

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Herz Bergner, *Between Sky & Sea* (The Text Publishing, 2010)

I begin to read this novel, sitting in the garden on (yes) a particularly warm day for England; 28 degrees merits a note in the daily news, as the voice of Malala, the girl shot in the face by the Taliban for going to school, drifts through the garden. This extraordinary young woman is at a summit meeting, talking about education and the rights of young people who listen to her and speak up with energy, vigour and pride. My wish is that Malala continues to flourish, to grow up and see the world for all that it is, and all that it is not.

There are many forms of oppression intrinsically linked; it seems, to the human search for meaning, for the placing of you, or I, within a context of one's own belief of what is right and what is wrong. This seemingly endless source of conflict rears its head in every generation; perhaps never more so than during the Nazi rule in which Hitler and his army committed the most appalling crimes towards Jews and those persons within Germany who did not conform to the Nazi rule. For example, my grandmother was imprisoned in a concentration camp for joining the anti-Hitler protest marches in Berlin. A distant cousin with special needs was taken from Berlin City, out to relatives the countryside and kept hidden from the army until he died a natural death. Neither of my relative's stories comes close to what others experienced during that terrible time, they merely serve as a further example, perhaps, of what it was to be human in an inhumane society.

The novel *Between Sky & Sea* takes on an age-old narrative of voyage. A group of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi invasion, board an old Greek freighter to Australia – a foreign land, a place unknown and strange. Homer's *Odyssey*, that epic voyage written so long ago, takes the reader to strange lands, strange times and then back to a home that Odysseus recognises. It is this notion of home, or Heimatland (homeland), which is examined in the book *Between Sky & Sea*. The boat seems to represent a no man's land, a place that is forever in-between, an unsteady place that rocks and heaves on a never-ending sea under a never-ending sky. The crew: a lost ill-prepared lot, are thrown together to live through a seemingly endless narration of day and night. The story moves from a wide lens in which we see the passengers ordered 'to stay in their cabins and go to bed early' (3) to a tight lens through which we meet the characters and learn about their prior life situation, their relationships and their loss. The structure of the book is solid, if a little predictable, each section given careful weighting so that the whole is balanced. Most interesting is the fact that under scrutiny each character becomes a mass of contradiction that is revealed through a complexity of life experience and compromise. For example Ida utters 'words she regretted' (134). She 'began to spit out pieces of truth which cut like sharp knives.' She asks 'Why didn't he remember his wife and child whom he had left in the fire without any protection?' (2). She abuses her one true soul mate, and in doing so eases the pain in her heart, for just a moment. Ida (in her past life) was married to a man she detested, yet he and her child are dead. She has to blame someone, as the pain is all too consuming for her to manage. She blames the one person who knows, the one who was there and has always been there: Nathan, who she loved before her arranged marriage, and still loves. The Greek café owner is returning to Australia with a Greek wife, as he 'was not attracted to the Australian girls' (39). His wife, the one hope he has of happiness, dies on the way. The 'distinguished Warsaw doctor' (67) on board, is unable to help anyone and becomes an object of embarrassment. Everyone on the ship is a sadder, less effectual representation of whom they were in their prior lives; apart from Bronya, whose prowess grows as the others weaken and die. She is the

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only one able to adapt to her circumstances like a chameleon. She is unlikeable, untrustworthy, yet the only person on board who looks at things as they are and doesn't live as if her life is already in the past. Her character is written without sympathy. Her needs and wants exploited, so the reader dislikes yet grudgingly admires her survival instinct: 'she never parted and met the tall, elegant steward. In a corner hidden from prying eyes she sat with him until late into the night. And it was not all for love! for from him she got biscuits' (51).

The boat journey, for most, is a slow dying – they are sailing away from all they know and love, into the unknown. Will they arrive? Will they perish?

The holocaust theme is never far away; echoes of an ominous nature seep into the text as first one child is ill, then dies. The boat is disinfected. On board 'The Jews became frightened, fell in line and allowed themselves to be driven like a flock of sheep' (77); a ghastly parody of the lines of men and women awaiting extermination in the gas chambers. The voyage is biblical in style as 'several white seabirds' (187) are seen as they near the shore, the ship 'which had been silent for so long ... wailed hoarsely like a lost animal' (188); a doom-laden scenario that, sadly, plays out in the final pages: all are killed, not by silent gas, but by 'a loud crash' that heralds the end of their journey.

Hauntingly sad and evocative, this book certainly stands the test of time; being as relevant to today's reader as it was in 1946.

Anne Lauppe-Dunbar