The great sea-dreamer's nightmare: New fiction

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The great sea-dreamer’s nightmare

Christopher Wordsworth

The Dogs Of Paradise, by Abel Posse, translated by Margaret Seyers Peden (Harshham Hamilton, £13.99)
Last Loves, by Alan Sillitoe (Dartmouth, £12.99)
Taking The Devil's Advice, by Anne Fine (Viking, £12.99)

There was something almost miraculous about the way in which Spain, a poor, parched, fragmented country cut off from the European mainstream by the barrier of the Pyrenees, burst on the world at the end of the 15th century. Only writing of the most royal purple, a translation worthy of it, and an irrepressible imagination could hope to do justice to such an historical phenomenon, and all three are sumptuously provided in The Dogs Of Paradise. From the incense of noble cathedrals to the stinking hold of a caravel, from the muttering cries of the fateful couple, Ferdinand and Isabella, to Columbus’s ambivalent circumstance by the rabbi (“slightly snub but he’ll pass” confirm Torquemada’s Jewsniffers) and the callipugious maidens at an Aztec beanfeast (destined to be waitresses and dishwashers at the Nebraska Cafeterias when the great sea-dreamer’s earthly paradise is located) the pageant of flesh and spirit is a torrent.

History says that the royal pair never met until their nuptials in Toledo; there is a more scandalous version here of preliminary rutting, and an interesting gloss on the intimate reasons for Ferdinand’s unembarrass at being the junior partner. Did Hitler wear a miniature of Isabella in the bunker, Ferdinand ever declare “one empire, one people, one leader” or the Amerindians contemplate a pre-emptive strike against the bearded ones (they discovered Europe in 1823)? Anything and everything is possible as the ships of destiny await the tide. “Who was who? There were Jews disguised as monks, their underdrawers stuffed with watches and silver spoons; priests dressed as musketiers travelling as agents of the Inquisition or Vatican, and a plethora of spies from England who had signed on as flamenco dancers”. Anchors aweigh!

Bernard is a successful publisher with a push background so Mr Sillitoe makes him more like a randy commercial traveller in Last Loves; divorced schoolmaster George is of finer clay but reverts to boozy adolescence when they get together, the friendship dating back to the Malayan Emergency (in which the author himself took part as a wireless operator) although their paths have seldom crossed since. Bernard’s ever-loving wife has stumped up for reasons of her own to be later divined; they are at the Raffles — why change the name? — in Singapore on a sentimental return to the Jeloree jungle where they were blooded against the terrorists and, judging by their reminiscent chuckles, permanently snarled — on Van der Hum moreover, South Africa plum brandy, arguing unusually weak brains and strong constitutions as well as yet another cock-up by the Naafl (some years earlier we were reduced to the local napa juice in the uhu, rumoured to leave a lead precipitate on the stomach lining — another story). There is also Gloria, shapely, mid-30s, from a provincial solicitor’s office, drawn to Malaya by memories of her father, a prison governor. As each of them comes face to face with himself she might as well be labelled “catalyst” and have done with it, being otherwise pure cardboard throughout. A romantic country, a smiling people, signposting the inevitable tragedy in the jungle when the letter from Bernard’s wife arrives revealing that two can play at that game. Mr Sillitoe is never less than honest value, but need he have been quite so portentous this time?

After Mr Posse’s fantastic riches and Mr Sillitoe’s sobered seekers in their private jungles it is back to the crumbling home front and the crackle of domestic cross-fire in Taking The Devil’s Advice, Anne Fine’s clever and entertaining second novel. It is said to take two to make a quarrel but the casus bell for Constance after 16 years of marriage is her philosopher husband Oliver’s serene unawareness of ever having given grounds for one. “After the thunder, the rain”. As Socrates is credited with saying when his shrew threw the chamberpot at him; Oliver preens himself on similar restraint, Constance being no mean crockery-hurler herself in her outbursts; he reminds Constance of Bertrand Russell shattering his first marriage with Olympian unconcern. Now after some 3,041 sexual occurrences by his calculations he has been evicted in favour of the gardener who at least is always around.

So, still, is Oliver, in the airing cupboard, writing his autobiography with its catalogue of grievances and stuffing the pages in a pillowcase where Constance finds them and adds her own rasping comments. What about being dragged at his chariot wheels for six rented years in America? The children’s dead gerbils? That disastrous jet-lagged Christmas, no battery with the toys? And the counter-charges: did Aristotle have to put up with Hoovers and nappies? But when you are slung out, at least you are free of each other. Fat chance! Aware of the deadly nightshade in this silly witty achievement.