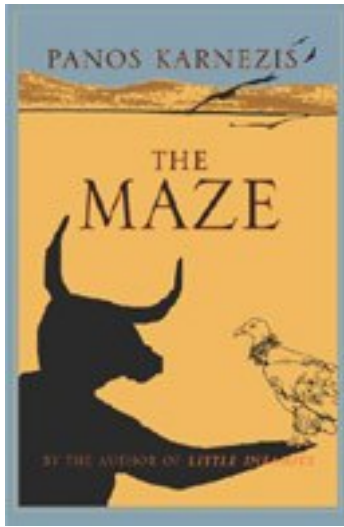


THE MAZE



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Set in Anatolia in 1922, 'The Maze' is the story of a retreating Greek brigade that has lost its way. It is pursued by a Turkish army that seeks to avenge three years of Greek occupation. No help is forthcoming.

作者介绍:

Following Panos Karnezis's well-received volume of short stories, Little Infamies, his first novel boasts high ambitions and a wide canvas - war and its devastating, dizzying after-effects. Written in three assured and distinct parts, it tells of a dissolute Greek army brigade straggling across the Anatolian desert in 1922, desperately trying to find its way to the Mediterranean coast and thus home. It's a life and death situation with distinct echoes of Xenophon.

The men are sick, exhausted, short of provisions and, for all they know, their homeland has given them up for dead. Meanwhile they're relentlessly pursued by a Turkish army seeking revenge; and it doesn't help that the Greeks have a recent massacre on their conscience.

The brigade is a queasy bunch, given to frequent bouts of philosophising interspersed with bickering. The tone is set by their leader, Brigadier Nestor - an elderly, hallucinating morphine addict with a penchant for quoting Greek myths. Meanwhile, a series of thefts in the camp has led to considerable unease and much discussion about who could be the culprit. Father Simeon wishes someone would come to confession, but no one seems especially surprised when they don't.

Part two whisks us over to a strange, small town in the middle of the desert. After the stultifyingly arid atmosphere of the first part, the change is surreally refreshing. In fact, with its jazzily beautiful gardens and simple-minded characters, there's a whiff of toytown - rather like encountering an episode of Camberwick Green in the middle of Lawrence of Arabia. You can only assume Karnezis fully intends the effect. In fact, throughout, there's an unmistakable, almost sinister sense of someone pulling strings. The more stories we're told, the more we're diverted and entertained, the more firmly Karnezis holds us in his grip.

So, here's a schoolmaster relaxing in the town's hammam. Here's Violetta - the unapologetically one-dimensional yet totally delectable town "madam" - engaged to marry the mayor. And here's her maid, Annina, in love with a hunchback gardener. This whisper of femininity feels like a breath of fresh air in the parched centre of such a masculine novel.

But soon enough, clothed in dust and misery, the brigade marches into town. By now, the men are a spent force - but theirs is a grim momentum which, you now realise, was only hinted at in part one. The third part of the novel, inevitably, takes us through the violent events that ensue. But if that makes it sound as though there's a sly and intriguing unwrapping of events - or even a change of attitude or pace - I'm misleading you. This a thoroughly baffling novel, neither tragic nor comic, nor even especially readable, yet with an atmosphere so unremittingly powerful that it holds you. But, for all that, it never seems to get going. Within the prose, time stands still. After 200 or so pages, there is still a perplexing sense of ennui - a feeling that we are still only at the beginning.

Why? Well, many of the characters - some have names, others just remain "Schoolmaster" or "Medic" - blend frustratingly into one another. So many of their utterances are banal, their speeches so strung with platitudes and semicomical generalisations that there's little real emotion. And the lofty footnotes don't help. When the brigadier refers to Midas, do we really need a seven-line, small-print explanation reminding us of the ass's ears business? If anything, the unnecessary lectures only add to the bafflement, distancing you further just when a little empathy is required.

Karnezis is a Greek who writes in English. It shows in his similes (too many) and his faintly yet enjoyably pompous prose. Sometimes he just about gets away with it: "Daily tasks ... were the buoy that kept him on the surface of life, whose darkness terrified him." And sometimes he doesn't: "He was sailing too close to the wind of self-loathing when a torpid sleep rescued him."

But the most enchanting and likeable aspect of his prose style - the quality that makes

him absolutely a writer to be reckoned with - is his confident touch with magical realism. There are flickers of De Bernières here, even sometimes of Márquez, but the mad beauty of Karnezis's imagination is entirely earned, entirely his own. Some of the apparently random images - a storm that turns the town blood-red, a tarpaulin filled with rain and bursting open "like the belly of a gutted animal" - take your breath away and stay with you long after all that Anatolian dust has settled.

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