

*Dead Europe* is the third novel by Australian novelist Christos Tsiolkas. In the novel Isaac, a 36-year-old Greek-Australian photographer, travels through Europe, from Greece to England. It is in essence a journey through Hell.

What can I say about *Dead Europe*? I will not say it’s a ‘must read’, although it is the most compelling book I’ve read for some time. There are readers who will find it deeply upsetting and offensive, and no-one could deny that it is shocking and often disgusting. Tsiolkas, however, manages to compel one to keep reading, almost in the same way as the Isaac’s sickness makes him seek more and more degradation as his odyssey progresses.

Despite its fascination with degraded sex, racism and violence and the seamy underbelly of European life, there is no sensationalism in *Dead Europe*. Tsiolkas is completely in control. He says, ‘I want this book to outrage people because I want people to be outraged by the vehemence and hatred of racism. I also want people to be honest about the racism within themselves. … I think it is a mistake to see that racism as only evident amongst extremists and thugs.’ Travelling in Europe, he says he has been disturbed by a rise in anti-Semitism among ordinary people over the past decade.

Tsiolkas takes an unusual and courageous approach to this issue. *Dead Europe* is not a tract, although its purpose is deeply moral. The main character is intentionally identifiable with the author. Isaac, a first-person narrator, shares most of his biography with Tsiolkas: ethnic identity, age, sexuality and family history. As he succumbs, the
author is concerned to show the vulnerability of anyone to the demons which conspire to bring him down, despite his good intentions.

It is a measure of the distance of this book from mainstream morality not only that sympathetic characters occasionally express anti-Semitism, but that pedophilia is not always condemned. Isaac himself remembers with gratitude the 60-year-old man who introduced him to sex at the age of thirteen.

Woven through the contemporary narrative of *Dead Europe* is a dark village tale of greed, hatred, violence, and superstition. It reads like a timeless folk fable, but it is set during the second world war, and the connection of these illiterate peasants with Isaac soon becomes evident. Isaac, sceptical and rationalist, with his liberal Australian education, cannot free himself of the evil spirits from a past which is so very recent.

*Dead Europe* is a work of corrosive power. It is a ghost story but has none of the camp fun which that label suggests. The ghosts, or demons, are deadly embodiments of forces which Tsiolkas wants us to understand are all too real, and are not just ‘out there’ but within everyone. Fortunately he offers a small sliver of hope – not religion but human love is the only force which can conquer evil.