



Making the journey home to a personal Ithaca



CHRISTOPHER BANTICK

Arnold Zable is a writer who has marked out a distinctive literary career with some remarkable books. From his luminous Cafe Scheherazade, where he asked us to listen to the resonances of the Holocaust survivors, to the award-winning Jewels and Ashes, focusing on a personal journey into understanding the enduring pain from the sacking of Bialystok Jewry, his writing revealed a writer of acute observational powers.

But Zable is also capable of personal journeys of another kind. The Fig Tree was an intimate account of him finding a sense of personal connection through his own family with Ithaca. Then there was the autobiographical account in the intensely moving, Scrap of Heaven, where he recounted the miasmic life of growing up in Melbourne's inner suburban Carlton.

His new book, Sea of Many Returns, in some ways is a journey back. Not to previous work, though there are certain qualities redolent with The Fig Tree. Rather, Zable returns to Ithaca in a novel. This is a beguiling and deft literary move.

Zable uses the novel form to ask questions about what is the place of nostalgia in the lives of people. But, more than this, the novel engages with the immigrant experience insofar as what this means for memory and connection to place.

The story asks us to travel with Xanthe, who goes to Ithaca in search of the influences on her father, Manoli and maternal grandfather, Mentor. Xanthe is translating Mentor's story of his journey leaving Ithaca and his life in Australia. It is a story which encompasses riots in Kalgoorlie to working in Melbourne.

When I meet Zable it is in Carlton. He knows the suburb intimately and he confesses Ithaca is also very familiar to him. "This is the hardest project I have ever

faced. My connection with the Greek community began at Princess Hill High School. This place was an immigrant, working-class area. There were lots of Italians, Greeks and Jews. I felt an immediate affinity with my Greek friends. Both are what I call kitchen cultures as most of the action takes place in the kitchen. This is where you eat, talk, argue and live."

The novel, Sea of Many Returns, begins like a legend. The reader is taken into a story where there is a craving for a departure and arrival at the same time.

"It is a story which operates on many levels," Zable says. "It works on the basis of a story, and family story and then the level of myth. These are all inextricably interlinked. First of all comes, Ithaca. When I say Ithaca, the name itself evokes myth and legend. At the heart of this is the Odyssey and Homer's Ithaca. There are many arguments as to whether this is the real Ithaca or whether it is not. In a way, that doesn't matter. Ithaca is an intimate part of western culture.

"It is a name that resonates and echoes with many associations.

"The original Ithacan story is Ulysses leaving the island and thinking he is going to be away for a short time but he didn't come back for 20 years. Here I am listening to story after story after story of men, who had decided to leave and say they are going to be back soon, but it is extraordinary how many were away for 20 years, 30 years, and who never came back. Ithaca is a continuing drama of arrivals and departures. This reflects in some ways the experience of the diaspora of the Jews. Yet there is a significant difference.

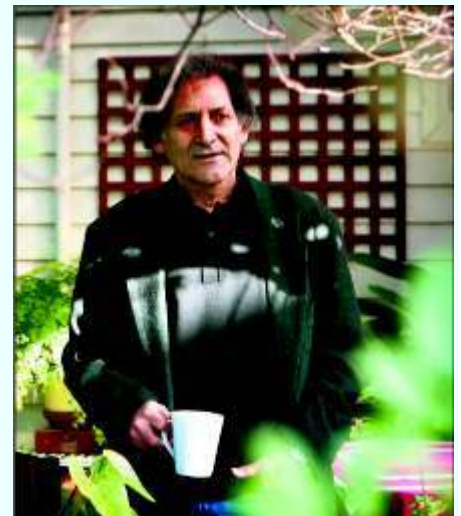
"I felt the difference when I first landed on Ithaca in 1986. This was en route from Poland. The difference for me is in Poland, you are going back to a graveyard in terms of Jewish life. In Ithaca, you go home."

Given that Sea of Many Returns is part based around the idea of a journey for Xanthe into the thinking of her forebears, and keeping in mind Zable's previous work, what place does memory and imagination have for the immigrant experience?

"You have to remember we are talking of a time that is over," he says. "Nowadays you can pick up a mobile phone and talk to anyone and even see them. People forget perhaps that a few short years ago, to make a journey to Europe was a major separation from loved ones. A bit further back, the only way you could make the journey was by boat. In a sense this was another era and the book is an exploration of memory."

What awaits readers in the novel is not only a superbly crafted story of multi-narratives and the illusion of time, but acute physical description of place.

Sea of Many Returns, by Arnold Zable, Text Publishing, \$37. Zable appears at the Perth Writers' Festival at the weekend.



Journey man: Arnold Zable in the backyard of his home.

Picture: The Age