First and foremost, *Honey, Olives, Octopus* presents itself as a well-informed, sustained paean to the joys not only of the Greek table but also of the landscape of the country from Thasos to Thessaloniki to Serifos to Crete. Bakken investigates and describes some of the foodstuffs this variegated country yields, from honey, olives, and octopus to chickpeas, bread, and red mullet. And let’s not forget wine, ouzo, and *tsipouro*, all washed down in heroic quantities. I’m reminded of a James Merrill poem, “David’s Night in Velies,” about rustic Greek hospitality:

Followed the Cyclopean meal:
Loaves, rice, hens, goats, gallons of sweet red wine.
I mellowed with the men
Who now waxed crackling,
—For all I knew—but then
Were on their feet, with flashlights,
tramping out
In ancient Air Force overcoats
After the small birds roosting
roundabout.

philosophical

Merrill stays by the fire with his hostess, but
Bakken would certainly be out hunting with the
guys. But despite the camaraderie of Bakken’s
male bonding, “Cyclopean” has it right; the lonely
shepherd Polyphemus, not wholly unsympathetic
in the Odyssey and downright likeable in
Theocritus’ Idyll, would be right at home in
Honey, Olives, Octopus, which introduces us to
many impassioned fishermen, bakers, farmers,
and cheesemakers.

This book also recalls another less earthy Merrill
poem, “After Greece” (and can it be a coincidence that one of Bakken’s books of poems is entitled After Greece?):

Light into the olive entered
And was oil. . . . All through
The countryside were old ideas
Found lying open to the elements.

True, Bakken’s elements are less abstract than
ideas: “In Greece, I risk becoming pure verb:
diving, eating, smelling, making, climbing,
writing, thinking.” Most of these verbs are
emphatically active.

I should be content to stay here for the
next week, eating seafood, sipping

tsipouro, and watching the vines grow. But the truth is, the moment I arrive . . . a weird kind of
oscillation kicks in.

. . . All at once I feel the desire to swim (in all three coves), to dive for octopus, to hike up into the
nearby olive groves, to chat with Stamatis about the state of the sea, to join Eva in the kitchen (where
she’s stuffing zucchini flowers with rice, onion, and mint), to read Wallace Stevens out on my patio,
to scribble something in my notebook, to throw rocks, and to scream (I don’t know what) with all the
air in my lungs. Some island calm will wash over me eventually, I trust, but my inquietude never
gives up easily.

Cyclopean paean to plenitude, candid account of the writer’s mood swings, Honey, Olives, Octopus is
also a travel book, rich with history and geography, and particularly knowledgeable about Greek
agriculture, botany, and cuisine. Reading the book—even thinking about reading it—makes me
hungry. The interested reader will find plenty of recipes here, though the inclusion of these strikes me
as more a nod to the current fashion for folding recipes into books that may or may not be primarily
about food (which this book certainly is) than as an integral part of the story.
Reading the book, I’m not only hungry; I’m also abashed to realize how little I learned during my distant four years on the island of Samos, even though my then-husband and I ran an olive press and raised (among other vegetables) okra and radishes that for one season I sold in the early mornings. True, I climbed a few mountains, went out on a few fishing expeditions, and drank a lot of wine (though I never liked ouzo)—but I was in my early twenties then, and accompanied by my Samiot husband. In addition to Bakken’s insatiable curiosity and manic energy, his solitary status through most of his adventures seems key to his intense engagement with the landscape, food, and people whose praises he sings. Nor is he in his early twenties, though it often seems that way.

Is Honey, Olives, Octopus a memoir? In one sense, of course; it recounts a particular strand of the writer’s life. It meditates as well as narrates and explains; it has room for poetry and history and geography. But while most memoirs focus on a discrete episode, this book is a memoir of a place rather than a time. “I go back to Greece as often as I can,” Bakken writes,

but that’s never enough, since my love affair with the country hasn’t dulled one bit. . . . While I’m not Greek by birth, I feel more at home there than almost anywhere else on the planet . . . I have a history here that I slip back into like a second skin.

The zig-zaggy feeling of the book, the undertow, the mood swings—these can be understood not only as jet lag, hangovers, or the rhythm of digestion, but as a stubborn ache at a fundamental feeling of displacement, wherever one happens to be:

A wave of homesick longing for my wife and children has come out of nowhere and it feels as if, after so many days in motion, my dawdling heart has suddenly caught up with my busy body. . . . I think of that great line by Seferis: “Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me.” I’m leaving for home tomorrow and can already feel the injury of departure.

Whether that wound is a longing for family or a longing not to leave Greece, or both, Bakken doesn’t say. But Honey, Olives, Octopus is all about longing.

The pervasive back-and-forthing here, the sense that real life begins and ends in Greece, reminded me less of memoir than (unlikely as it sounds) of the various characters’ hankering for Narnia in C. S. Lewis’s children’s stories. The Narnian landscape is more beautiful, food is tastier, conversations are more memorable than in dull old England. Narnia is where adventures happen. But unlike Peter, Susan, Edmund, Lucy, Eustace, Jill, and the other lucky children who stumble into Narnia only to be exiled when they get too old, Bakken isn’t a child. Often enough, his children have to stay behind in Pennsylvania. “When my nine-year-old daughter learned last week that I’d be heading back to Greece without her, she broke down. ‘But Dad, I just want to go swimming all day and eat octopus and spanakopita in the afternoon. It’s not fair!’ I understand her reaction and am myself prone to fits of melodramatic pining for the place and its food.” This oddly tepid passage leaves me sympathizing
with the nine-year-old.

Where Honey, Olives, Octopus does behave like a memoir is in its general practice of discreetly veiling the fact that its writer is writing. While Bakken occasionally refers to his professorial status, to his activities as a translator and poet, or to a writers’ conference, he’s much more likely to present himself as out fishing, climbing a mountain, or harvesting olives. Clearly much note-taking has gone into the making of this book, but one seldom sees Bakken actually writing—a quality the book shares with most first-person accounts of activities, such as being a fireman, or an ER doctor, that one doesn’t automatically associate with taking notes.

Nevertheless, Bakken has taken notes to excellent effect. The book is clearly and evocatively written, informative, well-paced, vivid, hunger-inducing (as I’ve said)—as well as sometimes, as the dark undertow exerts its pull, very poignant. Those who know Greece and the Greek language may or may not be more moved than others by vignettes such as this scene where Bakken is drinking wine with one of the many old friends he sees every time he visits Greece. This friend, George, is a cancer patient:

For fifteen minutes he ranges eloquently from politics to poetry to Eros and Thanatos. Though he doesn’t speak about his health directly, I know that what he isn’t saying is at the heart of his monologue. We’re not climbing Olympus for any ceremonial purpose, he insists, but he does reveal that he’d planned to climb it once before, with a now dead friend, and squandered the chance. He won’t let that happen again.

“We live in a sphere, not on a line,” George tells me, while hoisting an invisible orb toward the ceiling, “and we must find a way to fill it. Only fools worry about what’s coming. We are here, after all, swirling black wine in our glasses like a couple of emperors.”

Rachel Hadas’s most recent books are Poems for Camilla (Measure Press) and verse translations of Euripides’ two Iphigenia plays.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 32 Number 6, on page 65

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