

Praise for Panos Karnezis

'The literary find of the year'

—Annie Proulx

'Karnezis's writing has intensity and directness,
as he takes on the relationships between humans
and their gods.'

—Kate Saunders, *The Times*

'Unexpectedly haunting, its details catching like
splinters in that part of the imagination that
responds to pure storytelling.'

—*Times Literary Supplement*

'Gripping and worldly-wise ... a novelist
who is already well-respected but deserves
to be better known.'

—Phil Baker, *Sunday Times*

'A master storyteller.'

—*The Independent*

'Worthy of Graham Greene ... an outlandish,
ingeniously constructed novel as powerful and
full of surprises as any ancient myth.'

—*Sunday Telegraph*

'A novelist of unusual gifts.'

—*Financial Times*

‘Karnezis’s great skill is in evoking the haunting
beauty of lost places and souls ...’

— *The Times*

‘Prose as clear as the Mediterranean Sea ... a story
about the power of stories themselves, and the countless
ways we can all rewrite our pasts and twist our futures.’

— *Daily Mail*

‘An entirely individual writer
in full command of his material.’

— *Sunday Times*

‘Karnezis’s robust prose, as luminous and flinty
as his landscape, sharpens his focus on
captive souls in a lonely place.’

— *The Independent*

‘Enchanting ... the mad beauty of Karnezis’s
imagination is entirely his own.’

— *The Guardian*

‘Subtly brilliant.’

— *Irish Times*

PANOS
KARNEZIS

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are
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For Olivia

One

THEY KNEW THEY were lost because they had been travelling for several hours but still had not arrived. When the sun's disc broke above the sea, they saw nothing to raise their hopes, no sign of an island in any direction. At midday, still with no land in sight, someone said that the man who sold them the boat had fooled them. The men began to curse, the women raised their hands in prayer and the children cried, until the teacher silenced them all

with a calm voice, saying that he had seen a map in the town the day before and it was just as the smuggler had said: their destination was less than ten nautical miles from the beach from which they had set off. So then they turned to the man at the tiller and swore at him, grabbed him by the collar, slapped him, shook him with a force that rocked the crowded boat dangerously until the teacher announced, again in his unperturbed manner, which made everyone stop and listen to him, that even though in all likelihood they had missed their destination they could still use the sun and a watch to navigate their way back to the shore which, the previous night, they thought they had left behind for ever.

His words were greeted with sighs of relief and praises to God, who had put the sun in the sky. A different man took his place at the outboard motor, opened the throttle and turned the boat around. The sun was out but it was cold and windy and the sea, which had been rough during the night, was turning rougher. There were those who already suffered from seasickness but there was nothing else to worry about because the man who had taken it upon himself to save them reassured them that at the speed they were travelling they ought, according to his calculations, to reach their destination in less than two hours.

Mokdad sat quietly near the front of the rubber dinghy, quivering with the cold—or was it with fear? He was dressed lightly for that late autumn day and there were no warmer clothes in his backpack either. He had misjudged the ferocity of the Mediterranean, just as he

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had underestimated the difficulty of his whole month-long journey to the coast. Most of the people aboard had come across each other for the first time on the beach the previous night, but everyone already knew that one was a teacher, another the mayor of a small town, a third a gentlemen's tailor and Mokdad a doctor, a piece of information they had received without comment but with a lingering look of disapproval which had made him avert his eyes.

The prow of the large inflatable dinghy splashed through the waves and for a while everyone was happy again apart from the tailor, a small man wrapped in an oversized orange life-jacket, who was vomiting over the side. In their brief time together on the beach the previous night, he had confided to Mokdad that he could not swim. Out of the two families with children on board, one did not include the father: a woman, twin girls, and a boy with closely cropped hair. The boy's unruliness attracted the baleful glares of the teacher, who stood with one foot on the prow, like a sea captain from the Age of Discovery, setting the course with his compass. Mokdad had not spoken to him so far in the journey but had listened to him speak to someone else in beautiful Levantine Arabic, his voice bowing under the weight of an erudition that one did not normally associate with a primary school teacher. And indeed, in the course of that conversation the man had revealed that he was also a bit of a local historian, a pastime that gave him greater pleasure than the teaching of children, whom he had not been shy of saying he did not like much.

They travelled for a few minutes before the outboard motor sputtered and fell silent. All eyes turned to the man at the tiller with the suspicion that he was to blame, and watched while he pulled the starter rope again and again, but the motor would not start and he picked up the fuel tank and shook it: it was empty. There were cries, more despairing than angry this time, and the faith in God of everyone but the most pious was shaken to its foundation, a hopelessness that eased a little when the teacher produced a pair of plastic oars. The men took turns at them, but it was difficult to row in the rough sea and they made very slow progress. At dusk they could still see no land, and the teacher told them to stop for the day because without the sun he could not tell which direction they ought to be travelling.

As soon as the sun disappeared the temperature dropped quickly, and the evening became colder than their previous night at sea. Swaths of brown, red and orange marked the horizon, and a yellowish glow where the sun had been a moment earlier, but higher up the bright colours faded to grey and clouds were gathering. The waves were big but slow-moving, with crests that did not break, lifting the boat quite high and taking it down again in a gentle movement. Soon no one was talking, even those praying turned silent, and the only sounds were the splash of the waves and someone sobbing. The wind skimming the waves sent clouds of spray into the boat, but there was nowhere to take shelter and gradually everyone got soaking wet. As night fell the wind built up, the waves grew bigger and stronger and the boat was

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thrown about with force. There was a narrow crescent moon out, not bright enough to light the surface of the water but it gave the sky a dark shade of blue-grey, which marked it out from the inky blackness of the sea. A voice in the dark demanded water but there was no reply. The voice repeated the question with impatience but no one answered this time either, and Mokdad could just about see the tailor, bloated by his life-jacket, harassing those around him until someone gave him a shove and told him to leave them alone.

Mokdad shivered in wet clothes, sitting wedged between two other passengers to whom he had not spoken during the journey. Unable to resist his tiredness, he eventually fell asleep without wanting to, and when he opened his eyes again he saw that he was sitting in water. Everyone was shouting and trying to stand, holding up their luggage. They were starting to rock the boat and the teacher shouted at them to sit down but they did not listen. The waves kept tossing the dinghy about, causing the standing passengers to lose their balance, and they grabbed each other to steady themselves, but still they would not sit in the flooded hull.

A few passengers were trying to empty the water with their hands, and the teacher was still trying to pull down those standing, when another wave struck, the boat tipped and everyone fell overboard. The water was freezing and the weight of his clothes made it very hard for Mokdad to stay above the surface. Quickly he took off his jacket and shoes and looked for his rucksack in the dark. It was beyond his reach already and he tried to swim towards

it, but he was surrounded by other passengers and their suitcases and bags, many of which had scattered their contents on the surface of the water. All his money was in the rucksack; he tried to find a way through the flapping arms and the floating luggage but the waves held him back. There was an opening in the crowd and he made an attempt to swim towards it, but a hand grabbed him and he turned to see the tailor struggling, even in his oversized life-jacket. Mokdad abandoned his effort to get to his rucksack and stayed with him.

Those closer to the upturned dinghy tried to climb on it, but there was nothing to grab hold of on its rubber tubes and they kept slipping back into the water. Everyone was screaming and the waves crashed against the dinghy, which lurched this and that way, hitting those near it; those who could not swim well went underwater. Among the people the doctor saw the twin daughters of the woman without a husband, holding hands as they, too, tried to stay above the surface. He could not see their mother or little brother anywhere. When they stretched an arm at him, saying something he could not hear in the noise of the storm, he made to swim towards them, but the tailor's hand again stopped him.

Mokdad turned and shouted at him, 'Let me go!'

The tailor held him by the collar. 'No, no. Don't leave me, please.'

'Take your hands away! They're drowning! Let me go!'

'Don't leave me alone,' the man whimpered.

'Let me go, damn you!' Mokdad tried to free himself but the man tightened his grip.

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'Let me go, you fool!' Mokdad shouted.

'Stay with me. I can't swim. I... I... I...'

'Get your hands off me!'

But still the man did not let go and they struggled for a while before Mokdad freed himself. As he finally pulled away and turned his head, he saw the two girls go under the waves. They did not come up to the surface again.

In a rush of anger he grabbed the tailor by his life-jacket. The man yelped and tried to fight him off this time like a child, which made the doctor even angrier and he began to pull the life-jacket off him. He was not thinking; all he could see was the plastic orange jacket, and he felt a blind urge to take it away from the man who could not swim. The loose jacket came off over his head easily, while the small man was trying to stay on the surface and fight the doctor off at the same time. Mokdad tossed it into the waves, too far for the man to get it back, and only then, his anger satisfied, did he come to his senses. The tailor, his arms flailing, was swallowing water, and the doctor shouted at him to calm down and move his legs and arms. He seemed to be doing it, but when the waves brought Mokdad closer to him the man grabbed hold of him with both hands and they went under together.

The doctor kicked and moved his arms to come back to the surface. His mouth broke out of the water and he took several deep breaths before trying to haul the other man up, too. The tailor offered very little help, but with great effort Mokdad managed to get him back to the surface. The man spat water and coughed and breathed rapidly, still holding Mokdad tightly around the waist, a dead

weight on the doctor, who was struggling to keep both of them afloat. The effort was exhausting, he had trouble breathing and his strength was ebbing away but he could not give up, thinking of what he had done. He looked around for anything to help the two of them float and saw a suitcase, which he could just about touch if he stretched out his hand. But, even though he tried many times, he was unable to grab it. Then the tailor began to sink again and this time Mokdad had no strength to pull him up. And the man would still not let him go: they went underwater again. This time the doctor panicked and tried to prise the hands off him, but the other held him very tightly as they sank deeper and deeper. He could not see him—he could see nothing, it was completely dark.

He began to push and scratch the other man, his movements slowed by the water; he hit him in the stomach, poked his eyes with his fingers until finally, when he could no longer hold his breath, he escaped from him and swam to the surface, where he gulped air, shaking with horror. He looked around in the near dark but there was no one near enough to have witnessed what had happened. He saw his rucksack not too far away this time but he barely had any strength; he could do little more than keep afloat. He stayed where he was, watching his rucksack with all his money bobbing up and down on the waves until it disappeared. He thought about the man he had killed.

The wind skimmed over the waves and spray struck his face, making it difficult to see what was going on around him. Squinting, he thought he could see others in

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the water among scattered pieces of luggage. He wanted to stay within sight of them but did not attempt to get closer, afraid that there might be more who could not swim. Again he wondered whether anyone else had seen what he had done. Suddenly something gave him a hard blow on the back of his head, and he turned to see the rubber prow of the dinghy, which the waves had carried in his direction. He dived to avoid being hit again and when he came up there was a long rope trailing from the boat in front of him. He grabbed it. The wind and the waves continued to toss the boat and Mokdad was dragged along, feeling safer as he held on to the unsinkable dinghy via the rope. Now that he was no longer struggling to survive, he began to feel the coldness of the water again, in his feet and hands, which had gone numb, and his head hurt from the blow he had received from the boat.

The orange life-jacket was floating away. Someone grabbed it: it was the twins' little brother, who was beating his hands to stay above the water. The dinghy was blown towards him, too, and within a moment Mokdad reached him and got hold of him. The boy was not heavy but it was still hard to swim with the extra weight. He let go of him again and tried to climb on to the upturned dinghy, but he could not; nor did he manage to push the boy on it. Holding the rope with one hand, with his other he helped the boy put on the life-jacket, then tied the rope around both the boy's and his own wrists; he let the boat drag them away from the others. He could hear them for some time afterwards, then the noise of the storm covered their screams and Mokdad and the boy were alone.

With the moon now blocked by the clouds, the sky was just as dark as the sea and there was no horizon. All this time the boy had said nothing; he was just staring at the doctor. Mokdad said, over the wind and the splashing of the waves, 'Hold on to the life-jacket. It'll keep you afloat.'

The boy said, 'The life-jacket. I saw you.'

Now that there was a witness after all, Mokdad's secret became a crime. He wondered what the boy thought about it. He had not sounded threatening or appalled—more like fascinated. Perhaps in his young mind there was such thing as righteous killing and death made perfect sense; his thoughts were not yet tainted by doubt and despair.

Mokdad said, 'Rest a little. Then we'll try to climb on the boat again.'

The wind was still blowing hard, and the dinghy dragged them along on its blind voyage into the night. In the next lull in the storm Mokdad swam up to the boat, untied the rope from the boy's wrist, took up the slack and held on to it with both hands against the dinghy to stop himself from going under while the boy climbed on his shoulders. The boy's weight still forced him underwater, but he held his breath until the child had crawled on to the upturned plastic hull. When his turn came, with no one to help him, he could not climb up, but then he had the idea to swim to the stern and pull himself up from the outboard motor.

At last he was out of the water. Even though he was still cold, the numbness in his feet and hands began to recede. He took the rope that had saved them, which was tied to the bow eye of the dinghy, stretched it, and tied its

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other end to the motor, so that it ran along the length of the hull and the boy and he had something to hold on to when the waves tossed the boat about. He sat down with his legs on either side of the boy and wrapped his arms around his small body to keep him warm while holding on to the rope, too.

‘Have a rest. What’s your name?’

‘Jamil.’

‘I won’t let go, Jamil. I promise.’

Warmed by the man and the life-jacket, the boy fell asleep. The large dinghy was more stable capsized than right side up and there was no danger of its tipping over despite the rough sea. Mokdad watched out for the other passengers in the dark, but the boat had travelled far from them already and he could not see or hear anyone. There were only pieces of luggage, open suitcases and clothes and shoes scattered over the water bobbing up and down. All night he tried to stay awake but would drift off, only for a jolt of the boat to wake him up. It would take him a few seconds to understand where he was, then he would make another effort to stay awake, but within minutes his bleary eyes would shut again and he would quickly fall into deep sleep.

At daybreak the sky was roofed with dense bluish storm clouds, which moved together, and a narrow horizon glowed with the grey light of dawn. The debris of the previous night was gone and there was no sign of what had happened. Lightning flashed: Mokdad judged that it was very far away because he neither heard thunder nor saw rain, but the sea was still rough and he

held the sleeping boy in his arms while grabbing the rope with both hands until the wind eased and the sea settled into a tall but slow swell. There were a few gaps in the distant clouds where shafts of sunlight slanted through. He could see quite far but the horizon was as empty as the day before, an emptiness that struck him with fear. The sea felt like a wall built around the rubber boat without a way out. He shut his eyes and waited for the pounding of his heart to ease, telling himself that as long as they stayed on the dinghy they would be found. He shivered in his wet clothes, which the cold air would not dry; his hair was matted with salt and he wondered how long they would survive without water. But he could forget his fear briefly if he thought about the previous night. He tried to reassure himself that the tailor might still be alive, that at the last moment, while sinking, somehow the man had had the strength to kick his legs and move his arms and swim back up to the surface. But, even if that had happened, the man could not swim, and the boy was wearing his life-jacket now.

By midday the sky had cleared and the sea was almost calm. The boat bobbed up and down with a much lighter swell, giving the impression that it was hardly moving. Mokdad had had nothing to eat since the evening of their departure, but it was his thirst that was making him suffer, and he made it worse by washing his face with sea water and then unthinkingly licking his lips. Later something brushed against the dinghy. He saw it out of the corner of his eye and at first thought that he had imagined it, but when he looked in the water he saw a few inches below

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the surface a school of enormous brown jellyfish travelling blindly past the dinghy.

Jamil woke up and asked for water. He was sullen when he was told that there was none, and asked if he could drink from the sea.

‘No, it would make you sick,’ Mokdad said.

The boy made a grimace of annoyance. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘We have to wait,’ Mokdad said. ‘They’ll come for us.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. Soon.’

But Mokdad did not quite believe it. A group of strangers on a clandestine crossing...who would raise the alarm?

Jamil moved to the stern and played with the outboard motor, turning it this way and that, betraying not the slightest hint of grief for the death of his mother and sisters. Perhaps he believed that the women had survived and he would soon be reunited with them. But Mokdad doubted that. There was something about the child’s manner—his nonchalance, his absence of any emotion other than annoyance and evident boredom, his inexpressive face—that struck him as all the more callous because of his youth.

The storm had passed and there was no danger of falling off the boat. But it was still cold. For the rest of the day they said little to each other. The following morning the doctor was the first to open his eyes again, woken by his need for water. It was torture now; his mouth felt very dry, and moving his tongue about produced almost

no saliva. He stared at the horizon, no longer wishing for a warm day, which would make his thirst worse.

The swell slowly turned the boat around. It had gone almost full circle when he thought that he saw, at a great distance, the vague outline of land. He stared at it for a long time, unable to decide whether he truly saw it or it was some kind of mirage until the sun rose higher, the day grew warmer and out of the blue haze emerged the smooth and unmistakable shape of an island. He shook the boy awake and pointed it out to him.

'Look, look,' Mokdad said. 'Do you see it?'

'Where...?' Jamil replied drowsily.

'There. Don't you see it? Land. Can you see?'

'Yes...yes.'

'An island,' Mokdad said. 'Look.'

'How far is it?'

For a long time the sea pushed them towards it, but then the current changed direction. Mokdad made the decision to abandon the dinghy, even though they were still far from the island, and try to swim towards it. Several hours later they came ashore on a beach strewn with flotsam. Jamil took off the life-jacket and they sat on the pebbles facing the sea and trembling from exhaustion and the cold breeze. The ground swayed under them. Mokdad only had to close his eyes to feel that he was still perched on the capsized dinghy, but he was on firm ground, alive and cold and exhausted and desperately thirsty, the salty taste still on his cracked lips. What did his survival mean? That he was forgiven for his crime? Perhaps saving the boy's life had been his atonement and he could stop

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feeling guilty about what he had done; but the presence of the child, who knew what had happened, reminded him of it. He wished that he were alone.

A small bell chimed somewhere and they both turned at once and looked, startled, in the direction of the pines farther back from the beach. From among the trees an Asian elephant was shyly looking at them.