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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Arnold Zable is an essayist and novelist with several books to his name, and his latest novel is *Sea of Many Returns*, a family saga based on the Greek island of Ithaca, Odysseus’ island, in the Ionian Sea.

Xanthe is Australian born but both her grandfathers, Mentor and Stratis, were Ithacans who came to Australia to find their fortunes. Stratis left a wife and two young sons behind in Ithaca, and returned after many years to find the younger son, Manoli, an alienated teenager resentful at his father’s long absence. Eventually Manoli sails away from Ithaca to Australia as his father had before him, to meet and marry Mentor’s daughter Sophia in Melbourne.

Years after Manoli’s death, his daughter Xanthe visits Ithaca for the first time and meets her uncle Andreas, Manoli’s brother. Later she returns again with a manuscript from her maternal grandfather, Mentor, relating his first days in Australia in 1916, as a member of a foreign community in xenophobic Kalgoorlie, and his travels across the country to find a home in Melbourne where he puts down roots and lives out his life. She translates Mentor’s manuscript, interspersing it with her own story and that of her father Manoli.

*Sea of Many Returns* is an ambitious work, laden with myth, redolent with traces of ancient history and legend. The opening words are: ‘Beware dear reader. The story you are about to be told is a fairy-tale, a romance.’ The fable-like atmosphere is underlined by the perpetual present tense of the narrative and the stereotyped characters, the repetition of certain phrases, like incantations, and the weight of
symbolism. There is little of the usual ebb and flow of narrative: events don’t happen in the simple present, they are recurrent – ‘every night he would go fishing,’ ‘every year a young man drowned’ – so that even dramatic events like the Kalgoorlie riots seem automatic and inevitable and there is no feeling that events might go otherwise, which means, of course, that there is no suspense.

This works best during the part of the book when Xanthe is recounting her father’s increasingly erratic last years, tormenting his wife and daughter when not escaping to the sea his home-built boats, until he succumbs to a stroke. Elsewhere the rhythms of the narrative succeed only in becalming the reader: it took me an unusually long time to read this novel because after a few pages I would invariably nod off. Zable transmits something of the tragedy and romance of Ithaca, but with its stilted dialogue and Homeric echoes, and without a shred of humour even when the opportunity stands up and begs for it, Sea of Many Returns is a lugubrious work of unrelieved solemnity.