

B BOOKS

& writers

Cypriot poet shortlisted for major literary award

By John Vickers

COSTAS Montis, arguably the island's greatest living poet, was one of the eleven shortlisted candidates for the \$50,000 Neustadt Prize for Literature, won by Caribbean writer Kamau Braithwaite last month.

Montis' name, which was in competition with such literary giants as Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Seamus Heaney and Zbigniew Herbert, was put forward by a member of the panel of judges, Cypriot writer Elli Paionidou, who told me how her own participation came about:

"I was in New York two years ago at a writers' meeting", she recalled, "and I met a Russian author who told me about his Cypriot friend who is a distinguished professor at the University of Oklahoma. We corresponded and I eventually met Djelal Kadir, a Cypriot of mixed Greek and Turkish parentage, who grew up in the village of Ayios Theodoros in the Larnaca district and left at the age of 14 in 1960. At a Thanksgiving dinner, attended among others by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Professor Kadir told me about the Neustadt Prize which is awarded every two years to a major literary figure. Then last year he called me and invited me to be on the jury for this year's award."

Elli was in distinguished company, (one of her fellow jurors at last month's discussions was J.M. Coetzee) but it was not simply a matter of suggesting a name and taking a vote.

She had to spend several months poring over dozens of books by the other candidates for the award which, though much lesser known than the Nobel Prize for Literature is, nonetheless, highly regarded.

Many past winners are also Nobel laureates, whilst other Nobel winners have been nominated for the Neustadt award. For Elli Paionidou, who proposed a Cypriot writer, the task was even greater than it was for the other jurors, as she explained:

ENORMOUS

"The problem with Costas Montis is that, despite having an enormous body of excellent work, it has all been published in Greek and very little exists in translation. We tried to provide as much as possible, but you can imagine how difficult it is for photocopies of translated poems to compete with, say, the published works of someone like Mailer. It certainly brought home to me the need for our Cultural Service to take on the task of translating some of our major writers into other languages. It is a shame when those who deserve to be known outside their own country remain limited by the confines of their language. When a poet such as Montis is not widely translated, how will we ever make even the best Cypriot authors known beyond Cyprus and Greece?"

The 11-member Neustadt jury selected the prize-winner by voting first for 10 of the 11 candidates, then 9 of the remaining 10 and so on until it was a contest between the last two names.

Although Costas Montis was certainly an outsider for the prize, his name stayed in the shortlist until the final five. Elli Paionidou was delighted that a writer from Cyprus made such a strong showing.

"I certainly did my best to persuade the other members of the jury of the quality of Montis' work", she told me on her return from the United States. "It is not simply a case of a Cypriot supporting another Cypriot. He deserves recognition, and his candidature for the Neustadt Prize will help towards this. All eleven writers on the shortlist were profiled in *World Literature Today* which is distributed to more than 2000 universities and research centres all over the world and several of my co-jurors expressed an interest in studying Montis work more deeply. It's a start, both for him and for Cypriot literature."



Roula Ioannidou-Stavrou

WITH several local and international literary awards and poetry prizes to her credit, Roula Ioannidou - Stavrou might be forgiven if she were to concentrate on writing and leave the promotion side of her career to others.

In fact she is one of the most active writers on the island and a firm believer in the need to approach the reading public on a more personal basis.

"It's not enough to send books abroad or to sit back and wait for people to buy them in the stores", she says.

"Writers have to be known and be seen, they need to talk about their work if people are going to be interested enough to want to read it."

Last week Roula left the island for Athens, where she gave two illustrated lectures on her own work, literature in general and recent Cypriot history.

On Monday was the guest of the Athens-based American Pierce College, where she recited some of her own poetry (she has nine published collections to date), presented a number of works that have been set to music and talked on the Cyprus problem and the contribution of contemporary Cypriot literature to the enlightenment campaign on the national issue.

The following evening the Cypriot writer took part in a cultural event organised by the Cyprus Struggle Support Group, the main speaker at which was the Greek Deputy Minister of Defence, Nicos Kourris.

Constricted

Roula Ioannidou-Stavrou had no difficulty in taking her writings to Athens, but, I wondered, doesn't she ever feel constricted by the fact that Greek is, unfortunately, a minor European language?

"I feel very limited by the language and, obviously, if Cypriot literature is to reach a wider public it has to be translated into other languages", she told me before leaving for Athens.

"Translations are made with painful sacrifices to meaning, rhythm and language, but it's the only way."

Fortunately the writers' organisation P.E.N. is very supportive of Cypriot au-

thors, but if a Cypriot ever becomes well-known abroad one day it will be a great achievement."

Roula herself may not be well-known anywhere, but her own country for the time being, but she was recently included in an international anthology of poems from 55 countries, "World Poetry 1994".

Involved

The editor, Dr Krishna Srinivas, had seen a poem of mine in "International Poetry" and he wrote and invited me to submit one poem for consideration for the book", she recalled. "And although works that deal with a specific locality are more often rejected for an anthology of this nature, I decided to send a poem

about Nicosia which was accepted for publication."

The poem, which deals with those missing since the 1974 Turkish invasion, was published with explanatory notes, one of 268 chosen from all over the world.

Roula Ioannidou-Stavrou is obviously deeply involved in the literature of Cyprus and is at present seconded to the Cultural Service of the Ministry of Education and Culture, where she is creating and updating the archives on local writers.

Her belief in the worth of Cypriot writing and the need to take it more directly to the public means that she has to spend a fair amount of time and energy on activities that some

might even frown upon as "marketing".

"Poetry is for a small readership at the best of times", she says, "and if by giving readings or lectures a writer can increase the number of people interested in, reading in general, I think he or she has a duty to do so."

Even the most avid readers have an enormous choice of works in front of them, so if personal interest in or contact with a particular writer makes them select a book by that author, there's nothing wrong with that.

After all, as writers we want people to read our work.

That's what it's all about."

Bringing poetry to the people

By John Vickers



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