

PAUL BAILEY

His Mother's Son

The Testament of Mary

By Colm Tóibín

(Viking 104pp £12.99)

Colm Tóibín's latest novella is as intriguing as it is mischievous. In *The Testament of Mary* he tells the story of Jesus Christ's horribly curtailed life from his mother's point of view. She never mentions her beloved boy's name because the pain of his passing is still with her in exile in Ephesus, her last resting place. Her fondest memories of him are concerned with his childhood and adolescence, when he was dependent upon her and his also unnamed human father. She describes his time in her womb in rapturous terms, as is proper for a devout woman. The Holy Ghost doesn't get a look-in here. The birth of this Mary's child was an everyday wonder, not an act of eternal religious significance. Tóibín's commonsensical Mary is possessed of many virtues, high among which is the capacity to doubt. She is instinctively a sceptic when pondering the behaviour of other people, including the men and women who besought her son to perform miracles.

These miracles – the conversion of water into wine; the raising of Lazarus from the grave – are newly imagined. The pages devoted to the sweet and gentle Lazarus are especially bewitching:

He had been unchanged by death. Once his eyes opened, he stared at the sun with a deep unearthly puzzlement and then at the sky around the sun. He seemed not to see the crowd; some sounds came from him, not words exactly, something closer to whispered cries, or whimpers, and then the crowd stood back as Lazarus moved through them, past them, looking at no one, being led by his sisters back to their house, the world around remaining stilled and silent, and my son too, I am told, stilled and silent, as Lazarus began to weep.

Will this book upset, or even enrage, the thousands of Christians of all denominations who believe that the Virgin Mary is sacrosanct? It certainly failed to offend me, since the portrait this always scrupulous novelist presents is of a loving person

who cannot bear the notion that the son she raised and nurtured should be so barbarically sacrificed for the world that was, the world that is, and the world that's yet to come. She writes, you might say, with the authority of loss. She stands for every grieving parent in history, mystified by the cruel fate meted out to her only child.

Where the novel is at its most controversial is with its depiction of Jesus the man. He has grown to be a person that his mother doesn't completely understand, as is the way with clever children. She finds his followers a devious, not entirely trustworthy bunch. Her maternal instinct alerts her to the fact that there is trouble waiting for him. The more pious he becomes, closer to the god he now considers to be

his father, the more frightened she feels on his behalf. She wants him to live, even as she sees that he is heading towards death. She knows that he could be murdered by Jewish or Roman fanatics, but she is ill-prepared for his eventual crucifixion. Before her son meets the cruellest of fates, Mary notices the individuals who are witnessing the event – a man feeding a starved bird of prey with living rabbits, another throwing dice. Tóibín has read Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' to good effect. Life, in all its awfulness, has to go on.

About eight years ago, I was standing in Mary's shrine at Ephesus when a group of Polish nuns swept in. Within seconds, they were emitting near-orgasmic noises similar to those that the tennis player Victoria Azarenka makes on court. This was ecstasy in stereophonic sound. I think it unlikely that the nuns will ever read this lovely novella. It restores the Virgin to the human race, which is where – as the immortal prayer suggests – she forever belongs.

To order this book for £10.39, see the *Literary Review Bookshop* on page 35

JAMES PURDON

Albanian Nights

The Fall of the Stone City

By Ismail Kadare

(Translated by John Hodgson)

(Canongate 176pp £14.99)

The southern Albanian city of Gjirokastër has the distinction of being the birthplace of Ismail Kadare, who, having published forty-odd novels in Albanian and French, came to much wider notice in Britain when he was announced as the first winner of the Man Booker International Prize in 2005. But Gjirokastër also has the rather more dubious distinction of being the birthplace of Enver Hoxha, the Stalinist ruler of Albania who began his political life as an anti-Fascist partisan fighting against a puppet government in hock to Mussolini and ended up as the paranoid dictator of an economically stagnant and isolated outpost of communism.

Gjirokastër is the titular stone city of this most recent translation from Kadare's

immense body of work, though the title's vaguely epic ring is a little misleading for a novel that twines itself around local lore and wartime rumour to produce a disturbing hybrid of Balkan myth and Iron Curtain Grand Guignol. Much better to have kept the Albanian title under which it was first published in 2008, *Darka e gabuar* ('The Wrong Dinner'), with its hints of all those ominous meals familiar from the folk-tale tradition.

In this case, the dinner in question takes place in 1943, shortly after the advancing German army of 'liberation', its scouts having been fired upon by partisan snipers, announces its intention to take Gjirokastër by force. After the shelling, prisoners are rounded up in the old Roman way, one for