

ELLI PEONIDOU

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**THE SIRENS OF MANHATTAN  
(I SEIRINES TOU MANHATTAN)**

Review by Manos Kontoleon  
'Kathimerini' newspaper, Athens, 24-02-1998

**A young immigrant**

Elli Peonidou: *"The Sirens of Manhattan"*, (Patakis publications, 1997)

The writer of books for children is frequently faced with the dilemma of whether to present a truth in a straightforward way that may harm the reader, or to hint at knowledge in a milder fashion. The issue of self-censorship by those writing for young readers is a serious one, one which has not been entirely resolved and which, as long as it remains in semi-darkness, will prevent authors in this field from taking a frank stand regarding the self-sufficiency of art.

I mention this issue here since I will be referring to Elli Peonidou's novel *"The Sirens of Manhattan"* which, I believe, is a first, insofar as my knowledge of all things Greek in the field of literature for children and young adults allows me to judge.

The book deals with the emigration of Greeks to the USA during the early years of the post-war era and more generally with the Greek diaspora in America and I do not believe that this subject has yet formed a basis for the development of literature aimed at young readers.

*"The Sirens of Manhattan"* takes as its subject the first years of a young illegal Cypriot immigrant in New York. The feelings of someone who has left behind a beloved but poverty-stricken past and is trying to create a future, the feelings of someone experiencing divided concepts such as homeland, friendship and language – these are all challenges for a writer. The hero, Manolis, is an ordinary young man whose family situation forces him to board a ship and arrive as a stowaway in New York. There he attempts to survive, to integrate, to educate himself, to find work. Some people help him, others don't. He makes the best of his opportunities and dreams of a better tomorrow. At the same time he does not forget his roots. While he is trying to survive, Cyprus is fighting the great battle for independence. Albeit from a distance, Manolis follows the political developments and he does not forget his family and friends – his mother, his grandmother, his brothers and sisters, the girl he loves. Eventually a bright future awaits the hero. As Peonidou describes it, she also sketches out an entire historical period and an entire art form – that of the cinema (Manolis makes a career in films).

I do not know if the characters in the novel are in any way based on real people but what is certain is that Manolis and the other characters in the book are full of life.

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And herein lies Elli Peonidou's particular ability to write for children. While she describes a world that frequently touches the edge of darkness (financial, social and erotic), she never for a moment loses her dignity, a dignity that is never cold but, on the contrary, particularly sensuous. It is as if we are being addressed by someone who may have gone through a great deal but who nonetheless succeeds in making us not feel sorry for him because he has self-respect and an aristocratic air.

Peonidou's text is simple and almost epic. I cannot say whether the author has used self-censorship or not but she narrates the events realistically without provocation or insult to the inner world of the young reader on whose engagement any understanding of the book depends.