

NO FRIEND BUT THE MOUNTAINS: WRITING FROM MANUS PRISON

By Behrouz Boochani, translated by Omid Tofighian,
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Reviewed by

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Kurdish journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani typed out draft sections of this book on a number of prohibited mobile phones, while detained on Australia's Manus Island Regional Processing Centre from 2013. At the time of publication, he was still on Manus. The passages in Farsi were sent via WhatsApp messages to academic Omid Tofighian, who translated them into English in consultation with translators Moones Mansoubi and Sajad Kabgani. This is, in itself, an extraordinary achievement.

Boochani fled Iran to Indonesia and, after surviving a near-drowning in his first attempt to reach Australia, arrived at Christmas Island after being picked up at sea by the Australian Navy on his second attempt. He arrived in July 2013, four days after Kevin Rudd's announcement that 'from now on, any asylum seeker who arrives in Australia by boat will have no chance of being settled in Australia as refugees' (Rudd 2013). Asylum seekers taken to Christmas Island would be sent to Manus and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea for assessment of their refugee status. The book covers this first period, ending with the killing of fellow Kurdish refugee Reza Barati in a riot in February 2014.

Boochani never justifies the decisions that took him to the point of seeking asylum by boat. The most he writes is: 'My past was hell. I escaped from that living hell. I'm not prepared to think about it, not even for a second' (Boochani 2018, 75). He does not give us any insight into the life stories or decisions of his fellow refugees, although he spends some time mulling the motivations and post/colonial conditions of the local guards on Manus Island. This seems to be a deliberate ploy: the book is a study on Boochani's terms, and is not used to argue his case for asylum. Indeed, he shows contempt for journalists: 'intrusive people'

who 'take pleasure from shattering the dignity of a human being' (*ibid*, 93-94). Boochani will not add to his humiliation by seeking our permission for his journey.

Instead Boochani, a keen observer, has created a fine ethnographic study of the boat journeys and then the Kafkaesque carceral conditions, interspersed with passages of self-reflective poetry. He re-names the Centre 'Manus Prison', a prison which works on 'Kyriarchal Logic' (p. 126), taken from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 'theory of interconnected social systems established for the purposes of domination, oppression and submission' (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009 cited in Boochani 2018, 124). Fellow refugees, Australian guards, and Manus guards are presented as types, or allegorical composite characters. While empathetic, Boochani never presents an idealised fantasy of the refugees; they are not recognisable standardised tropes. In truth, 'they get on my nerves' (*ibid*, 128). Characters include The Blue Eyed Boy, The Toothless Fool, the Irascible Iranian, Maysam the Whore, The Cow, The Smiling Youth and The Hero. Reza Barati appears as The Gentle Giant. Local Manus guards, hired as part of the Australian agreement to use the island as part of the so-called Pacific Solution, are 'Papus', and mostly kind. Interpreters are 'basically amplifiers with consciousness' (Boochani 2018, 315). The Australian guards, many of whom are ex-servicemen, he simply describes as 'killers' (*ibid*, 143).

In his lengthy introduction and concluding reflections, Tofighian places the book's poetry firmly within Kurdish and Persian literary traditions. He also makes ambitious claims for this work as a 'shared philosophical activity' (Boochani 2018, xxxii) and interprets the genre as 'horrific surrealism' (*ibid*, xxix). For this empirical historian the book is, above all, testimony. Boochani's journalism has consistently reported on the harsh pragmatism of Australia's immigration practice, best expressed by Prime Minister John Howard in 2001: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Howard, 2001). With his co-directed film, also shot on mobile phone, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (Sarvestani and Boochani, 2017), and with this book, Boochani has sought a wider audience, adding an artistic sensibility to straightforward reportage. Boochani has, under remarkable circumstances, produced a historical record that exposes the systemic horrors of mandatory detention. He argues, 'This space is part of Australia's legacy and a central feature of its history – this place is Australia itself – this right here is Australia' (Boochani 2018, 158).

Many in Australia agree. Winning praise from prominent Australian writers, *No Friends But the Mountains* also won Australia's richest literary prize in 2019; Boochani was given an exemption from the judges of the usual citizenship requirement. The Australian Anthropological Society has also created an occasional Behrouz Boochani Award, in recognition of his ethnographic work. In July 2020, Boochani was granted refugee status in New Zealand after over-staying a one-month visa to speak at a writers' festival; he is now a Senior Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Canterbury. One of his stated aims for the book, to open 'critical spaces for engaging with the phenomenon of Manus Prison' (Boochani, xv), has achieved spectacular success.

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