Book review: Island of Dreams by Aline Tayar

Three cousins, one an interpreter, return to Malta from disparate lives in different countries when their elderly aunts can no longer look after themselves or the ancestral home. Their reunion leads t

Thomas AFTON.
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Island of Dreams
By Aline P’nina Tayar
Ondina Press, 2012

There's something faintly peculiar about these reviews isn't there? I mean to say one of us writes a book and another one writes a review about it in Communicate! (The AIIC Webzine). Oh dear.

So when Luigi wrote to me and said a colleague had written a book about a large Sephardic family having ructions, I said, how nice.

No, he said, I want you to write a review for the webzine. I was in fact already very curious to read Aline Tayar's Island of Dreams, for obvious sociological reasons. (Aline and I have never met, although we are Facebook friends.)

My great fear of course was that I wouldn't like it and where would I be? So I pointed out I'd be in South America for several weeks, and the post was awfully unpredictable.

Someone will bring it to you, said Luigi helpfully. So there I was, stuck.

I sat down with Island of Dreams and remembered going off with my sister to view a newborn baby. What if the kid is really ugly, I said.

No problem, she said, we'll just say "that's some baby."

But I am happy to say that I do not need to say "That's some book," because I was enchanted.

I would imagine that if I were to sit down and try to write a novel (or invent penicillin, or fly to the moon, but let that pass), I would try to answer the following questions:

How do I use my own experience? How do I reflect upon who I am, and what made me? If I want to write about a large Sephardic family having ructions, how can I do this in a way that is intelligible to people from another world? If I want to write about being an interpreter, how can I do this in a way that doesn't freeze the narrative before it starts?

Also, am I allowed to have a family tree on the first page?

I find that Aline has figured this out. Island of Dreams is the story of a Maltese Jewish family, the Toledanos, who run a well-established pharmacy in Valletta.
The central event in the book, which takes place before the action begins, is the historically accurate doctors' strike, during which Maltese medical practitioners resisted Dom Mintoff's plans for what was later to be referred to as socialized medicine in the United States.

The children of Nonno Giacomino Toledano the pharmacist and their spouses are mostly pharmacists and doctors, who end up on different sides of the strike, who see old family tensions worsen as a result, and who have predictably complicated relations with the patients they no longer treat.

The culminating point, not for Malta but for the Toledanos, is the receipt of a letter bomb that kills one of Nonno Giacomino's daughters.

The family scatters. Two unmarried daughters, pharmacists, remain in Valletta. The two sons emigrate to Israel and Australia. The dead daughter's widower takes up an itinerant career in an international organization.

Fast forward to the present day. Nonno Giacomino has three middle-aged granddaughters. One is an international activist in Australia. One is the mother of a large family on a kibbutz in Israel. One is a free-lance conference interpreter in Brussels.

The three cousins realize that their two elderly aunts in Malta are no longer able to look after themselves or their family home, and travel to Valletta to deal with the situation, meeting for the first time in many years after spending their childhoods in close proximity. This simple structure allows Aline to explore many themes.

Who are we? My parents went here and your parents went there, so I'm Australian and you're Israeli. But it could so easily have been the other way.

What does the past mean? Our lives are overshadowed by a tragic event which we cannot fully piece together, indeed do not remember in the same way. It forced us all into exile, and left one of us without a mother. Is it possible to make sense of such a thing?

One of our fathers conformed, one rebelled. One made a mixed marriage, one married into a poorer family. How many generations does it take for this to go away?

Our grandmother made one single arbitrary decision, one (well actually lots, but one which is pivotal to the plot). The Russians are coming, so one of my granddaughters must learn their language, and I've already decided which. How can this go on resonating for decades?

What is language? Do we speak English, Italian, Maltese, Hebrew? How does it change us, does it matter?

What does it mean to come from a family like ours? To be rooted in the place you were born and to be proud of it, and at the same time to feel the whole Mediterranean is your home and to have relatives in many other places? And to live among, even to marry, people who don't really understand how this can be?

How can I stand to come back to a beautiful place I left long ago? How do I deal with the fact we cannot agree what is best for our old aunts and their house, and why does every disagreement lead us right through the minefields of the past?

And, most importantly, is the phrase "interpreter with emotional baggage" a tautology? If not, where is the cause and where is the effect?

I was impressed by the treatment of all these issues, and the fairly effortless way they flow into one
another.

I could cavil with some points of detail, have preferred that a few aspects be either more fully developed or left out, but I loved this book.

Luigi will say that if I liked Island of Dreams that much, I could have written this review a little faster, but we all have our issues.

I gather Aline has also written a more biographical treatment of her family history called How Shall We Sing? I'm going to read that next.

Recommended citation format: