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## **Aspects of the Greek Children's Novel: 1974-1994**

Meni Kanatsouli, William Moebius

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Aspects of the Greek Children's Novel: 1974-1994**

*Meni Kanatsouli (bio)*

*Translated by William Moebius*

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To the general European or American public, Greek children's literature is completely unknown, first because translations of Hellenic literature rarely appear and second because it is only in the last two decades that children's literature has earned a wide reputation in Greece.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to focus attention on novels because the novel is the literary genre in which the deepest and most radical changes have occurred within Greek children's literature, and thus a discussion of that form may best illuminate the directions Greek children's literature is presently taking. Open as it is to multiple influences and interactions, the children's novel in Greece is gradually moving from an emphasis on national concerns to a more international perspective.

Penelope Delta (1874-1940) was the first Greek writer to ask questions about the nature of a literature for children and to seek to create a literature with a particularly Greek stamp. Accordingly, she turned to the historical novel, setting her work either in the Byzantine era or in her own time.<sup>2</sup> A talented and sensitive writer, she combines excellent descriptions of nature with an ideological content, obviously didactic, in which patriotism, a love for work, and a sense of duty prevail. Delta has been criticized for her bourgeois ideology and for her ethnocentrism, but she was simply expressing the values of her time and should be viewed in that context. Her primary objective was to create a truly Greek children's literature where none had earlier existed.

Delta had followers who were also interested in creating an historical and Hellenized novel, one free of European influences and inspired by the culture and landscape of Greece. But it was only in 1974, the year that the Greeks threw off a seven-year dictatorship, that modern children's literature began to flourish and expand. The spirit of freedom dominates novels written after 1974, reflecting the abolition of censorship of expression and of political beliefs as well as the lifting of taboos formerly imposed on books for children.<sup>3</sup> These new directions in the children's novel may be described in terms of theme, content, and narrative structure. Thematically we may divide the modern Greek novel into four categories: the historical novel, the novel of manners, the

sociopolitical novel, and the science fiction novel.

It is surprising that the contemporary historical novel, unlike its predecessors, does not look for inspiration in the more glorious periods of Greek history, but rather in moments of historic decline. For example, two books by Lili Mavrocefalou, *Agis* (1977) and *Kleomenis* (1981), reflect the turbulence of the last years in ancient Greece before Roman domination. *He oraia Elene ton gaidaron/La belle-Hélène des ânes* (Beautiful Helen of the Asses, 1987), by Dimitris Ravanis-Rendis, parodies the historical novel, presenting thirteenth-century daily life in the Cyclades, which were under the domination of the Franks.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Kira Sinou, with her books *Ste chora ton mammous/ Dans le pays des mammoths* (In the Land of the Mammoths, 1977) and *To telos ton teraton/La fin des monstres* (The End of the Monsters, 1980), describes life in the prehistoric era.

Another thematic tendency in the contemporary historical novel is to pose political questions. For example, Alki Zeï (also known as Alke Zee), an important contemporary woman writer, condemns without overt propagandizing authoritarian politics and upholds socialist ideas in *To kaplani tes vitrinas*, published in English as *Wildcat Under Glass* (1966), and *Ho megalos peripatos tou Petrou* (1971), published in French as *La guerre de Petros* and in English as *Petros' War*.<sup>5</sup> But works such as Zeï's have met with some disfavor. Twenty years ago, a large-scale battle broke out against those who favored certain ideas or political parties in books for children. The myth of the innocent child, who must be protected to preserve his innocence, held sway in the minds of teachers. In their view, there was no reason why children should come into premature contact with adult issues and face the realistic and disagreeable aspects of life.

As it has been...

Tsang, Mally. *Picture This: Perception and Composition*. Boston: Ball-Buch Ltd., 1991.

Huang, Wen-ching. *Yehoweh Yi Tsung Hwei shueh shih* (History of Children's Literature in Taiwan). Taipei: Chuan-wen, 1994.

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by *Ment Kasakoulis*

Translated from the French by William Moebius

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As it has been practiced in Greece, the historical novel for children represents a protest against just such an outlook. Inspired by either distant or recent events, these works attempt to be not descriptive but explanatory history; they search for political, social, and economic connections that will enable a certain type of reflection upon events. As Denise Escarpia observes, we reanimate the past in view of certain contemporary problems, without a partisan bias, "mais sans neutralité ni lâcheté prudente" (but without being neutral or prudently tepid) (84).

Traditionally the novel of manners or mores has represented a less politicized school within Greek children's literature. Writers of this genre depict the Greek countryside and the



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