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Arts & Letters

Books



DEAD DISTURBING

A bloodthirsty tale that plays with the fire of anti-Semitism. By **ROBERT MANNE**

When George Orwell was in Burma he asked a young boy he met his nationality. "I am a Jew, sir!" He was no more self-conscious than if he had answered: "I am a Sikh." No Jew in Europe would have answered the question like this. As Orwell was able to illuminate through this tiny incident, for the best part of 2,000 years the place of the Jews in the Christian West was fraught and strange. Even the phrase "the Jews" was overloaded with mysterious and sinister meaning. It was only after World War II, and especially in the United States, that "the Jews" became the Jews, just another ethnic group.

Christos Tsiolkas's third novel, *Dead Europe* (Vintage, 411pp; \$22.95), is ambitious and undeniably powerful but also perplexing and disturbing. It is largely about not Jews but "the Jews". Why I am perplexed and disturbed cannot be explained without an outline of the story it tells.

The novel comprises two separate narratives. The first, told in the style of a fairytale, is set in a traditional Greek peasant village during and after World War II. The village has not yet experienced what the great sociologist of modernity, Max Weber, called "disenchantment". Its world is still magical.

Lucia is the most beautiful woman in Europe. Michaelis Panagis is the son of a local idiot and an Albanian whore. He has returned to his village with a modest fortune from New York, where he worked in a Jewish factory. After his return, Lucia is given in marriage to Michaelis. As it happens, their marriage is barren. The villagers are cruel. What is the worth of her beauty if her womb is cold?

During the war a Jewish couple approach Lucia and Michaelis. The Germans have arrived in Greece. The couple offers a considerable reward – a wooden box of gold and jewels – for the protection of their son, Elias. Lucia and Michaelis regard all Jews in the traditional way, as diabolical Christ killers. Nonetheless they accept the offer. Elias is secreted in a basement under an abandoned church, where he lives amid the stench of his own excrement. One evening, while the villagers dance and carouse, Lucia goes to the Jewish boy to feed him. She washes him and sees his member erect. Even though the stench of the boy is overpowering, they rut like dogs.

To the considerable pleasure of Michaelis, Lucia is pregnant. She is not so pleased. If they are to have the child, she threatens, Elias must be killed. Michaelis murders the boy; Lucia is overjoyed. The son born to her is called Christos. She is besotted with him. Even when he is far too old and his little body is fat and long, she takes him at every opportunity to her breast. Michaelis has not coped well with his act. Because of the memory of the murder he cannot mount his wife, except on one occasion when he is deep in drink. This occasion brings the couple their second child, Rebecca. Michaelis loves her deeply. Lucia is too preoccupied by Christos to feed her daughter or keep her clean.

Since the murder of Elias a curse has visited the village, taking away the infant boys. Happily, Michaelis's Albanian mother has the capacity to penetrate into the meaning of things. She agitates for the body of Elias to be dug up. It has not decomposed. She agitates for it to be burned. The mother can see the ghostly presence of the boy hovering over Lucia, and she sees that Christos is a bearer of the curse. She strangles her grandson with her own hands. The curse on the village lifts.

In Greece the war has ended and the Civil War has come. Lucia is mad. Now white-haired, but still a beauty, she offers herself to the local anti-communist colonel and provides information about the partisan bands. She is shot and killed. Michaelis

takes Rebecca to Australia where, as a wog, she experiences brutalities at the hands of Anglo-Saxon boys. The ghost of the Jewish boy that has hovered around her mother is now with her. The family is still cursed.

The second narrative is set in the present time. The narrator is a 36-year-old gay, Greek-Australian photographic artist named Isaac. We meet Isaac at a time when he has travelled to Greece for what turns out to be a rather dismal officially funded exhibition of his works. Isaac has left his beloved working-class partner, Colin, behind. After some perfunctory, guilt-ridden promiscuous sex in Athens, where Isaac expresses his fidelity to Colin by refraining from anal intercourse, he goes with his cousin, Giulia, and a friend, Andreas, to his mother's village. It is here he discovers that his family is cursed, and the ghost of a boy makes its first appearance in Isaac's life.

Isaac travels to Venice. He is beginning by now to see Europe as a kind of hell – of whores, drugs, porn, harassed asylum seekers, cheap glitz, inner death. He encounters an old mute Jewish man. The man leads him to the Venetian Ghetto, Europe's first. He encourages Isaac to photograph the icons of continuing European racism. He shows him his library of books on Jewish history and the Holocaust. The old man thinks Isaac is Jewish. When he sees the crucifix Giulia has placed around Isaac's neck he goes berserk. He steals Isaac's camera. He bites him deeply but draws no blood. He hisses like a snake. He spits in Isaac's face.

Isaac moves from Vienna to Prague, a city he once associated with freedom and hope. It is now sunk in moral squalor. No one looks each other in the eye. Here Isaac meets an Australian friend, a gay working-class photographer he calls Sal Mineo, employed in Prague's thriving pornographic industry. Sal Mineo offers to introduce Isaac to his boss, King Kike, a new type of Jew, not like the effete college Jewboys they knew in Australia. King Kike is the most obscenely fat human being Isaac has ever met. He is also enormously wealthy, from the profits of pornography and sex. Isaac is taken to one of the Jew's nightclubs where, to the audience's gratification, an 11-year-old Czech boy fellates a 40-year-old man and is then anally raped. Isaac is stirred.

On the train trip out of Prague we discover that Isaac is, or has become, a vampire. He seduces a young Brazilian woman in order to drink her menstrual blood. The blood acts on Isaac as a metaphysical tonic. He is alone. He is omnipotent. He soars above the world. The prose, a bacchanalian stream of consciousness, begins to resemble Henry Miller's *Tropic* series, but without the exuberance or the joy.

As he approaches Paris, Isaac is summoned to a

meeting with an old, close Jewish friend of his parents, Gerry. Gerry is now a people smuggler. He wants Isaac to help a Muslim refugee, Sula, make it to Australia. Isaac visits the apartment of Gerry and his exquisite Dutch Jewish wife, Anika. There is an atmosphere of such concentrated hatred between them that Isaac is physically sick. While he is there the police arrive. Sula has been arrested. Anika does not deny that she has betrayed her. Gerry beats Anika to a pulp. Isaac comforts her and drinks her blood. Then Gerry says something strange: "Enough."

Gerry comes from a land of wolves that is no more. There is a hint of Transylvania. Gerry tells Isaac of the murders he committed during the war after being discovered having sex with the wife of his partisan protector. Eventually we learn that Gerry's real name is Isaac, and that he was very close to Isaac's mother, Rebecca. Is he in fact Isaac's Jewish father? Has he bequeathed him his vampire blood?

Isaac passes through Amsterdam in a state of euphoric, solipsistic frenzy on the way to his last stop in dead Europe, England. By now he is "ontopofthefuckingworld". He knows there is no moral order. He believes in nothing except the destructiveness of religion and the human capacity to create Armageddon. He knows he is God and Satan. He knows he is possessed. He knows that he needs nothing other than to drink blood. After two last indescribably hideous episodes of his blood hunt, Isaac is found in the streets of London, delirious. The doctors believe he is certain to die. It is at this point that the two narratives converge and the novel reaches its still enchanted, magical end.

Dead Europe is a book about "the Jews" in part because their entirely fictitious, supposed existence as a single, sinister, purposive collectivity remains unquestioned throughout. The Greek villagers all assume "the Jews" are Christ killers, with satanic powers and the capacity to lay a curse. Almost all the characters in the contemporary narrative are similarly obsessed by "the Jews". Isaac's mother is a traditional anti-Semite. The first story Isaac remembers being told – which constitutes the first lines of the novel – is about the Jewish practice of placing a Christian infant in a wooden barrel and bleeding it to death.

Although Isaac's father had always mocked this kind of anti-Semitism, we learn that he has associated the Jews with American power, regarded them as ungrateful for what the Communist Party had done for them and that he once, when very drunk, blamed the Jews for the international heroin trade. Isaac's partner, Colin, also hates Jews. The

two things that have caused a rift between Isaac and Colin are the memory of a teenage incident where Colin desecrated Jewish graves, and the swastika that is still tattooed on his arm. It is only when he imagines the ink of the tattoo rubbing off on his own skin that Isaac feels his union with Colin to be complete.

In Europe the supposed political problem of "the Jews" pursues Isaac. He discovers that Andreas is an uncompromising anti-Semite who thinks the Jews run America and is a true believer in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Nazi "warrant for genocide". When he is in bed with Andreas, Isaac discovers why. Andreas has loved only one person, a Serbian soldier he met while reporting the Bosnian war. For his death, Andreas blames the Jews. In Cambridge this case against the Jews returns. Isaac is introduced to a Yugoslav couple. The man is a Nietzschean philosopher. He develops his thesis about the Jews as the authors of the desert philosophy, monotheism, the source of the world's ills. He also puts the most cogent case in the novel about the connectedness of American and Jewish power. The problem, as he sees it, is that these two peoples, who both cling to the self-image of the slave, are now the masters of the world. His partner, in drink, is more direct. "I hate the Jews, Isaac. The Jew Americans what they did to my country ... I was glad to see those Jews jumping from those burning buildings. They deserve their towers to burn."

The problem of "the Jews", however, goes deeper than politics. Isaac's journey through Europe can be read as the story of his attempt to liberate himself from the suffocating influence of the post-Holocaust Jewish worldview. In Greece his cousin tells him that the Jewish obsession with the Holocaust is a sickness. In Venice Isaac's unpleasant encounter with the old Jew in the Ghetto ends with a curse: "You fucking Jew." A rush of power surges over Isaac. "It was as if," he explains, "I had been yearning to utter this curse since the beginning of time." In the old man Isaac sees "an eternal exhausting vengeance" and "no promise of forgiveness". "For one deranged, terrified moment – I promise only a moment, it passed, I willed it away immediately – I wished that not one Jew had ever walked on the face of the earth." To suppress an exterminatory desire, Isaac must rely on an exercise of will.

Why do the Jews threaten Isaac? I think the explanation is this. He is a character not yet entirely freed from the burden of guilt and shame. No burden is greater than "the Jews'" demand for obedient submission to the moral meaning of the Holocaust. If he is to flourish, it is from this burden that he must be freed.

On his first trip to Europe, Isaac visits the Jewish



Christos Tsiolkas, above, writes of killings, vampire bloodlust and "the Jews".



Museum at Thessaloniki. He is oppressed by the Holocaust photographs but feels insulted by a Jewish attendant. "I wanted to ask questions and he treated me like dirt." On his second trip, in Venice, he sees a mural of Jews being shipped to the death camps. "I closed my eyes and attempted to muster compassion. Or grief. Or shame. Anything, some damn emotion." His effort to feel something, anything, fails. All he can feel is the pleasurable warmth of the sun.

If the old Jew of Venice can offer nothing but brooding on history and suffering, the new Jew of Prague, the fat porno-capitalist, tempts Isaac with the vision of liberation – through the

subversion of the moral order and the embrace of a bestial, unconstrained carnality. By the time he reaches Paris, Isaac can no longer be moved at all by insufferable Holocaust lamentations. There is poetry after Auschwitz. "There is nothing to apologise for, nothing to regret, no sins or evil to make recompense for ... Every cell in my body is singing sweet electric life. It is worth killing for this life ... Be brutal, be cruel, be alive."

By Amsterdam Isaac is apparently liberated from sin and guilt. He has sex with three different men in a porno cinema. He cannot be bothered with the queue outside the Anne Frank Museum. By London he finally knows what he believes. Hypocritical religion has brought utter ruin to the world. Yet the path he has followed since Prague, of vampire bloodlust then pure carnality, in the end leads Isaac only to unspeakable horror, to madness, and to the edge of death. From the old world, it seems, there can be no escape. The ghost of the Jewish boy, as Isaac lies in his delirium, still has him firmly in its grip.

Insofar as I understand the argument of this strange and nihilistic book – and mine is by no means the only possible reading – I find it repellent and unpersuasive. Yet what troubles me particularly is the discursive role assumed in it by "the Jews". There is nothing in the novel that resists the idea of the Jews as a single united group and as a cultural burden. Its energy and interest frequently rely on injecting, crudely and ambiguously, some of the oldest and most consequential anti-Semitic libels – the vengeful Jew; the diabolical Jew; the bloated capitalist Jew; the Jewish curse; the world power of the Jews.

Are we meant to assume there is some direct cultural continuity between the traditional Christian anti-Semitism of the Greek villagers and the contemporary left-wing political anti-Semitism concerning the dispossession of the Palestinians and the fusion of Jewish and American power, expressed with some eloquence by three Balkans characters: Isaac's communist father, the Greek journalist Andreas, and the Cambridge Yugoslav? Are we to assume there is a complete disjunction in character and sensibility between the thirty-something gay Greek-Australian photographer, the novel's narrator Isaac, who is fed up with the Holocaust and summons an exercise of will to resist the thought that it would have been better if no Jew had ever walked on the face of the Earth, and the thirty-something gay Greek-Australian novelist, Christos Tsiolkas, who is the author of *Dead Europe*? How are we to understand why the contemporary Jewish characters we encounter in *Dead Europe* are almost all either possessed or grotesque? Nothing in the novel makes these things clear.

Dead Europe, which climaxes in scenes of almost indescribable violence and horror, is nothing if not a transgressive novel. The trouble, however, is that we live in a post-transgressive age in which breaching traditional taboos has almost altogether lost the power to shock. There is, however, one subject that still possesses this power. Since the Holocaust the expression of anti-Semitism has been culturally forbidden. In *Dead Europe* Tsiolkas has solved the riddle of the transgressive artist in a post-transgressive age by drawing the question of "the Jews" into the proximity of his unconscious, despairing private fantasies concerning religion, violence and sex. In my reading *Dead Europe* is neither anti-Semitic nor anti-anti-Semitic. It is a novel where the author has sought to excite himself and his jaded audience by playing, to my mind purposelessly, with the fire of a magical, pre-modern anti-Semitism.

When I first outlined my bewilderment with the praise Helen Demidenko received for *The Hand that Signed the Paper* – another, far less accomplished, Australian novel about "the Jews" – like many critics I was accused of interfering with freedom of speech. Perhaps similar claims will follow this review.

Such accusations make no sense. Freedom of speech is a two-way street. Just as Tsiolkas is free to pursue his Nietzschean flights of fancy and his struggles with religion and guilt and shame in any way he likes, so am I free to say that I would have preferred it had he not pursued them in a book that wobbles unsteadily and disconcertingly between the problem of anti-Semitism and the problem of "the Jews". **M**