

# Istanbul of the Mind

LAURENCE RAW\*

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## Istanbul Passage

By Joseph Kanon

London: Simon and Schuster, 2013, 404 pages, \$11.85, ISBN 978147398345

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## Istanbul: Perfect Gems of City Writing

By İlhan Çiler

London: Oxygen Books in association with the British Council, 2013, 254 pages, £9.99, ISBN 9780955970092

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## Sailing Through Byzantium

By Maureen Freely

Edinburgh: Linen Press, 2013, 278 pages, \$13.65, ISBN 9780957596818

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**W**hile traveling through, İstanbul can often prove overwhelming for tourists and locals alike, people often find different strategies to make sense of their experiences. Several foreigners have drawn on a lexicon of tropes and/or images that represent the city as strange and mysterious – the epitome of eastern promise. By doing so they invoke the kind of orientalist metaphors that date as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, when western aristocrats embarking on the Grand Tour became fascinated with the Ottoman Empire. This stance suggests a basic resistance to empa-

thizing with other cultures: although İstanbul might prove fascinating, its charms are best kept at a distance.

Joseph Kanon's İstanbul Passage offers a case in point. Structurally speaking, it is a tightly plotted spy thriller set in Second World War İstanbul, wherein expat business traveler Leon Bauer is drawn into a shadowy world of intrigue, carrying out undercover odd jobs for a variety of paymasters while sustaining good relations with the American Embassy in Ankara. While attempting to do his bit for the Allied war effort, Leon can never be sure of the outcomes of

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his various missions in a city teeming with refugees and spies trafficking in secrets and lies. The book's chief attraction lies in Kanon's narrative of Leon's actions that prove surprising for readers and the protagonist alike.

Geographically speaking, *Istanbul Passage* is carefully plotted; the author has done his research into various areas of the city – Beyoğlu, Laleli, Bebek, Üsküdar – and what they looked like during the Forties with their decaying buildings and innumerable back streets. He has also studied the transport system – as Leon moves from the European to the Asian side and back again, we feel that we are by his side, sharing the journeys with him. On the other hand İstanbul is continually represented in terms of orientalist metaphors; it is “magical” with its “smell of frying fish, trays piled with *simit* (Turkish bagel-like bread) balanced on vendors’ heads, boats crowding the Eminönü piers, everything noisy and sunlit” (p. 22). Why the sight of a *simit*-seller should appear so magical is left tantalizingly unexplained. At night, the city casts a forbidding shadow: “Down the hill three men appeared out of the shadows, probably on their way to a *meyhane* (Turkish bar where alcohol is served). The night belonged to men here, roaming the streets in bored groups, the women safely shuttered away” (p. 47). The city's imperial past casts a threatening shadow over the present: “You know there were five hundred slaves in Yıldız then? Not forty years ago, not even history yet. Slaves here. And people listening in trees” (p. 77). The Bosphorus, sepa-

rating the city over two continents, possesses its own peculiar mystique: “there were two currents [...] the surface current flowing south and a deep undercurrent flowing north, dense and saline, strong enough to drag a fishing boat by its net, pull someone off course” (p. 89). The locals keep to themselves – even in a country transformed two decades earlier by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms, there are only “a few Turks secular enough to risk being in a church,” as if they somehow feared for their lives if they were discovered there. The church is patrolled by “two burly men Leon assumed to be police, scanning the crowd, their faces expressionless” (p. 95).

Through an accumulation of metaphors we learn more about Kanon's true opinion of İstanbul; unlike its western equivalents, it possesses an unearthly quality, while at the same posing continual threats to the unsuspecting traveler with its crooked streets and the endless depths of the Bosphorus. Despite recent moves towards democratization, the city is dominated by its imperial past, as symbolized by the threatening police presence at a church service. Religious differences matter: few Turks would ever be seen in the vicinity of a Christian building. Kanon's representation is strongly reminiscent of that portrayed in Hollywood films of the forties with a Turkish setting. Raoul Walsh's *Background to Danger* (1943), a remake of *Casablanca* (1942), offers a good example with its studio settings of a dark, sinister city providing refuge for a host of shady characters,

including *Sydney Greenstreet*. Norman Foster's *Journey into Fear* (1943) contains a bravura performance by Orson Welles as Colonel Haki, the sadistic chief of İstanbul police. The fact that *İstanbul Passage* evokes such associations suggests two things – first, that the novel is basically old-fashioned in tone, and second, that Kanon believes that they are significant as a means of making sense of an oriental culture. This is quite disconcerting – despite numerous initiatives to improve US-Turkish relations by creating positive images of the “new” capitalist-oriented Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it seems as if the “old” preconceptions still inhibit cross-cultural understanding, especially in popular fiction.

*İstanbul: Perfect Gems of City Writing* is a comprehensive anthology including extracts from foreign visitors past and present – Virginia Woolf, A. W. Kinglake, Gerard de Nerval, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Jeremy Seal, and Rory Maclean – as well as a generous selection of Turkish writing in translation as well as writing in English (Elif Şafak, Ayfer Tunç, Yaşar Kemal). The book is divided into eleven sections, each corresponding to a different emotional experience of the city (“What is it about İstanbul?” “Travellers’ Tales,” “The Glorious Past,” “A City for All Seasons”). What is perhaps most striking about the book is that despite its professed commitment to communicate the city’s “diverse and vibrant artistic scene,” many of the familiar orientalist metaphors keep cropping up throughout the text. Writing in 1877,

the traveler Edmondo de Amicis describes İstanbul’s mystery: “Beyond the sixth hill of Stamboul and beyond Galata nothing but vague outlines can be seen, patches of city or suburb, glimpses of harbours, fleets, groves – pale in the azure air, unreal, like tricks of the light and atmosphere” (p. 10). Jeremy Seal, the British travel writer was impressed by “a succession of bridges shrouded in mist, washed-out echoes of bridges that bound İstanbul across her legendary waterways” (p. 44). William Dalrymple believes that the walls of the dome of Hagia Sophia “cease being barriers and become like passages into a higher reality” (p. 187).

The city’s presumed sinister aspects are equally comprehensively documented. Gustave Flaubert feels the sense of “being crushed and overwhelmed [...] as you rub shoulders with so many unknown men, from Persians and Indians to Americans and the English – just so many individuals who, in their terrifying mass, make you feel extremely small” (p. 44). The novelist Barbara Nadel thinks that “Everyone in İstanbul had a fake something or other [...] controlled largely by criminal gangs known locally as ‘mafias’ [...] these counterfeit businesses were known to run sidelines in prostitution, money laundering, drug dealing and contract killing” (p. 156). Daniel Rondeau, writing in 2002, notices the “packs of wild dogs” that roam the Muslim districts of İstanbul and “often forced passers-by to make detours and hated to be disturbed” (p. 183). Michael Booth believes that anyone

who hesitates in Kapalı Çarşı is likely to be robbed: “You soon learn not to make eye-contact with any of the traders; their powers of persuasion are relentless.” The only solution apparently is to pretend to join one of the numerous parties of American tourists whose “outgoing guilelessness acts as a kind of minesweeper” (pp. 226-7). The military metaphor is significant; the only way to resist attack from the city’s inhabitants is to fight back.

Throughout the book the experience of İstanbul is represented in terms of binary oppositions, a wearily western-influenced way of looking at the world. Virginia Woolf contrasts the English “root and fibre” with the city’s “wild panorama [...] and [...] the sharp, acrid smell of the streets” (p. 14). Rory Maclean characterizes the city’s “complex geography” with its “new [i.e. western-inspired] tower blocks” set against its “anarchic streets” and its “millions of voices” contrasted with “its dreams of a legendary past at once foreign and familiar” (p. 244).

Many of the Turkish writers included in the anthology employ similar tropes: Gül İnepoğlu creates an imaginative picture of a prosperous city during the Ottoman Empire, with a riot of flowers creating a “divinely contrasting harmony” wherein “coloured crystal globes were hanging from the shelves on fine chains between the tulip vases” (p. 62). Yaşar Kemal speculates on whether “the magic of İstanbul” lies in “its sea and sky, its rivers and monuments” (p. 77). Feryal Yılmaz

notes how the city at night throws up a panorama “of standing cars, people going in and out of restaurants and liquor stores [...] all blended together in one big blur” (p. 88). Elif Şafak notes the violence lurking beneath the city’s surface, a world of “mud and chaos and rage, as if we didn’t have enough of each already” (pp. 91-2). Hikmet Hükümenoğlu offers a nostalgic glimpse of old İstanbul, where children “used to walk to Bebek and get a cherry-vanilla ice-cream cone, sit on a park bench [...] and just relax” (p. 119). This isn’t possible any more in a crowded city where “long lines of bronze, blonde-haired girls, pot-bellied boys, and odd, shaggy dogs form queues in front of ice-cream vans” (p. 119). İnci Aral offers familiar binaries contrasting the order of the Andolu Külübü in the Prince’s Islands with the “shame and sun-filled world of crude people” inhabiting the rest of the city (p. 232).

As most of the extracts from Turkish writers are in translation, we might assume with some justification that their texts have been consciously selected to confirm western ideas about İstanbul as an orientalist paradise. Nonetheless, the sheer frequency with which certain metaphors (e.g. İstanbul the mysterious) recur throughout the book suggests a willing acceptance of such ideas by Turks and non-Turks alike. Perhaps this is the point of anthology; to create a body of work that confirms rather than challenges popular political stereotypes about Turkey. Whatever the motives, the experience of reading *İstanbul: Perfect Gems of City Writing*

eventually pales, with familiar images cropping up with monotonous regularity.

Maureen Freely's new novel *Sailing Through Byzantium* contains a few similar images of İstanbul in the early Sixties, a time when the city resembled "a theatre" with "the great waterway that passed through it" (p. 29), its "shadowy streets" with "the trace of a submerged palace in the cemetery next to the mosque," and "cobblestone labyrinths, collapsing wooden houses, gypsy encampments and crumbling Byzantine walls" (p. 28). Freely shows how such images have a profound effect on her protagonist Mimi, a fragile nine-year-old who has come to live in İstanbul with her father, mother, and two siblings. Tiring of the conformity and paranoia characteristic of the mid-Fifties, her parents are now part of an expatriate American community whose lifestyles can best be described as colorful. From the piano-playing homosexual Baby Mallinson to the bohemian teacher Nella with her brown legs and free thinking, to the dypsomaniac Hector Cabot – everyone seems dedicated to a life of pleasure. Even Mimi's mother, a blues singer who gave up her career for the family, now decides to sing in public.

The experience of inhabiting such a community proves profoundly unsettling for Mimi. Living so far from her homeland, she cannot adjust to the fact that in her eyes she "was no longer an American" (p. 61). When the prospect of imminent nuclear annihilation arises during the

Cold War, Mimi's imagination goes into overdrive. Her mother tries to help by asking her daughter to record whatever she sees around her in her sketch-book or in prose; but this move proves fatal, as Mimi's attempts to discover what is happening leads her into a web of paranoia, half-truths, and misunderstanding. Her mind is chock-full of visions of "a world where nothing could hold on to anything else – where cars started and never stopped, and babies drowned in the bath [...] and pencils slipped to the floor to roll off to infinity" (p. 149) and her fears put Leo Huthre, one of her father's closest friends, in mortal peril. Her father remarks: "Don't you realize that, thanks to you, our poor friend [Leo] [...] was dragged in by some goons for questioning, not once, not twice, but three times this year [...] my dear, dear friend, without whose kindness and encouragement we would never have made it here [to İstanbul] in the first place, is now under suspicion of treason?" (p. 209).

However, Freely does not blame Mimi for her misapprehensions, but perceives them as an inevitable consequence of inhabiting a world of socio-political surfaces. The American admiral's wife, a senior member of the expatriate community, wants to be considered good; hence she plies Mimi with sweetmeats. At the end of the novel everyone indulges themselves in an "End of the World" party, taking place on the night of the deadline given by President John F. Kennedy to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev to turn his war-heads in

Cuba away from the United States. Mimi cannot understand why her father should enjoy such an event: “Why does he expect me to be a good sport when the world could end tomorrow?” (p. 220). Her child-like sketches are a product of that world of surfaces, as they record what she wants to believe rather than responding to what takes place around her. At the end of the novel, taking place over half a century later, Mimi looks at a series of photos taken during the “End of the World” party, recording the participants’ enjoyment of a “shared secret” that the young Mimi knew nothing about. She believes that she has been somehow hoodwinked by “a stockpile of lies [that] had reached proportions so epic that they [the Cold Warriors in Turkey] thought nothing of purloining the sketch book of a child who happened to be her mother’s eyes and ears” (p. 204). For the young Mimi every event is charged with significance; the sight of her mother gossiping with some locals fills her with hope: “She [her mother] was giving them a piece of her mind [...] Once upon a time she had looked up to these men. She had trusted them to keep the world safe. Now she has seen, with her own eyes, how they operated” (p. 204).

The book ends on a melancholy note, as we learn how, following the “End of the World” party, Mimi’s mother never sang again. Inhabiting a world of surfaces had destroyed her self-confidence: “She saw her dreams tarnished, she looked at those great characters, in the great room, and she saw that they, too, were paper-thin [...] And something died in her” (p. 231). Although proud of bringing up a family, her life was somehow diminished, her potential unfulfilled. *Sailing Through Byzantium* suggests that this is an inevitable consequence of inhabiting an İstanbul dominated by surface images, a retreat from rather than an engagement with the realpolitik of the world surrounding it. To identify the truth might be difficult, but it is vitally necessary – especially at the time of the Cold War, when impressionable children like Mimi might harbor lurid thoughts about life coming to a permanent end. Freely’s wonderful novel underlines the importance of maintaining a critical stance as we try to make sense of alien and/or unfamiliar cultures. Perhaps this is what western visitors to İstanbul should do, as a way to understand how artificial many of the romanticized constructions of the city actually are. ■