

Wonderful World by Philippos Mandilaras

a novel for young adults

"Wonderful World" is the world of thirteen teenagers living in a deprived neighbourhood near the centre of Athens. The reader follows twenty-three hours of their lives the last day of their school year. In the evening of that day they are organizing a big farewell party for leaving the Gymnasium.

The party will be held at the school premises and it is obviously the event of the year where everyone is longing to be - each one for its own reason. But a series of unfortunate events and a gang of petty thieves threaten to spoil everything.

The narration is through monologues of the heroes, in a staccato, raw and daring style. The teenagers are not masked or censored. They're honest, straightforward and strict both with others and with themselves. Inside the maze of their conflicting thoughts, they try to find their place in the school microcosm, in their families but also in the big world that surrounds them. They fight to heal their wounds and move ahead. It's adulthood, in short.

"A Wonderful World" is Philippos Mandilaras's first novel after four years of silence. In it, he attempts to capture the essence of today's adolescents in a multiracial, rundown neighbourhood in the centre of Athens.

EXTENDED SUMMARY

"A Wonderful World" is that of thirteen adolescents living in a blighted area near the centre of Athens. The reader follows twenty three hours of their life on a day in May when the final year of junior high school comes to a close and they begin to prepare for their exams the following week. On that night they have arranged a big farewell party which they plan to hold at the school itself. It is the event of the year which they all await eagerly – each for his or her own reasons.

The narration is given through the heroes' consecutive internal monologues. At the start of each monologue the time, place and state of the hero are mentioned (in the manner of stage directions.)

The prose is conversational, blunt, often raw and daring. The adolescents conceal nothing, nor are they censored. They are honest, direct and strict both with themselves and with others. Through the labyrinth of their conflicting thoughts they attempt to negotiate their position in

the microcosms of their school and families but also in the big world surrounding them. They try to heal their wounds, tame their ghosts and move on. In short, they try to grow up.

The reader enters the heroes' world at one minute past midnight on the day of the party. He does so by reading the thoughts of the lovestruck Fotis who is standing outside Eleonora's apartment building trying to confess his love for her by writing on the wall using the spray he has bought while at the same time trying to convince her to go to the party with him. The reader leaves their world twenty three hours later, at the same place but six floors higher up on the terrace of the building in which Eleonora lives, where the heroes have gathered to celebrate their wonderful world.

A lot happens in between. Dynamic and witty Eleonora sets off in the night to vandalise the gym teacher's car because she believes he has behaved towards her in a degrading way all year. She then goes back on her decision but after his behavior one morning following her short delay during the first hour of school she decides to strike during the third break. She, and the whole school, enjoy the results of her actions at home time. Meanwhile Fotis' declaration of love, written using a spray on the building's wall, makes her feel awkward. A feeling of awkwardness which is accentuated when she learns from her mother that the lyrics Fotis has written, taken from a song by Nick Cave are the same lyrics she dreamt her first love would say to her, long before she met her husband, Eleonora's father.

At the same time Fotis drifts in a poetic, dreamy world where Eleonora is his muse despite the fact that in the here and now he still has trouble looking at her in the eye.

While Fotis wonders whether he is truly in love with Eleonora or with the image of her that he projects into his poetic universe, his best friend, Antonis suffers the loss of his dear uncle, the man who raised him after his father's death. At the same time, however, Antonis feels suddenly attracted to and instantaneously in love with the reserved and enigmatic Joanna. When he is invited to the tacky vigil for the deceased organized by his unpleasant aunt and her friends, he finds comfort in an imaginary conversation with Joanna until he decides to escape from the asphyxiating apartment full of middle-aged, supposedly mourning ladies and to return to his world where he meets Joanna roaming the streets and realizes that beyond conversing with her in his mind he wants to converse with her in person, holding her by the hand and looking into her eyes.

Joanna, the philosopher of the group, is the one who plays a strategic role in getting back the equipment for the party stolen from the school by a band of burglars including her brother. She also plays an important part in defeating Sakis Skantzou who is the main enemy of every girl in the class. Sakis is a sexist bully, bullied himself by his brother, who has undertaken on behalf of his brother (who is also the leader of the gang of burglars) to discover who told the school principal on them for stealing the equipment. Soon, however, Sakis himself becomes infuriated with his brother's behavior (his brother taking no notice of Sakis' need for the party) for the first time in his life and takes his revenge.

His revenge is violent as is his whole life with the exception of the moments when he meets beautiful, exuberant classmates (who fear him more than anything in the world), like Antesina who simply dreams of a quiet life with a good husband somewhere on a farm far from Nigeria where her missing father lives, and more importantly, far from her mother's latest boyfriend who seems to be lusting for her.

But Antesina cannot even fathom how Sakis fantasises about her best friend Kelly who despite living in poverty and raising her young siblings practically by herself, dreams of fame and fortune which she can achieve solely through her impressive and always meticulous (albeit due to stolen clothes from the shops on Patision Street) appearance.

After all, these are the same reasons why Anargyros, the "priest boy" as everyone calls him, falls for her. Anargyros is a permanent victim of Sakis' violent personality. In fact today – on the last day of high school – he has decided to take revenge (a totally hellish act as far as his ethics are concerned), however on his way he meets Kelly and at that point hell and temptation take on a whole new meaning for him.

Anargyros is the victim of Rafailia's repressed aggressiveness. Rafailia is the girl in glasses who has a blind faith in starsigns and feels jealous of everybody. Thankfully Christiana, with her big heart and love of chocolate (and good food) knows how to handle such situations and channels the permanently stressed and disappointed Smaragda, the girl with a perpetual sense of loss, to the couch where Rafailia sits awkwardly so that they can exchange their sense of awkwardness, their silence and their guilt trips until the chocolate soufflé comes out of the oven and they realise that these are reasons enough for the party which will take place sooner or later.

Because the party which was meant to take place in the school yard with the principal's blessings has changed both venue and its aim.

To begin with it was a party aimed at celebrating their high school graduation. But at lunchtime on the same day after the equipment was stolen and returned and a threatening message from Sakis' brother implying that the equipment had been returned as empty boxes with no content, the amazing Tatiana (the one who always tried to strike harder at volleyball practice to let out steam because of all she was going through at home) thought that "The party is just the excuse for..."

She sent the note to Artin, the one who had just that morning decided to end his career as Sakis' brother's 'frontman' and burglar in general, taking advantage of the fact that he had seen and taken photos of the gang when they were stealing the equipment. And so Artin sent everybody Tatiana's idea –he even sent it the ostensibly calm Christos, his withdrawn classmate with a staggering sense of humour who often acted as everybody's guardian angel.

And so everybody – truly everybody – felt that yes, the party was the excuse for them to all come closer to one another, to get to know their limits and those of the next person, to argue, to philosophise, to confide in others, to embrace, to fall in love, to mourn and, above all, to

dream. It seems, after all, that this is the reason why their world is wonderful. Despite the fact that they live on the dark, wounded side of town at an equally dark time they are able to keep their dream alive and change the dark matter of their daily life into laughter, embraces and love. They are able to transform “I” to “we”.

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