

Anne Dublin. *A Cage Without Bars*. Toronto, Ont.: Second Story Press [2018]. 129 pp. + 16 unnumbered pages.

Reviewed by Norman Simms

In a marvellous way Anne Dublin has managed to turn the horrible and complex story of the Children of São Tomé into a short children's novel that she says will be as painful to read as it was to write. The historical tale is narrated by Joseph, a young Jewish boy who on the verge of his bar mitzvah year is forced first to leave Spain at the time of the great Expulsion of 1492, cross over into Portugal with his mother, father and young sister, Gracia; only then for the brother and sister, to be separated a few months later and sent as slaves of King João (John) to the small insalubrious island of São Tomé off the west coast of Africa.

Dublin has simplified the historical circumstances of the expulsion from the newly unified kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and the subsequent events in the neighbouring state of Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. She has only given enough information about the history of São Tomé as the young adolescent boy might have known. It had been uninhabited at the time of its discovery only a few decades before the Portuguese attempted to set it up as a sugar-producing colony, something that proved extremely difficult because of the climate and the topography, and eventually, with the beginnings of a successful establishment of the sugar industry in Brazil, the enterprise was simply abandoned less than a hundred years later.

In describing how the few aristocratic Portuguese landowners tried to plant sugarcane, Dublin leaves out almost all the historical details, focusing on the narrator, his sister and their personal experiences in the cruel years between 1494 and 1497. Most of the initial consignment of child slaves (somewhere between 1500 and 5000, apparently aged between three and thirteen years old, with even the first number incredible to believe if there had been only one shipload, as Dublin says) died of distress, disease and malnutrition before landing, and probably more than half of the remainder (whatever it was) in the first few months. News of this tragic event soon reached the ears of people in Portugal and those parts of Europe where the Jewish parents dispersed after the kidnapping, particularly in the Low Countries and Italy, as well as in Brazil.

In general, Dublin barely hints at the historical complexities. After initial attempts to bring Portuguese settlers to the island failed because of an extremely high mortality rate from disease, poisonous snakes and crocodiles, the king granted permits to private parties to see what they could do—this time with criminals swept from the jails and streets of Lisbon and the children of those Sephardim who had crossed the border in 1492 and granted temporary residence of eight months provided they could pay a high tax for the privilege. It was thought that the young Jewish children would be able to grow up able to tolerate the heat, fevers and other debilities of the São Tomé. The other forced labourers—riffraff of all kinds, including prostitutes, crooks, murderers, rapists—were considered expendable and required only for a short initial period. Black slaves mostly from Angola were subsequently to be purchased at the fortified port of Mina on the mainland and brought over to provide a more permanent slave population.

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To Jewish commentators, especially after the mass conversion of all Portuguese Jews in 1497, the fate of the children assumed mythic proportions. Not only were these boys and girls lost to their families, but they were lost to the faith: unwillingly baptized and sent for education to friars, they grew up what would soon be called *conversos* or New Christians and subject to perpetual suspicion of *judaizing*, that is, heretical backsliding to the “dead letter” of the Mosaic law, whether consciously hiding their beliefs and practices, as Crypto-Jews, or unaware or even confused about what they said, did and dreamed. They were, in short, *maranos*, pigs, sons and daughters of pigs, whose blood was tainted and whose souls were putrid. Nevertheless, within a couple of generations—a time that Dublin does not deal with—many of these lost children interbred with the Angolans on São Tomé and the neighbouring island of Príncipe, became plantation owners and slave-drivers notorious for their cruelty. Some of them, however, thanks to the help of the friars who came in waves—most dying within weeks of arrival on the contagious territory—since becoming a friar in Portugal was one of the successful disguises Marranos could assume to live out their ambiguous and confused lives. Now and then the records show immigrants to the Italian cities under Iberian control (remember that shortly after the mass conversion in 1497 Portugal was subsumed under the Spanish crown) claiming to be from São Tomé. Interestingly, São Tomé fell under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition branches in the New World, not in Africa, so that mestizo heretics and others suspected of Judaizing were sent for trial to Brazil. When convicted but not “translated” to the secular arm to be burned at the stake in an auto-da-fe, they were imprisoned on small islands off the South American coast, from which they occasionally escaped or were eventually released as second-class subjects. They were then able to tell their stories to sympathetic audiences of former Jewish families and individuals who were existing in the region, with whatever exaggerations or lies needed to receive help in re-establishing their lives. At best, Dublin hints at this sequel to the story of Joseph and Gracia, when Joseph returns to Europe, leaving his sister to continue her life as a faithful Catholic.

As in her other historical novels written for Canadian children she handles the problems of Jewish history with great finesse, able to deal with unpleasant and tragic events without frightening young minds and yet never compromising the integrity of the victims of prejudice, oppression and injustice. Joseph’s separation from Gracia is left to open the field for modern readers to discuss with parents or teachers or even among themselves. All those sixteen unnumbered pages that stand before and after the narrative itself provide information that would make such conversations intelligent and mature. Older readers will also find guidance to further reading in books, articles and internet sites.

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