Hans Keilson, *Comedy in a Minor Key* (Scribe, 2011)

Hans Keilson was a Jew born in Germany who, in the mid-1930s, went into exile in the Netherlands with his wife, and was active in the Dutch resistance. He was a psychiatrist as well as a writer, and died at the age of 101 in May this year.

*Comedy in a Minor Key* was originally published in 1947. There are two other novels, *Life Goes On* (1933) and *The Death of the Adversary* (1959, republished 2010), plus an important clinical study on trauma in children.

*Comedy in a Minor Key* is a slim novel, barely one hundred pages in length. On the cover of this new Scribe edition is a park bench, the significance of which becomes clear late in the text. The story involves Wim and Marie in the Netherlands during wartime, a couple who hide a Jewish perfume salesman, who they know as Nico. He stays with them for almost a year before developing an infection that worsens into pneumonia, and kills him. This we learn in the first two pages. Since they have been hiding him, he doesn’t really ‘exist’, but now they have to do something with his ‘non-existent’ body.

The story is deceptively simple, of course, but simultaneously complex. Keilson does not labour this, but presents a clear prose and crisp dialogue that carries the reader into the world of people under stress of unimaginable degree and makes it imaginable. There is as much unsaid as said in this book; nowhere are the words ‘Nazi’ or ‘Hitler’ used, just ‘the war’.

It begins with Nico already dead, then travels back and forth to show his interaction with the couple interwoven with their movements after his death. These are undemonstrative people, not thinking of themselves in any heroic way. Nico is a man torn from his real life into limbo, and he suffers, quietly, as a result. Tellingly, and ironically, it almost looks as if he regains a better appearance after the effects of illness and death: ‘After a year of staying in this room day in and day out had driven the last emaciated traces of life from his face, the fever had given it back a certain colour and curvature’ (2).

It is through examinations of the tiny events of their lives that the tension of the situation is made clear. For example, there is a scene where Nico is waiting for Marie to collect the newspaper after it is delivered. Sometimes she forgets, and he fantasises about going down the stairs himself and picking it up – ‘he knew exactly on which steps the wood gave and creaked, the third and the fifth from the top…’ (7) – but doesn’t dare, in the end. There’s an awkward moment when the fishmonger calls, and Nico is in the kitchen with Marie, and other times when similar potentially dangerous things happen that might reveal him. The reader is given insight into how debilitating it might be to live in secret.

The effect of those months of hiding is shown in other small ways too. Marie and Wim have a beautiful Chinese vase which they show to Nico. In a darker moment, when his predicament weighs heavy, Nico stands before this vase: ‘It became a symbol to him: he hated this symbol, and he hated the people who owned this symbol’ (48). His hosts were able to buy something like that, spontaneously and with joyous abandon, when he could not do anything with such abandon without grave consequences. He has lost that freedom that they still possessed. Perhaps Keilson did not need to state it boldly like this – ‘The little thorn that grows invisibly

in anyone who lives on the help and pity of others grew to gigantic proportions, became a javelin lodged deep in his flesh and hurting terribly’ (49) – but it explains Nico’s feelings succinctly and with vivid metaphor.

And so, although we know what happens to Nico, there is a clever twist to the story which allows Marie and Wim to see things from another angle, and which gives a poignant balance to the book.

The translator is Damion Searls, and he was responsible for bringing Hans Keilson’s work back into the public eye. There is an interview Searls conducts with the author in the September 2010 issue of The Believer online, which reveals that the novel is reminiscent of Keilson’s own experience of being hidden. It also suggests that Keilson mourned for his parents, who were murdered in Auschwitz, all his life.

What strikes me about the novel is the way in which the author has chosen to write about an enormous event. One criticism I encountered was that the book is slight and relatively inconsequential. I disagree. The book has impact because Keilson chose not to portray the horrors up front, but obliquely; not on the grand scale, but in one household; and not surrounded by evil, but by a proportion of ‘good’ people, including police. There are hints of what lies outside, and Nico’s fear is palpable. This is what can be done with skilful writing, with the building of atmosphere, with suggestion rather than hammer blows to the reader’s head. The reader’s imagination is allowed to work.

As Keilson commented to Searls in their interview, ‘Not everything can end at Auschwitz’, and in Comedy in a Minor Key, the author has put this into practice in a moving novel.

Sue Bond

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