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Zigzag Through the Bitter-Orange Trees

ISBN: 1566566614

By Ersi Sotiropoulos, translated by Peter Green

Review by: Elizabeth Whitmore

01/08

It is rare for Americans to have the opportunity to sample new literature from non-English speaking countries, and *Zigzag Through the Bitter-Orange Trees* is one of our golden opportunities. Author Ersi Sotiropoulos won the Book Critics' Award and the National Literature Prize for Best Novel in her home country of Greece for this dark, comical story.

Zigzag has been translated beautifully to English by Peter Green, the Dougherty Centennial Professor emeritus of classics at the University of Texas and at the University of Iowa. A master of Greek translation, it is interesting that Peter Green would deviate from his academic roots of translating Catullus and Ovid to work on this little postmodern novel by a Greek woman. Furthermore, the editor at Interlink Books was quite young—twenty-three years old—when she began working on *Zigzag*. This combination of creative, historical, editorial, and linguistic talent is what makes *Zigzag* such a gem.

Told in four rotating voices, the story follows the lives of Lia, a terminally ill woman in an Athens hospital; Sotiris, a perverted male nurse; Sid, Lia's melancholy younger brother; and Nina, a little girl. The story is simple, quirky, and sullen. What makes it infectious is the sheer beauty of the language, which is richly evocative and dazzling in English.

Zigzag fully embodies its title, as the story tempers sweet, juicy orange fruit with pithy, bitter pulp and a bit of rot and decomposition. The text even appears to spiral gently out into little segments, like those of an orange, as it alternates between the different viewpoints of the characters. Though each line is worth marveling at, the story moves quickly, even efficiently.

The interactions between the four characters are realistic, but the scenes also maintain a sense of beauty that does not overwhelm the reader with saccharine sweetness. Smoothly, deftly, Sotiropoulos creates depictions of shame, loneliness, and desire that cannot be ignored. *Zigzag* has an enormous amount of



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Ersi Sotiropoulos, ...
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brilliance operating behind its creation, and the talent is evident on the page, as this is a story that both reads softly and speaks loudly.

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