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# Three Sisters, Three Summers in the Greek Countryside

By [Karen Van Dyck](#) July 16, 2019

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MARGARITA LIBERAKI (LEFT) AND HER DAUGHTER, THE NOVELIST MARGARITA KARAPANOU (RIGHT), ON THE ISLAND OF HYDRA.

“That summer we bought big straw hats. Maria’s had cherries around the rim, Infanta’s had forget-me-nots, and mine had poppies as red as fire. When we lay in the hayfield wearing them, the sky, the wildflowers, and the three of us all melted into one.” The beginning of Margarita Liberaki’s *Three Summers*, at once vivid and hazy, evokes the season and the story of adolescent girlhood that the book will unfold. The novel tells the story of three sisters living outside Athens: Maria, Infanta, and Katerina, the youngest, who tells the tale. The house where they live with their mother, aunt, and grandfather is in the countryside. Focusing on the sisters’ daily life and first loves, as well as on a secret about their Polish grandmother, the novel is about growing up and how strange and exciting it is to discover the curious moods and desires that constitute you and your difference from other people. It also features a stable cast of friends and neighbors, all with their own unexpected opinions: the self-involved Laura Parigori; the studious astronomer David and his Jewish mother, Ruth, from England; and the carefree Captain Andreas. The book is adventurous, fantastical, romantic, down to earth, earthy, and, above all, warm. Its only season, after all, is summer.

The world inside the book could not be more unlike the world the book came into when it was first published in 1946, immediately after the terrible famine and the Axis occupation of Greece during World War II, and on the brink of the even more devastating civil war, barely a shadow of which can be found in the idyllic world between its covers. In fact, its cover originally featured a garden. In the story we learn that just as each of the three girls wears a suitable hat of her own choosing, so each of them has her own garden patch to tend. In Katerina’s, we learn, the flowers pop up in a crazy, haphazard way. To describe it, Liberaki uses the word *pardalo*, meaning “splotched with color,” a word derived from the ancient Greek for “leopard” that suggests the wildness in Katerina’s heart. The whole summery world of the book is wildly, sometimes dangerously alive—one year the countryside is swept by a devastating fire—and it is nature, growing plants and growing girls, that makes it so. To its first Greek readers, this novel must have offered an oasis from the unbearable realities of the day, a place to live out the life-and-death implications of war in the smaller details of flowers, birds, and bees.

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dizzy delights of girls letting themselves go, allowing themselves to test their limits and find out who they are. It is unabashedly a book about the girls' new sexual awareness. Maria is boy crazy at the beginning and baby crazy by the end. Infanta is remote and virginal, loving her horse more than the boy next door with whom she rides. Romantic, impetuous Katerina plays out complicated love scenarios in her mind.

Social taboos are largely lifted: touching oneself, as well as sex before marriage, pass with little comment; the sisters and their friends are left free to ponder their lives and those of their elders, imagining all sorts of ways in which the future might take shape. The danger and damage life can bring are acknowledged—in the background of the three summers lie histories of divorce, abortion, abandonment, and sexual abuse—but it is the plenitude of nature and the spirit of creation that prevail. Maria's pregnancies, the mating of the she-goat Felaha, the still lifes of Aunt Theresa, and the embroidered peacocks of Infanta: these are all part of one world. Katerina, observing everyone, entering imaginatively into their lives, arrives at a new sense of sympathy and power that will eventually sustain her own creative vocation as a writer of a book, the reader is led to imagine, quite like *Three Summers*.

The earthy utopianism of the novel met with immediate success. In Greece, the book has gone through fifty-one printings, and to this day, many Greek readers list it as their favorite book of all time. It is also widely beloved in France, where it was originally published in 1950 on the recommendation of Albert Camus, who wrote to Liberaki: "The sun has disappeared from books these days. That's why they hinder our attempts to live, instead of helping us. But the secret is still kept in your country, passed on from one initiate to another. You are one of those who pass it on." A lyrical paean to youth, a refuge from the present, a garden of promise, Liberaki's story takes us to a place we want to be.

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Margarita Liberaki was born in Athens in 1919. After her parents divorced she was raised by her maternal grandparents, the owners of a publishing house and bookstore that were central to the intellectual and artistic life of Athens. She studied law and received her degree in 1943, but her ambitions lay elsewhere. Her first novel, *The Trees*, appeared in 1945, and *Three Summers* (or *The Straw Hats*, as it was titled in Greek) followed soon after. *Three Summers*, with its emphasis on the creative impulse and Katerina as a writer-to-be, turned out to be quite prescient about the direction Liberaki's own life and career

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writer. She was pregnant with their child when she was writing *Three Summers*. Less than a year later she divorced him and moved to Paris, leaving her daughter to be raised, as she had been, by grandparents.

Living in Paris was emancipating for Liberaki. She insisted on transliterating her name as Liberaki, not Lymberaki, so that it looked like a cognate of liberation. She associated with other Greek expatriates—the poets Andreas Kambas and Odysseas Elytis, and the Marxist philosophers Cornelius Castoriadis and Kostas Axelos—as well as the likes of Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. She wrote another novel, *The Other Alexander* (1950), before turning to the theater and screenwriting. From the exploration of the female psyche her work now moved toward Greek mythology, where she sought, as she wrote, “a more liminal space, a ritualistic Dionysian writing that tries to define Greece’s position between Europe and the East through archetypal myths.” Her career from her first novels to her final screenplay, *Diaspora*, and her translation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, both of which were published just before her death in 2001, can be characterized by daring experimentalism.

Liberaki’s daughter, Margarita Karapanou, who grew up between Greece and France, also went on to become an important writer, and *Three Summers* may be seen as a precursor not only to Liberaki’s career but also to her daughter’s. In particular it looks forward to Karapanou’s most famous novel, *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1976), also a story of growing up, although much darker. (In an interview she tellingly inverted Camus’s praise of the sun in her mother’s novel: “Camus would come over for dinner ... and he would say, ‘Poor Margarita, here in the darkness of Paris, not the light of Attica.’”) The relations between mother and daughter can be summed up by such an attitude, comparable to a glass half full. What has always interested me, however, is the mutual confluence of the two women’s work, especially the way that Liberaki’s wise-child naivete intermingles with Karapanou’s bad-girl precocity.

Both women, as it happened, were of great help in making my translation of *Three Summers*. I was sixteen, Katerina’s age, when I first went to live in Greece, studying Greek poetry on the island of Kalymnos with a bunch of post-junta dissidents. I got to know Karapanou shortly thereafter and some years later Liberaki, who asked me to translate her novel. In the summers of 1992 and 1993 I stayed with them on Hydra, in their tall gray house with a bright yellow door, overlooking the port and the sea, and I came to understand how inextricably intertwined life and literature were for these women.

I remember walking that first summer to their favorite swimming spot as Liberaki explained to me that although she had only one sister, the sisters of *Three Summers* were very much drawn from her own experience. Maria was happy with being a wife and mother, Infanta with being an artist, but only Katerina wanted both. She was like Katerina, she said. Her sister, Aglaia, a sculptor, was more like Infanta. (Later that evening I would meet Aglaia at the opening of an exhibition by a family friend, the painter Nikos Ghikas. Among the exhibits were the covers he had done for books by Liberaki and Patrick Leigh Fermor.)

The following summer brought new insights into the relation between mother and daughter, into their lives, their work, and indeed my own. In a breezy room I worked with Liberaki on rendering difficult passages, while Karapanou lay on the couch reading American murder mysteries and eating almond cakes I had brought from the neighboring island of Aegina. Liberaki and I would go back and forth debating alternatives, and every once in a while Karapanou would throw in a trenchant one-liner with just the right American inflection. The translation wouldn't be what it is without her. These women's lives and writings were about translating between languages and cultures, but also about translating between themselves, as well as collaborating on the translations of their books.

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Liberaki used to joke that it was taking us only two summers to translate her three, so I imagine she would appreciate that it has now taken me a third to revise what I did back then. My notes from those distant visits, as well as our correspondence, show that at the time the themes of her novel were no less central to my life, too. I was also figuring out how to be both a writer and a mother. Translation was a way of bridging these two pursuits. Like raising children, translation involved acknowledging foreignness: something that was and wasn't one's own, dependent and independent at once. When we translate we are asking the reader to believe that, though the work is from another language, it now exists in a new language. Perhaps a field full of poppies with three sisters wearing straw hats, I think, as I reenter the summer-lush world of Liberaki's novel. But where is this field? Where does a translation take place? How could mine be both in Greece and in America?

The title had been the first problem. I chose *Three Summers* since *Straw Hats* in America has a different class valence, more hillbilly than bourgeois, and it might send the wrong signal for a book about well-off girls in large houses attending summer parties. Even if I

happen in a title. I had to get my readers inside the book first. Like children, translations need to be helped along before they can be expected to do things on their own. And like children it was important for them to be different from their parents—and for this difference to be noticed.

Foreign words introduced another thorny issue. In my original translation I had included Gallicisms like *Mlle* and *comtesse* but had shied away from Greek words. The meanings of the street names, for example, had seemed part of the atmosphere of the book, so I had translated them: “Spring Avenue” for “Aniksi Avenue” and “Olive Avenue” for “Elia Avenue.” But perhaps such assimilation was misleading. Didn’t translators, like writers, have a responsibility to teach readers about worlds they don’t already know? And wasn’t multilingualism an important part of this teaching? For my revised version I decided to transliterate more of the names and to include a glossary. After all, anglophone readers over time have learned to accept “Champs-Élysées” rather than “Elysian Fields.”

Punctuation can also underscore the mixed provenance of a translation. The Greek publisher of the series where my translation first appeared applied Greek, not American, conventions of punctuation. I insisted that they be changed. Revisiting the book after all these years, I feel differently. Yes, quotation marks for dialogue instead of guillemets, and certainly the table of contents at the beginning, not at the end, but the Greek practice of three-dot ellipses throughout the text, even at the end of sentences, could help to re-create—in English—the sense of stream of consciousness that the novel possesses in Greek. Roman numeral chapter headings also gave a slight sense of foreignness.

Ultimately Liberaki’s novel, as well as my experience of working with her on the translation, helped me understand how interrelated writing and motherhood are and how important translation is to seeing this. Both translating and mothering are practices of hybridity but also of unequal power. They are projects that require careful thinking about how two works or human beings are and are not the same. They demand that we take responsibility for our decisions, but also that we acknowledge structural imbalances beyond our control. In fact, noticing differences is one way to allow a child to grow up and a translation to stand on its own.

The sense of newfound independence emerging from the safety and comfort of home is what I hope my translation of *Three Summers* brings out. There is something so replenishing in this novel, something about spending time, just hanging out, not really

scene, describes what it feels like to lie in the hay in the barn pretending to take her *mesimeriano*, the mandatory afternoon nap. She draws us into a kind of resting for which we so often forget to leave time, but that is so necessary if we are going to have the strength to take risks and make a difference in the world.

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*Excerpted from the introduction to **Three Summers**, by Margarita Liberaki, translated by Karen Van Dyck, published by NYRB Classics. Introduction copyright © 2019 by Karen Van Dyck.*



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