

Alastra - A book of two worlds

by Giorgos Panagiotakis

AUTHOR BIO

Giorgos Panagiotakis was born in Athens in December 1968. He has worked in cinema and television, serving various posts, and has written screenplays for films and videogames. Many of his scripts and reviews have been published in print and in electronic media. Prior to “Alastra - A Book of two worlds” (Patakis Publishers) he has published with Kedros two novels and a series that was awarded the Literary Book Prize for children in Anagnostis magazine 2015.

ABSTRACT:

Victoria and Christos find themselves in their great grandmother’s house; a great grandmother which up until a few days ago they didn’t even know the existence of. Is it possible that their great grandmother is not what she seems? And that they themselves exist outside real time? And, finally, what is this book that writes itself every night?

Vivid narrative which carries you into the imaginary world of Alastra right from the very first pages, and an artfully structured plot which keeps you on the edge of your seat, making you hang on the lips of the heroes in anticipation of their actions, reactions and judgments. The narrative universe of “*A book of two worlds*” is an amazing imaginary universe yet also a window into the magical journey of two children towards self-knowledge.

A FEW WORDS ON THE PLOT:

When Victoria and Christos find out that they are to spend a whole week of their holidays at their great grandmother’s house, they are anything but looking forward to it- the house in question is in the middle of a long, dark forest, and their great grandmother is ill mannered and scary. Let alone the fact that until that point they didn’t even know they had a great grandmother!

Soon they discover that there are more reasons to worry. For example, there is a forbidden book somewhere in the house which seems to write itself every evening. The heroes of this book bear an uncanny resemblance to Christos and Victoria. Only they live in a strange, mythical world where a great war has just broken out

between humans and three tribes of magical creatures– the creatures of the Forest, of the Sea, and of the Underworld.

As the days go by, the questions continue to pile up. Where does the key-hole shaped well outside the house lead to? What is the great grandmother's real identity and what is her mission? And most importantly: can someone enter a book or switch places with the people that live and breathe within its pages?

In this context, Christos and Victoria dare to embark on a literary yet literal quest, on a magical journey towards self-knowledge. They become involved in an exciting adventure, in a game of identities and reflections which takes place in two opposing worlds; two worlds with their own mythical creatures, their own problems, and their own battles which need to be fought.

SYNOPSIS:

Part 1. The Chronicle of Alastra

Christos and Victoria are twins who spend their boring summer holidays in their big house on the Green Hill, perched before their “huge yet thin as rice paper TV screen”. They are taken aback when they find out that they have a great grandmother, Kyveli, who seeks to host them in her remote house on the Rainy Mountain for a week. In return, they will inherit the house. The twins' parents need no further convincing: they load their children onto the huge jeep and follow her instructions to the last word.

Things go sour from the very beginning when the children are in the Dull Valley waiting for one of Kyveli's representatives to pick them up. Firstly they lose their glasses and then a wolf catches Victoria's sleeve in its jaws and drags her on a path with Christos trailing behind, mortified. While they cross the bridge that leads them out of Dull Valley, the connection on Christos' mobile phone is lost as is all contact with the world they have known so far.

And so begins the children's double journey into another world and, essentially, into themselves. Christos and Victoria find themselves at the heart of Rainy Mountain, in the strange house of their strange great grandmother who looks after the two siblings in the strangest of ways. And though at first they try to flee, there comes a point when not only do they no longer contemplate leaving, but rather choose to delve deeper into their new life.

One evening three very strange creatures (The Green Lady, Barin, Namtaru) visit Kyveli and they all discuss a war which is in progress somewhere. They also discuss a “magical book” which determines destiny as well as an old oath which concerns it. The children eavesdrop on the conversation and cross-check the information with that which they find in a forbidden book in the house entitled “The Chronicle of Alastra.” On its pages, which seem to mysteriously write themselves every evening, a world of mythical creatures (Creatures of the Sea, the Forest and the Underworld) and humans comes to life. As they read it Christos and Victoria come to know the state of this world: they see poverty, crime, usurpation of power and misery. They read about the war that has broken out between the alliance of mythical creatures and humans oppressed by king Longbeard and his scheming advisor Metastasius. They even learn about the change in the UnderWorld where the just Irkala has been overthrown by the all-powerful demon Nergal.

Christos and Victoria identify with the two heroes of the book, the siblings Istros and Niki, who are the same age as them and are forced to put their lives at the stake in order save their family. And so while the tribes of mythical creatures besiege the humans’ castle, Istros and Niki secretly travel to the so called Island of Fate to find the apple tree that doubles as a portal into another world. That is where the “Book of Fate” which writes itself every evening is found, under the protection of a witch who is well-respected by all. Whatever is written in the book happens in the world of Alastra. All the inhabitants have sworn never to lay a hand upon it. But in contrast to the mythical creatures who never break their oath, humans are far more capable of doing so. And so, Istros and Niki are called upon to steal the “Book of Fate” and deliver it to Metastasius who plans to write in it all that is needed in order for humans to win the war.

After their dangerous adventures, Istros and Niki reach the island of Fate as castaways. They manage to escape the creatures of the forest. Hit by arrows which induce sleep they find the path of the apple tree and begin to climb something which resembles a well. At the same time, while Christos and Victoria are reading, they hear a noise outside their great grandmother’s house. They run to the window and are shocked to see two children identical to them coming out of the well. The only difference is that these children are dressed in clothes of another era.

Part 2. Outside a book or in it

Following their initial confusion, Christos and Victoria decide to help Istros and Niki. But the “Chronicle of Alastra” which by now can be clearly identified as the “Book of Fate” has disappeared. In the meantime, Istros and Niki, drugged by the arrows, fall

asleep. At this point Christos and Victoria make a big decision. They wear the others' clothes and go down the well. Their aim is to take Istros and Niki's place and find a fair solution to the story of Alastra. They even believe that this will have an impact on their own world and on their own lives.

Victoria who unlike her brother is an avid reader, has identified the dark antagonists of the story. But she does not reveal her suspicions because "in a book, everything must be said at the right time." She does, however, warn Christos of the dangers that may arise when you are the hero in a novel.

Problems begin to arise when they reach the Island of Fate. Victoria is captured by the creatures of the Forest, is put through a trial and condemned to imprisonment. Following a draw between the representatives of the three tribes she is delivered to the demon Namtaru and she travels with him to the Black Island where Nergal's kingdom and the Gate to the Underworld are. Meanwhile, Christos has met –and probably fallen in love with– a Tree Girl (Sorviana). She and her friends (the Tree Children) are against war and hide in the forest in order not to be recruited as soldiers. Under the leadership of a boy (Fraxo) they all decide to help Christos. They are joined by harpies Iris and Aello, two well-built, winged creatures of the Underworld who remain loyal to the overthrown queen Irkala.

On Namtaru's ship Victoria realizes that Nergal secretly cooperates with Metastadius, thus confirming many of her suspicions. In the meantime, having gained confidence after his initial success, Christos attacks the ship all alone and is captured. The siblings are led to the Black Island to be interrogated by Nergal himself. There they enter the water roads of the Underworld and board the Grim Reaper's boat (the Grim Reaper being the boatman of the dying). The latter proves loyal to Irkala and secretly takes the children to her. She reveals that she has saved Istros and Niki's parents from death but can do nothing more because Nergal has crushed both her anger and her power.

The children are locked in a cell where Nergal visits them. Victoria tricks him by saying that she and her brother have stolen the 'magic book' which is now hidden on the Island of Fate. She even convinces him to allow them to go there, accompanied by his soldiers, in order to bring the book back. At the same time she reveals her suspicions which prove to be valid. Indeed, Nergal and Metastadius are the same person and the war is a result of his actions.

His aim is to make all the tribes of mythical creatures disappear so that the joy of living is lost and fear of death rules supreme. He even aims to exert his power in the world that lies beyond the apple tree. Christos secretly records Nergal's confession on his mobile phone in order to have proof of his treachery. But when he realises

that Nergal will find the telephone on him he gives it to the Grim Reaper, urging him to show it to Irkala.

While Christos and Victoria board the ship again to return to the Island of Fate, Fraxos and the rest of the Tree Children rush to their aid. A battle against Nergal's soldiers ensues, only to end when Sorviana and the harpies arrive along with representatives of the Tribes of the Forest and Sea (The Green Lady and Barin). While the latter try to discover the truth, a terrible earthquake occurs. The rocks of Black Island are torn apart and Irkala appears, followed by Istros and Niki's parents and other prisoners. The Grim Reaper happily recounts all that has happened and thus we learn that the proof of Nergal's treachery awoke the queen's dormant wrath leading her to come into conflict with the usurper and ultimately to defeat him. Now everybody heads towards the castle of Alastra and the siege ends. The people of Alastra imprison Kind Longbeard and make peace with the tribes of mythical creatures.

When all is taken care of the harpies take Christos and Victoria (as well as Sorviana and Fraxo) back to the island of Fate. With a heavy heart, the children bid farewell to their new friends and return to their world through the apple tree portal. They discover that winter has come. Kyveli welcomes them and informs them that Istros and Niki have taken their place.

Christos and Victoria must decide which world they want to live in. They opt to regain their old identity and set off on the road to their house on the Green Hill. There they secretly meet with Istros and Niki and learn about the beneficial changes in their family which have come about thanks to the siblings from Alastra. They then exchange clothes and roles and go their separate ways. Istros and Niki leave for Alastra while Christos and Victoria embark on a new life as they move to the city with their parents.

REVIEWS:

"This mingling of worlds, characters, events and books is governed by a remarkable speed which propels the reader forward, yet without being stressful or bombarding him with information that is difficult to absorb. Instead the reader feels a remarkable balance between the plot, the suspense ("what happens next?"), the climax, and the solution. Beyond the cinematic and gameplay elements and descriptions (which appear to be especially well thought out) I detected an ability to penetrate into the psyche of that strange creature known as an adolescent across the world.

In the middle of his perfectly crafted story, Panayiotakis gives us what is, in my opinion, the ultimate narrative peak in the book. This comes in the form of the ingenious scene where the two worlds come together, having moved parallel to

each other up until then. It is a scene in which all limits, narrative strands, boundaries and physical laws are torn apart in a sensory shower, serving the narrative unity which allows heroes and readers alike to dive into the big adventure.”

Eleni Georgostathi - blog

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