

Níkos Bakólas. *I megháli platía: Istoría ton Méson ke Néon Hrónon*. Athens. Kédhros. 1987. 556 pages.

Níkos Bakólas's sixth work of fiction in thirty years, "The Large Square: History of Interim and Recent Times," is set in Salonika during the waning days of World War II and the civil conflict that followed. More like a chronicle than a traditional narrative, the beautifully written novel centers on the life of a handful of characters and their struggle to survive the poverty, violence, and death that surround them. Each chapter, titled after one of the main characters, focuses on his or her particulars, the whole being narrated in the omniscient third-person method of realistic fiction. Though historical events are mentioned, the work is not a historical novel; it is a fictional account of a world in which persons suddenly vanish, never to be seen again, through accident, act of violence, or covert operation.

Fótis the vagabond, Hrístos the journalist, Angéla the immigrant, Yánnis the ambitious and corrupt businessman, as well as Ánghelos and Antigone—two youngsters born and raised in the midst of war—all are exemplary individuals who, confused by the politics and frightened by the violence around them, are trying to make sense of and believe in ideologies that promise a better, more secure future, only to be betrayed and even sacrificed by them.

In the background is Salonika, real with its flesh-and-blood characters walking in its dark, narrow streets, drinking in its taverns, making love in its poverty-stricken houses. At the same time, however, the city seems unreal, almost mythical, haunting its inhabitants with unknown enemies, conspiracies, and intrigues. "The Large Square" is unsparing in its depiction of the toll exacted by a national conflict even as it affirms that war wounds heal and that people often emerge from such ordeals all the stronger. A masterful storyteller, Bakólas knows how to paint panoramic canvases and how to delineate individual dramas enacted within broader ones.

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