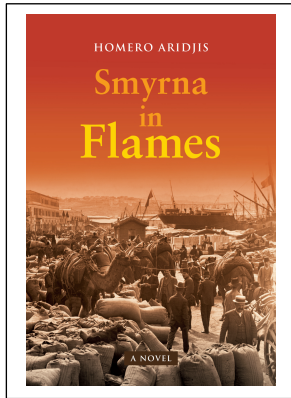


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SMYRNA IN FLAMES

HOMERO ARIDJIS

Translated from the Spanish by Lorna Scott Fox

166 pp. Paperback (flaps): \$19.95

Mandel Vilar Press & Dryad Press

September 13, 2022, marks the centenary of the horrific Great Fire of Smyrna. It might be expected that scores of books and articles on this topic will be published. What might not be expected is a harrowing novella-cum family memoir by the Mexican author Homero Aridjis.

Aridjis, a poet, novelist and environmental activist, is half Greek. His father, Nicias, ended up in Smyrna at the end of the Greco-Turkish War, as part of the retreating Greek army, and witnessed the inferno.

When the Ancient port city was set ablaze — by pro-Turkish forces, according to most accounts — its Greek, Armenian and Levantine quarters were reduced to ashes and rubble over a period of nine days. It is thought that as many as 100,000 died, not just as a result of the conflagration, but also from the slaughter by Turkish troops, suicide and drowning, as panicked inhabitant crowded onto the quay, hoping to escape. Allied warships stood at anchor in the harbour, maintaining a chilly neutrality in the face of humanitarian disaster. The horrors Nicias Aridjis witnessed led him to emigrate to Mexico, never to return.

This distressing history is retold by Aridjis in *Smyrna in Flames*, which draws on his father's experiences as well as scholarship and other eye-witness accounts, including the memoir of the U.S. consul, George Horton. There is a danger in historical fiction of disaster tourism (there are many graphic rape scenes included here, for example) but Aridjis maintains an artistic distance. He uses literary tropes — the names of ships in the *Iliad*; a Cavafy poem becomes the literal writing on the wall — and there is an element of the surreal. At one point a group of escapees from a mental hospital wanders through the burning city. They imagine themselves to be early saints. In another striking scene Georgios Hatzianesti, the Greek commander-in-chief who oversaw the defeat, is afraid to stand up because he believes his legs are made of glass. What seems like magical realism or metaphor turns out to be fact: reportedly, Hatzianesti did suffer from this delusion.

While the Kemalist Turkish forces and Çetes (brigands who did much of the dirty work) are sometimes rendered as orientalised caricatures, Aridjis reserves some of his harshest criticism for the “neutral” western powers, who stood idly by as the disaster unfolded. The book is not all devastation, however. There is an interlude in which Nicias recalls his father's delight in growing figs.

As a plotted novel, *Smyrna in Flames* doesn't always hold together, but as a lyric exploration of human failings and cruelty it is honest and powerful. Complete with footnotes, photographs and maps, it is a genre-blurring work, lucidly translated by Lorna Scott Fox. The book's final photograph illustrates how Aridjis's family adapted to a life away from Smyrna. It shows an elderly Nicias in his orchard in Mexico, cradling an armful of figs.

For more information

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