

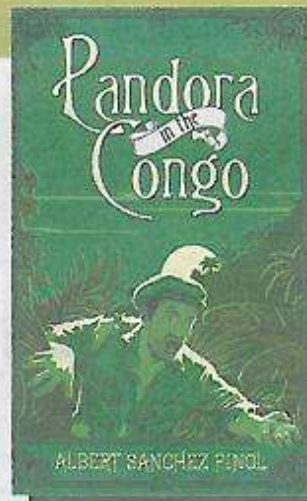
Pandora in the Congo

by Albert Sanchez Piñol

Translated from the Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem
Canongate, 2008

In Greek myth Pandora was the first woman who, in response to Prometheus' theft of fire, was sent down to earth to punish mankind. She brought gifts, one of which was the famous jar box which contained mankind's evils, such as, greed, envy and vanity.

Pandora, once on earth, opened the box releasing the ills, only to leave hope inside as she closed the lid again. Thus, judging by the title of this book we can safely assume that Sánchez Piñol has taken on a rather hefty subject (although not touching upon the feminist angle



of this myth) for his second book in a trilogy which began with *Cold Skin*. This latest instalment deals with an English gypsy man who struggles against a race of the whitest of whites (alien like creatures) whom he encounters in a clearing in the midst of the Congolese jungle.

Does this sound outlandish? Well, it is not in Sánchez Piñol's interest to make us look at the story in this way only and he is indeed seemingly serious about the issues raised. The story appears to have come about through the osmosis of different art forms and genres which perhaps reveals the path that the writer has taken to develop an interest in the issues that he is addressing. Both the cover of the book and the story lead us to recollect Conrad's *In the Heart of Darkness*, Haggard's *She*, but also writers like Verne or Herge, and there are also

hints of horror, adventure and B-movie extractions. Yet, simultaneously history is coming alive by real historical characters walking on the stage as themselves, such as the Irishman Roger Casement; who in 1904 presented a report which proved fatal to the Belgian King Leopold's bloody reign of the country.

One of many questions that the author wrestles with seems to be those of coming to terms with guilt: from guilt over real historical colonial atrocities, to the guilt over having, at some point, enjoyed less obvious but unfair, if perhaps naive, portrayals of colonial countries and their peoples in pulp fictions and other entertainment veins. It is this awareness and ability to talk about the issues, via the genres chosen, that makes this book so interesting, and an intriguing read. Even the moments when the story wears a little thin and one thinks that one can make out the empty chasm between a story and its maker, it never fully loses its grip, and as such one wonders if that flailing has more to do with the translation than the Catalan original. Nevertheless, a lot of care has gone into writing this book and this makes it an important delight which I hope a lot of people will get a chance to partake of.



Freelance journalist and writer Jeanette Rehnstrom is a member of the Irish Writers' Exchange. She has been writing extensively for GCN magazine for almost three years with two columns by her featuring in the magazine every month.
www.irishwritersexchange.com