

Book Review: Cold Nights of Childhood

by [John RC Potter](#) (September 2024)



There is a well-known saying that you cannot judge a book by its cover. In the same vein, one should not judge a book by its length. *Cold Nights of Childhood* by the Turkish author,

Tezer Özlü, is a slim volume. Although a short novel it is indeed also a weighty one in terms of what it contains from a literary viewpoint. Originally published in Turkish as *Çocukluğun Soğuk Geceleri* in 1980, Ayşegül Savaş in the introduction to the republished version writes that it “is Özlü’s first novel and the second of three books she published in her short lifetime. She died of breast cancer at the age of forty-three in Zurich, a death even more tragic, perhaps, after years of battling with mental illness.” Knowing these facts, then, gives the reader a glimpse into the telling title: *Cold Nights of Childhood* is, in essence, the narrator looking back in the rearview mirror of her memories, in an attempt to forge ahead into an uncertain future. Although a novel, there are similarities between the unnamed protagonist in the novel and the woman who authored it. Savaş continues, “The book shares many similarities with its author’s life,” and then provides specific details of the commonalities between Özlü and the narrator. She states, “While these facts of Özlü’s life story overlap with the events of *Cold Nights*, the interest of the book is not so much its autobiographical mirror but the way that life is endowed with an electric mutability.”



Tezer Özlü

The English-language version of this Turkish novel, skillfully translated by the author and academician Maureen Freely, has made this rather hidden gem of a novel accessible to readers

around the world. In the close to half-century since its initial publication, Özlü's novel is experiencing a literary rebirth and renewed appreciation, allowing for the type of celebrated recognition that it so richly deserves. In the illuminating introduction, Savaş gives further details that peel back the layers of the correlation between the author's and the narrator's lives, as one would peel an apple; perhaps what is most enlightening is the shared affinity of mental illness between Özlü and her central character and how it can affect all aspects of one's life. In the brilliantly written introduction, Savaş continues, "Madness, after all, disrupts the temporal narrative. Here, time is broken and reshuffled through the sharp edge of consciousness. The self is peeled away layer by layer to arrive at its core."

The first chapter is entitled, 'The House,' in which with deft literary strokes Özlü paints a picture with words of the birthplace of the narrator's childhood memories. The novel opens with these words: "My father has a whistle, saved from his days as a gymnastic teacher. Every morning he marches through the house in his baggy striped pyjamas blowing on that whistle." In short order, the author portrays a family like so many others: complex, multi-faceted, unfathomable, and dysfunctional. Although the family is living in the teeming metropolis of Istanbul, there is always the reminder from whence they come. Özlü writes, "We're no longer in the provinces. We've abandoned those rambling orchards and large wooden houses to their silent towns. And we've abandoned those silent towns to the 1950s. All I have left are fleeting childhood dreams of Esentepe's tall pines, of yellow and purple crocuses gathered from fields of melting snow." Like so many other families before and after them who have shared similar aspirational dreams, the narrator's family has moved from the country to the city in the pursuit of a better life; however, as is often the case, it is not so much a better life as just a different one.

Özlü continues to peel back the layers of the narrator's childhood in the second chapter, 'School and the Road Leading to It.' Like the narrator, the author lived in the Muslim country of Turkey but attended a Catholic school in Istanbul. The chapter provides details of the narrator's family and friends, her burgeoning sexuality, and her transition into young adulthood. She reflects, "During those autumns, winters, springs and summers we're still children. But in place of childhood joy, there's a strange disgruntlement, a seeping misery. A growing unease about our teacher parents and the narrow house of our Muslim neighbourhoods, about our Church school's Catholic atmosphere, and its nuns' peculiar and-to us-incomprehensible behaviour, and the lack of other teachers, other ways of learning, that might give our thoughts direction, might help us make sense of the lives awaiting us." As the narrator experiences life and love as a young woman, she turns away from childhood and toward her life as an adult. She writes, "We grow up inside an anger that grows with us. The neighbourhood in which we live, the dead end, the rooms and the furniture, the old bedstead with its broken springs and its cotton mattress that caves in at the middle—we grow up hating them all. The only life is in the streets. The streets are jumping with it. The city's beauty is in its people and its crowds. What's real is the outside world. The outside world is calling to us. Ringing in our ears. Singing of other lands, of an ocean to the west of us, and ocean to the east." There is a sense that the narrator's experiences and perspectives share an affinity with Özlü's own.

The third chapter, 'The Leo Ferré Concert,' continues with the concept of the city of Istanbul as a character. Anyone who has visited this fascinating city knows that Istanbul has its own unique personality and definable identity: it is a country within itself, straddling two continents over the ensuing centuries. The narrator states, "This city never ends. I can go for kilometres without seeing anything to mark a beginning or an end." This chapter is the longest of the four and

depicts the narrator's literary thoughts and life as well as her descent into periodic bouts of mental illness. Also, her first two (of three) marriages are presented, both ultimately unsuccessful as well as her attempts to attain and maintain mental and emotional equilibrium. Of her husband, the narrator states, "He is in Paris. And everything is so much better without him. He's coming back. He'll add his own unhappy suspicions about the world to the flow of my own confusions. His hopelessness too. Let him stay in Paris. Or if he comes back, let him live without me. There is no friendship between us, no marriage, no love." It appears, then, that history has repeated itself: earlier in the novel, Özlü has the narrator viewing her parent's loveless marriage in a similar vein.

Against the backdrop of a soulless marriage, the narrator descends further into struggles with her mental stability. She tells the reader, "The illness that began with such joy has carried me from Ankara to Istanbul to drop me into this joyless room inside a mental hospital in the middle of the city. This room, which I enter at the age of twenty-three, will rob me of all joy and tenderness for the next five years." Despite the narrator's long struggle with poor mental health during these years, the devastating experiences appear to be the literary fertilizer for the flourishing of her imagination. Nighttime at the mental hospital serves as the backdrop for the ideas that will hopefully become future stories. The author portrays the narrator's state of mind, her struggle as a woman, and her aspirations as a writer: "Getting up the next morning, all I want is to go out in the garden. To the countryside. I do my writing during these hours. A lot of it. All in my head. I long to get up. If I do, I can see lights playing on the surface of the sea. And the dark shade of trees. The houses are darker than they are at night, even. Here and there, a light burning in a room. All these writings slip away the moment I awaken." The turmoil within the narrator's mental and emotional landscape reflects a Turkey that is in crisis. Özlü informs the reader, "It's the spring

of 1971. Unusually hot for this time of year. In a year blighted by political unrest across the land. Unrest I shall never manage to understand.”

In the short fourth and final chapter, ‘The Aegean Again,” the narrator has returned to southern Turkey. The chapter opens with these provocative and alluring words: “I’m sitting on the top steps of an ancient theatre. I’m waiting for the flood of colours that the sun will bring up from the Taurus Mountains. It will paint them every shade of purple, brown, green and blue. It will be born into the reflection of its own colours. Mist will rise from the valleys to climb up and up until the sun burns it away.” There seems to be a sense of peace, of closure, and finally, of acceptance. One hopes as well, that the narrator has conquered her demons, and vanquished her fears. We learn the time in this place has been temporary; the respite will soon be over and she will be returning to that huge city of cacophony, history, and mystery—Istanbul. We discover there is a new husband, as well as a child, her daughter. Although still quite young, the narrator hints at her own mortality, reflecting, “ Life is full of passion. This we know. The more you come to love life, the more your recognition of death grows and evolves.” Life marches on, and with it, the shortening of the matchstick that is one’s life. She continues, “As always, there’s that unease. It never lessens. It only grows. Then several of our friends die, one after the other. People still in their forties. With them we bury our hopes and wishes for a better life.” Ultimately, this novel is about Istanbul, that source of inspiration across many centuries. The author shows the narrator in a reflective mood: “How I love the rain, the Bosphorus, the meyhanes, politics and this great city where life can be so hard.” In the closing pages, Özlü depicts the narrator reflecting on her life, “My long years of suffering have not destroyed me. They’ve only guided my heart.” In light of Özlü’s similar struggles, one wonders if she is writing as much about herself as she is about the narrator.

In the closing pages of this brilliant novel, Maureen Freely, in the Translator's Notes, provides an insightful closure to the author's work and life. Freely writes, "The Istanbul Tezer Özlü knew as a child in the 1950s was not much different from the city I came to know a decade later." There is an emotional connection between the translator and the author due to the shared commonalities of time and place, in that fabled and historic city of Istanbul. She refers to the district of Fatih, "where Tezer and her family lived, and where my mother, sister, brother and I spent so many dusty Saturdays desperately trying to keep up with my father, who had fallen in love with its unswept cobblestones, subsiding wooden houses, wondrous mosques and broken marble foundations." Freely refers to her family's relationship with Bebek and Rumeli Hisar, former towns along the Bosphorus that became absorbed into the city of Istanbul. She tells us, "It was along this same stretch of shore that Tezer found some peace after the many ordeals she describes in this autobiographical novel. She made her happiest home in Arnavutköy, through which I passed each day on my way to my American lycée. Translating the pages she set there was for me a homecoming, and not just because she took me back to a place I once knew so well. It was first and foremost her way of fashioning a paragraph, which cut right through the many straitjackets, real and metaphorical, that were forced on her—as a daughter, a student, an abused and electroshocked patient, and even as a writer."

Freely's translation has received richly deserved accolades, including being the winner of the renowned National Book Critics Circle Barrios Book In Translation Prize. Freely's concluding Translator's Notes are a fitting tribute and testament to a Turkish writer whose physical and literary lives ended far too soon, but whose stories will continue to live on and shed light on the vagaries of the human condition for readers around the world.

References:

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