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A Tale without a Name

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Now and then, the details of an author's life on the flyleaf of a book can be as fascinating as the book itself. Penelope Delta was a Greek writer of distinction and energy and, it appears, strong political convictions, whose life a hundred years ago was tumultuous and tragic, ending when she committed suicide the day that the German army entered Athens in 1941. Among other literary interests, she wrote for and about children and was the first Greek writer to advocate the creation of a national body of children's literature. **A Tale without a Name** was written in 1910 and, while it remains a well-loved story in Greece today, I imagine it also says something about the state of Greek politics at the time it was written. It is cast in the shape of a fairy tale about a kingdom whose neglect and corruption by its rulers has caused it to become a laughing stock among its neighbours and easy prey for their territorial ambitions. It is no mistake, either, that all the local warring kingdoms have rulers who are related to one another, just as they were in reality in pre-First World War Europe. The didactic intentions of the book are quickly apparent, for this is the kingdom of the Fatalists, ruled over by King Witless and Queen Barmy. And when the Crown Prince and his little sister, Little Irene, meet Mistress Wise and her daughter Knowledge in the woods, it would be a dull reader who didn't realise that change may be underway. Slowly, the prince and his sister, through their resourcefulness and dedication, begin to revive the kingdom and its people. The prince leads a successful resistance to invasion by the King the Royal Uncle from the neighbouring kingdom, then returns the kingdom to prosperity and is crowned Prudentius II. If the names are a little heavy handed (and the translator may not have done the story any favours here), this is a tale which, for all its loud signalling of its didactic intentions, constantly intrigues and excites, as the prince moves among his people convincing them that change is possible. The battle scenes towards the end of the book, staged as economically as some of Shakespeare's, are as brutal. The traitor, Master Faintheart, condemned by the prince after the battle, is summarily strung up from the nearest oak. The message that political leadership needs vision, courage, integrity, intelligence, decisiveness and self-sacrifice, is put across to great effect, and is, unfortunately, as relevant today as it was then. However, I am not sure if the book will readily find a young audience. It has been produced attractively by Pushkin Press, with small woodcut-like black and white illustrations by the translator, but in a format (and at a price) more likely to appeal to adults. Like **Animal Farm**, itself subtitled **A Fairy Story**, thirty or so years later, it's a political tract in thin but compelling disguise.

Links:

[1] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/a-tale-without-a-name>

[2] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/201>

[3] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>