



The Santa Fe New Mexican, Pasatiempo IN OTHER WORDS

ROBERT NOTT

Published: June 19, 2009

Café Tempest: Adventures on a Small Greek Island by Barbara Bonfigli, Tell Me Press, 305 pages

Having spent nearly two years in Greece in the mid-1980s, I particularly connected to Barbara Bonfigli's amusing and enchanting novel (somewhat based on fact -- the author shares biographical traits with her protagonist, Sarah) about a theater producer from London who flees a bad relationship by spending a summer on the Greek isle of Pharos. There, she ends up directing an amateur production of *The Tempest* and falling in love with an unlikely mate.

Bonfigli captures the romance of the islands -- the turquoise seas, the isolated beaches (no need for swimsuits there), the goatherds parading through town, the cats (everywhere), the ouzo (also everywhere), and the coffee (really everywhere). All her characters are likable, even the proud and pompous and prejudiced ones. She writes with an arch sense of humor and an appreciation of the absurd. e of the book's laugh-out-loud passages sees Sarah trying to explain Shakespeare's convoluted fairy-tale plot to her befuddled ensemble, a band of islanders more interested in eating pastries and drinking Sprite than taking direction. Some of the jokes are delightfully bad, but some are genuinely funny, as when Sarah says of a female rival, "All her tops are tanky."

You can imagine the jam the lead character gets in, taking over the production of the annual theater pageant. The locals did *Hello Dolly!* the year before, so Shakespeare is quite a leap. To stay on good terms with everyone, Sarah has to find roles for all who show up for auditions -- not an easy task, given that there is only one female character and that every inhabitant insists

he or she is a real actor. Sarah spends a lot of time meditating and looking for a mantra for every situation, which often complicates matters since what seems like a simple saying to her -- "I am that" -- baffles those around her. The novel is so dialogue-heavy that at times it suggests a play rather than a novel (Bonfigli's résumé includes producing theater) -- and sometimes it's very mundane dialogue. A critical editor would have cut some of this stuff. And as good with comedy as Bonfigli is, she grafts humor onto almost every situation, as if she's afraid to let a page go by without a laugh. The author has a great eye for detail, and her writing easily brings to life the people and the place -- another reason I would prefer less dialogue and more description. ***Café Tempest*** did take me back to my younger, freer days, when tomorrow was never supposed to arrive and the major problems of the world would never dare to intrude on isolated Mediterranean isles like Pharos. Bonfigli's characters just want to eat, drink, swim, make love, and celebrate life, and who wouldn't want to be around that kind of crew?

-- Robert Nott

Barbara Bonfigli signs copies of "Café Tempest" at 5 p.m. Friday, June 19, at Garcia Street Books, 376 Garcia Street, 986-0151.

Copyright (c) 2009 The Santa Fe New Mexican