

KAY FERRES

Antigone Kefala: *THE FIRST JOURNEY* Sydney 1975
Wild & Woolley

The two short novels in this volume are in many ways similar, particularly in their narrative style. Both stories feature a first person narration.

In both stories in this volume, the narrator — a young man in *The First Journey* and a young woman in *The Boarding House* — is confronting the problem of identity. Alexi's journey takes him from the village of his childhood to the city where he is to study music at the conservatorium. Melina in *The Boarding House* also has to survive a reorientation: she has left behind a failed marriage to face an alien environment in Sydney, a two fold alienation since she is also a new Australian.

"I moved down the room looking for Richard. I silently searched the groups that were crowding the walls, their backs turned as if trying to press further into the walls away from me.

Then I realised that I stood alone in the middle of the room, a ring of emptiness and silence around me, as if they were pinning me there within a magic ring out of which I could not move, which they were weaving in silence, closing their ranks against me, pretending to be engrossed, punishing me.

I stood there for what seemed an endless time, till the invisible net they were all tracing in the depths of their innermost beings, all in unison, their selves responding in a compact well regimented way, till the net became so powerful, in spite of their voices that rang loud and indifferent above the gramophone, that my feet would not move and I stood rooted to the floor."

Both Alexi and Melina find a new perspective of themselves through the experience of death. Alexi is befriended in the city by Caragea, an artist, and his wife Anna. From the earliest stages of the story Alexi feels "this burning necessity to be first in someone's importance Yet no one, not even later could give me the required weight. Some initial foreignness in me from the beginning." This couple appear to give him some weight and he responds with compassion in his relations with the dying Anna.

Melina too experiences death in a more direct but also vicarious manner. She is called to the morgue to identify a body, thought to be her landlady. It is not, but the recognition that everyone is carrying death inside themselves allows Melina to break through the alienation and to feel a bond with the landlady she had previously regarded with impatience.

In both stories the narration shifts from the present to the past through interior monologue. A subtle control of the narrative is maintained by anchoring the present firmly to a concrete feature – railway platform, library, tree – which is recalled when the time sequence reverts back to the present. Both narrators are impressionable, feeling their way in their environment, and consequently description of that environment figures prominently. This is more delicately handled in *The Boarding House* than in *The First Journey* where it sometimes hinders the flow of the narrative and where in many cases overtones of symbolism are incongruous because the character of Alexi, who imposes the symbolism, lacks the depth to sustain it. Characterization too is not handled so well in *The First Journey* where characters are often fixed and contained by a description rather than allowed to dramatize themselves. Where they are allowed to do so – e.g. Aunt Sofia in *The First Journey* and Mrs Webster in *The Boarding House* – the writer is also able to exhibit her sharp ear for dialogue.

The enduring impression taken away from these short novels is of Antigone Kefala's fine handling of the narrative, particularly of such situations as Melina's return to the boarding house from the morgue. The discovery that Mrs Webster still exists is pushed aside by the landlady's chatter. Melina no longer listens with impatience.

"I laugh suddenly relieved, a great weight seems to be lifting. Thank God she is alive.
' You look so smart,' I say, 'have you had a good time?'
' Yes love, but I'm so tired. They live so far away, or I am getting old. They live alone in their little house. Very lovely couple. We've been friends for nearly thirty years now, you know old friends, nothing like it these days. Can't find such lovely people any longer. She was a pretty little woman. Says that I look better than she does, keep meself younger. I didn't tell you did I now? Yesterday when I was going to the butcher's, met this fellow that was here the other night. I've known him for years. Very nice, proper, decent man. What do you think he told me? He made me laugh. Laugh. He asked me to marry him. Fancy that? Eh? Aren't men fools? I said – me? You must be mad. I'm an old woman. Older than you. And what do you think he said? He said – Sadie, it's not a matter of age. It's a matter of personality. Per-so-nality. You're such a nice, warm, charming woman. The old devil! Eh love? Still some guts left in him. I laughed me head off. Me marry at my age? Eh love? What an idea! '"