places – this had a brief mention in the story. I enjoyed seeing the changes of the small French villages on the Côte d'Azur in 1919 to how they are now. Romance comes not only from Antoine but also Jean's teen feelings. It would be good to see how Jean develops into a man and the path his life will take in the following story.

Becky says

Oh wow, what a gorgeous beautiful book. Sometimes you read something that has been translated for the first time, and you just feel so grateful for the wonderful publishing people who have dug out such a gem and brought it to a new audience; this was one of those moments. This story is touching, funny, dramatic just perfect. The translation is excellent, and the book is full of poetry and brilliance. Jean is a wonderful character, who experiences the events of the 1920s and 1930s while trying to decide on his place in the world and in his family. Reading this I kept being reminded of Fielding's Tom Jones; this book is very similar in style, plot and even in the existence of a narrator giving glimpses into action that takes place beyond the pages of the book. To say that the two have similarities, should not take anything away from this jewel of a novel. Towards the final chapters I actually tried to slow down my reading, trying to drag out the pleasure a little longer. I simply didn't want the book to end. Gallic do have the second book 'The Foundling's War' all lined up, ready to be published later on in the year, which is a good thing as it saves me having to struggle to get my French up to reading the second book in the original language!

Liviu says

Tried it a few times based on glowing reviews but never got into it until recently - once I started appreciating the wry, subtly funny tone of the novel which is not raucous enough to be called a romp, but not very serious either, *The Foundling Boy* just rolls and one cannot stop turning the pages to get more Jean's (mis)adventures as a boy and later teenager, his luck with the local girls, while his trek through Europe and his friendships with other oddballs who may be much more skilled at deception and tricks for him reminded me of other enjoyable picaresque novels of yore

A satire on the French mores of the countryside with comments from the author that interrupt the flow but not distract from the novel and much more, the book comes to life with quirky people and a time that was passing fast as many of the characters (though not Jean of course who flows mostly unscathed through all) were quite aware also

And the mystery of his parentage which is kind of obvious from the first few pages (as a hint: it is indeed the obvious) is finally solved by the end of the novel though of course the story itself doesn't stop here and continues in *Foundling's war*

Highly recommended if in the mood for a lighter tone, funny but also ironic and sad on occasion novel and I quite understand why most everyone was enchanted by this 1975 French novel when it was finally translated in English a few years ago

Claire McAlpine says

A baby left in a basket at the door of the caretakers, one legged gardener Albert and his caring wife Jeanne, is where we meet Jean Arnaud, in a coming of age story that drifts between him and the du Courseau family who live in a grand home named *La Sauveté* in Grangeville, Normandy.

Wondering who this foundling might be, we follow him through his childhood and adolescence, in the shadow of the residents of the grand house, the story sometimes meandering off to the south of France with Antoine du Courseau in his Bugatti car, who has an already warm bed at every stop. Actually a number of the male characters drive unusual, expensive cars and it is something of a coincidence that Jean Arnaud often finds himself the passenger. (author fetish perhaps)

Jean too discovers a travel bug and will visit London, bike through Italy on the trail of Stendhal with a young German following Goethe's footsteps, run off to Paris and come of age right at the precipice of WWII.

It is an engaging read interrupted on occasion by the author's ambitious presence, making his voice heard directly to the reader. He is a good storyteller, although I did have a moment reflecting on how he portrays female characters in the book. Although I concede, that according to research as recent as 2012 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln concludes that we all view women as sexual objects and men as people. And no surprise then, that they say and is the case in this book that:

"It might be a natural tendency, in some regards, to reduce women to their sexual body parts,

but in the long term, that's going to interfere with your ability to form good relationships with women."

A great read, albeit a little disappointed with the caricature of women.

My complete review here at Word by Word.

Sharen says

Truly memorable! The author shows great sensitivity in revealing his characters. He also possesses a delightful wit in his observations of human nature.

Read it. You won't be disappointed.

Tina Tamman says

This is an irritating book. I would have dropped it long ago if it wasn't for my book club. I need to read it for our next meeting. Who knows, maybe it will even provide a good discussion. After all, from what I see, many readers have enjoyed it, and some of my club friends may do so as well.

The novel covers the first 20 years of a French boy's life, beginning in 1919 and ending in 1939. There is a large cast of people he comes across, befriends, is close to, loves, admires, is associated with, but I didn't find any of them interesting - I was unable to relate to them. Jean Arnaud, the hero, is also uninteresting. The only two persons who come to life are the author (who has far too much to say) and a dubious friend called Constantin Palfy. Since Jean's father fought in the First World War, the novel might have turned into a polemic about war, but it didn't. The book ends when Germany and the Soviet Union have just carved up Poland and, on the personal front, Jean learns something about his parentage.

Disappointing.
