

REVIEW

The Open Hearth (2000)

Thomas Doulis

The Open Hearth is an epic of Greek immigration, the best literary account of their Americanization. Its depiction of the steel industry is better written than the books on American industry by the Socialist muckraker Upton Sinclair. This is a work of scrupulous scholarship, a valuable historical record not only of the Greeks but of the American labor movement, the steel industry and what President Franklin Roosevelt meant to workers--a moving family saga, a discerning evocation of history and a masterpiece of Realism. Greeks are of special interest among all ethnic groups because they originated western civilization and embody characteristic American values of independence and democracy.

The openhearted hero, Costa (Gus) Straton, comes to the United States to pay off his father's debts and to provide dowries for his sisters. Costa pays the costs of sustaining his family in the Old World while struggling to survive in the New World. After the Disaster of Asia Minor in 1922, America offers Greeks an opportunity to sustain themselves and even to extend the glory of their past. Doulis makes Steeltown, representing the industry as a whole, as vivid as Dante's inferno, yet a hell that is Costa's way to fulfill the American dream. The dark looming ironworks are lit by molten steel pouring like liquefied sunlight. Costa is illuminated by labor unrest and must cope with industry spies, company thugs and the Ku Klux Klan. During the strike of 1937, he helps form the Steelworkers Union. Doulis opens our hearts to Costa and the other Greeks because they are so down-to-earth, colorful, decent and generous, for the most part. Their typical bighearted generosity is exemplified by The Pananos, who bakes all his pastries too large.

When he returns home to his village in Greece to find a wife, Costa chooses Marianne, a woman with no dowry but with a strong and virtuous character. In America, the two raise a family during the Great Depression. The names of their children Ariadne and Socrates evoke past glory and suggest qualities it will take for them to thrive in the "alien corn" of the new country. Names such as Agamemnon the Bookie--a humorous transformation--suggest adaptations will be necessary. Costa's religion from the village, with its priorities and traditions and rituals, embodied in Papa Thanasi, keeps his soul alive and redeems him and his community in the end. His wise choice of Marianne, a kind of virgin Mary, then a Great Mother and liberated partner and teacher, gives him what he needs to prevail, as represented finally by the success of the union in every sense of the word. Doulis dramatizes the tension between sustaining the spiritual "village" and adapting to the diversity of America as a melting pot, an open hearth--one of the great themes of our history. "Everyone seems to do what comes into his own head here."

Greek or not, readers will enjoy the vernacular language in this novel--the Rakafellas, the chewtobaccos and the Klookies. Some approximations and coinages are hilarious, especially the Greek immigrant versions of Anglo-Saxon obscenities such as "fokim ina ess." The diligent "hart-workin" Greeks contrast with the "freelodies" in this "dimocracy."

Thomas Doulis is a novelist, historian, translator and critic living in Portland, Oregon. His two previous novels are *Path for Our Valor* (1963), about paratroops, and *The Quarries of Sicily* (1969), set in Greece during the years of the military Junta. He worked on *The Open Hearth* and a sequel for seventeen years.

Michael Hollister (2015)

THE
OPEN
HEARTH



THE FIRST GENERATION
A NOVEL OF IMMIGRATION

THOMAS DOULIS