

**Lorenza Foschini, *Proust's Overcoat: The True Story of One Man's Passion for All Things Proust*, translated from the Italian by Eric Karpeles (London: Portobello Books, 2010)**

*Proust's Overcoat*. Wasn't there a book with a very similar title? I hit the Google button. Up it came – *Pushkin's Button* – and a helpful little message: *Customers viewing this page may be interested in these sponsored links ...* The first was for Hong Kong Custom Tailors.

Marcel Proust would not have been interested, even if the miracle of Google had been available to him in the Paris of the early 1900s. Why order a new overcoat when the one he had – a double-breasted, dark grey wool coat with a black fur collar, lined on the inside with otter fur – had served him well for decades, both on his back and across his bed like a blanket as he wrote *In Search of Lost Time*? Wrapped in his famous overcoat, Proust was a familiar sight around Paris. Marthe Bibesco recalled seeing him at a ball, sitting on a little gilded chair, 'with his fur-lined cloak, his face full of sadness, and his night-seeing eyes'.

That overcoat is now padded and wrapped in tissue paper and resting in a cardboard box in a storage room of the Musée Carnavalet. Lorenza Foschini, an Italian journalist, stumbled on the curious story of how it came to be there when she interviewed the celebrated costume designer, Piero Tosi. He talked about his research in Paris in the early 1960s for Luchino Visconti's planned film adaptation of *In Search of Lost Time*, and how he had been referred to one Jacques Guérin, a collector of Proust's manuscripts and probably the very first 'Proustitute', as such enthusiasts are now called. Guérin told him how he had acquired the writer's bedroom furniture, which he had eventually donated to the Carnavalet. He still had Proust's overcoat, he confided; would Tosi like to see it? From a box on the shelf, he unwrapped a dark grey wool coat lined in fur. Tosi was dumbfounded.

What happens to our treasured possessions when we die? The question is at the heart of this fascinating little book which, if nothing else, might persuade you that it is worth taking some care when it comes to the disposal of your worldly goods. Especially if you happen to leave a literary estate.

Jacques Guérin was born in Paris in 1902, and eventually became head of the family firm Parfums d'Orsay, a leading perfume company that employed around five hundred people and had stores on Rue de la Paix and Fifth Avenue. Though he remained head of the firm for over fifty years, the business was never the primary focus of his life; he loved books, and he loved prowling through antiquarian bookstores for rare editions, precious manuscripts and artists' papers. In 1935, he hit pay dirt. A bookseller called Lefebvre on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré showed him some proofs corrected in the hand of Marcel Proust; he had bought them only minutes before. The seller had also offered him Proust's desk and bookcase, but Lefebvre had declined – his interest was in books, not furniture. The seller would be back soon to collect his payment.

Proust was Guérin's favourite writer, so one can imagine his excitement. Proust had only been dead seven years when, as a young man, Guérin had had his appendix removed by Dr Robert Proust, the brother of Marcel, and had subsequently visited the doctor at his home. He had been shown the imposing desk and massive

*Proust's Overcoat* by Lorenza Foschini. Ruth Starke.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 3 no. 2, May 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

bookcase that had once belonged to Marcel, and stacks of manuscript notebooks, the complete works. Breathlessly, Guérin had asked whether he might inspect the first edition of *Swann's Way*; the author would, of course, have made his brother a gift of this. The doctor frowned. An old printed edition? He had no such book. Guérin had left, pondering the relationship of the two brothers.

Now, six years later, Robert Proust had just died and somebody – who? – was selling off Marcel's possessions. Guérin waits, anxious to make the acquaintance of 'someone who might provide him access to Proust's immediate circle, a world to which he was still incredibly drawn'. Not to mention access to all those manuscript notebooks.

Foschini tells the story well, with a journalist's eye for the facts and a fiction writer's manipulation of narrative tension. Part memoir, part biography, part literary detection, *Proust's Overcoat* will enchant those readers who enjoyed *The Hare With the Amber Eyes* (2010), Edmund De Waal's prize-winning memoir of two centuries of family history told through a fabulous collection of netsukes inherited from his uncle. In fact, there's a link: Charles Ephrussi, the original collector, was a model for Proust's Charles Swann.

Proust believed that certain objects hold something of the soul of people who owned and loved them; little wonder, then, that in the last photograph in this book, the author and the director of the Musée Carnavalet hold the fabulous coat with expressions of awe and adoration on their faces.

**Ruth Starke**