Out of Place

*Seeing Further*, Esther Kinsky (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

*The Empusium*, Olga Tokarczuk (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

*The Edge of the Alphabet*, Janet Frame (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

Although, according to various surveys of readers, it is not common practice, I have always had favourite publishers whose books I kept an eye out for. First it was the green Modern Penguin Classics, then it was Picador – which was easy because in the 80s and 90s they had their own book spinners in bookshops. More recently my go to publishers have been Charco Press, Open Letter (mostly on the back of Rodrigo Fresán's books) and Fitzcarraldo editions. (And Other Stories are about to join the list.)

Ever since I bought Clare Louise Bennett's *Pond* and the first of Agustin Fernández Mallo's *Nocilla* trilogy I have kept an eye out for Fitzcarraldo's sparse blue (fiction) and white (non-fiction) book coverss. Two of these new books I'm reviewing are by authors – Esther Kinsy and Olga Tokarczuk – who Fitzcarraldo helped introduce to English speaking audiences and garner critical and popular acclaim, not to mention literary prizes.

Of course, I haven't enjoyed – or indeed read – everything they've produced. Recently they've taken to publishing swathes of Jon Fosse and Annie Ernaux, both of whom I find incredibly dull; and sometimes it's hard to see why a book has been designated its blue or white cover: Isn't Ian Penman's book about Fassbinder as much about him and his response to the latter's films, which is a kind of storytelling? And aren't diaries always fictional constructs, especially when rearranged alphabetically and edited/selected by the Sheila Heti?

I don't say that to be difficult. Kinsky's *Seeing Further* comes wrapped in white but is a story, albeit perhaps a true story, about her buying and trying to resurrect an abandoned cinema in Hungary. Sprinkled with photographs, it is about a love affair with the flicker of projected images and an attempt to capture the cinematic experience. Like Kinsky's novels, it is a quiet, intriguing book, full of unexpected characters and the web of relationships between them. There is no big storyline or plot, no dramatic ending, simply an unassuming tale of the narrator deciding, almost on a whim it seems, to buy a semi-derelict cinema in a small town in Hungary, then following through by leaving Budapest and moving there.

It is a wonderful exploration about light and dark, memory and illusion, town versus city, communities changing and adapting. And it is about coping with the past and with failure:

Why doesn't anyone come to the cinema? I asked Jószi

after the film? He could not have been the only one who

still had memories connected to this film, the laughter of

another time, mixed with dreams and hopes still in his

mind.

Jószi shurugged his shoulders. Maybe people want to

be alone with eveyrhting they miss. They sit at home,

thinking about what they don't have. We used to have this

cinema, it was here, it was a complete place. All around it

many things were lacking but the cinema was there.

Jószi goes on to suggest that the 'fairy tales' that were conjured up in films made audiences cry and laugh together, but that 'Returning to the cinema here is like taking a look around in that fairy tale.' He suggests that 'Maybe they'd rather forget.'

There are things that cannot be forgotten, too, in Tokarczuk's *The Emposium*, a bizarre and meandering novel that is subtitled 'A Health Resort Horror Story'. Confusingly, the proof review copy comes wrapped in white, not the blue it will be formally published in, and the blurb suggests it is a return to the territory of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

I know nothing about Mann or his writing. To me *The Emposium* is a weird combination of Katherine Mansfield, *The Wicker Man* and Rudolf Steiner. I confess I found it an effort to get through, though it does quicken its pace for the final third, after a slow start. Of course, our society knows little about health resorts in the mountain, let alone the idea of curing Tuberculosis by breathing mountain air and taking gentle walks and icy baths. Nowadays, the idea of a spa has become a luxury break, attached to self-indulgence and pampering; a far remove from the early 20th Century depicted here.

It is hard to know what the real horror is meant to be here: the spirits who at times narrating the book or the patriarchal male attitudes expressed by the male characters who have been sent to the spa, busy debating why women aren't equal, and what they are for. Sexism, licentiousness, drunkenness and pontification are the order of the day here, ignorance and attitude. There is little to shock readers here because if one is paying attention it is clear what is going to happen from very early on, and at times the satire is rather heavy-handed. A note explains that 'All the misogynistic views on the topic of women and their place in the world are paraphrased by actual authors' but – recognising that I am male – it can all seem a little clumsy and didactic.

Tokarczuk seems to have abandoned her engaging genre subversions in favour of moralistic stories. Whilst *The Emposium* is nowhere as tedious or po-faced as *The Books of Jacob* – an overlong and over-serious historical novel about an 18th Century heretical preacher, that no-one I know has managed to finish reading – it lacks pace and tension for much of its duration. If I was being generous I would suggest it is a comedy of manners and societal expectation, with a pantheistic or occult twist.

I've read a couple of Janet Frame books previously and enjoyed them, but they have both gone back to the charity shop from whence they came. She is a serious and slightly dour New Zealand author very much concerned with post-colonialism and existentialist dilemma. This 1962 novel reads very much as a 1960s novel, tight and controlled but somewhat out of place in the 21st Century.

Rupert Loydell (1000) words