

Book Review

Marie Redonnet. *L'accord de paix*

Ann KONTOR

Marie Redonnet made a name for herself in the 1980s and 1990s for her stark prose and her (usually female) protagonists living in vicious cycles from which they never quite seem able to break. By the mid-1990s, she went into semi-retirement, taking a comfortable job with the French government as a researcher. Like her hopeless characters, she surprises us once again. Redonnet's sixth novel, and her second book with the Grasset publishing house, is quite unlike any other work she has ever done. It is a record-breaker of sorts. Not only is it her first creative work since 1996's *Villa Rosa*, but also at just over 300 pages, it is easily the longest work she has produced. Neither has she ever portrayed an actual situation as she does with this allegory of Palestine.

Olga, who runs a small bar in the high valley, is sent by the shepherds, her patrons, as an ambassador to Johnny Lo who has just signed a peace accord. She is accompanied by Sister Marthe who has just broken her vows with the Chartreuse des Anges based on a dream she received, and together they go down to the main town of Port l'Etoile. One of Lo's former lieutenants, Jimmy Do, refuses to acknowledge the peace accord, and an army in search of him burns Olga's bar and destroys Sister Marthe's convent. Having nowhere else to go, both stay at Father Jean's Refuge where they meet a colorful cast of characters. Olga and Sister Marthe, bonded by the atrocities that occurred in the high valley, must find their own paths

which will eventually lead them thousands of miles away with their respective mates.

The novel was written between 1998 and 1999, after Redonnet visited Israel and “adopted” a Palestinian boy, to whom she dedicates the novel. Ironically the book was published just weeks before the latest tensions in the Holy Land flared up in September 2000. Port l’Etoile is a city divided, and the western half is the site of military occupation, while in the east the citizens see themselves as superior, politically and culturally. Redonnet cleverly names the principal financial institution the West Bank. The futility of armed conflict is put into question, and Redonnet perhaps adds her own commentary to Sister Marthe’s thought that “Il n’y a pas d’avenir à Port l’Etoile” (300). Like Port l’Etoile, it may be that Redonnet doesn’t see a very bright future for the Middle East. While the end of the novel is pessimistic for the peace process, for the first time all of Redonnet’s characters meet with a (relatively) happy ending.

Redonnet is far from having a one-track mind, but themes that are woven throughout her works recur in this novel: the sea (and a whale carcass!) (*Mobie-Diq*), circus folk (*Doublures, Cirque Pandor*), a traditional language falling out of common use (*Rose Mélie Rose*), and her trademark bizarre nomenclature (names range from Joe Mac Law to Lenzo Ha). Her stark minimalist style is, perhaps for the first time, silenced just a bit so that some of the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters become more apparent. Marthe is a rich and deep character, a loving, gentle woman determined to make her way in the harsh world. The complex tapestry that Redonnet creates is a story of peace, hope, and ultimately, man’s willingness to persevere despite enormous obstacles.

REDONNET, MARIE. L'accord de paix. Paris: Edition Grasset, 2000. ISBN 2-246-60111-8. Pp 304. 119F (18.14•).