

Independent

Boyd Tonkin: A Week in Books

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You seldom expect reality to match - let alone surpass - the radiant images of classic literature. In the first book of *Paradise Lost*, for instance, Milton describes Satan's seething legion of rebel angels as "Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks/ In Vallombrosa". The poet was recalling his travels in Tuscany in 1638, where he met - or so he claimed - the persecuted Galileo.

That passage has haunted me ever since I first read it, but so far as I knew - until last weekend - there wasn't a single tree left standing on those hillsides, an hour's drive east of Florence. Yet it turns out that Milton's woodlands still flourish spectacularly on the slopes of Vallombrosa, perhaps as deep and dark as when he witnessed them. And in a clearing high up in the pines, beyond the level of the broadleaf trees, stands an 11th-century Benedictine abbey. There, on Sunday, a ceremony of epic length honoured a story from a very different sort of place: Hisham Matar's debut novel of tyranny, persecution and survival in Gaddafi's Libya, *In the Country of Men*.

Matar, already Man Booker-shortlisted and the winner of a Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Ondaatje Prize, took the inaugural Premio Vallombrosa - Gregor von Rezzori. This award for international fiction published in Italy has been created in memory of the writer (her late husband) by Beatrice Monti della Corte. Von Rezzori (1914-1998) was the last great literary ironist to emerge from the cultural mêlée of the old Habsburg lands: the mordantly witty author of novels such as *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, his dissection of a class and an age, as well as of an autobiographical gem, *The Snows of Yesteryear*.

In their house a little further down the valley, his widow established and still presides over the legendary writers' retreat of the Santa Maddalena Foundation. For years, returning authors have praised it to me as paradise found: a place of inspiration-boosting peace and charm. Like Milton, they didn't exaggerate that much.

For Kamila Shamsie, "the best place in the world to work" is the red-doored studio that overlooks the forested declivities beyond. Bruce Chatwin used to favour the 13th-century signal tower at the far end of the Santa Maddalena olive grove, where (because every Eden has to have its serpent) real snakes may sometimes lurk. EM Forster's English pilgrims in Italy sought a room with a view. On its top storey, the signal tower offers a bathroom with panoramic vistas. But, just in case all this felt idyllic to the point of cliché and beyond, the heavens opened over eastern Tuscany on Sunday afternoon. Visiting authors merrily dodged the downpours as if at some even greener, lusher counterpart to Hay.

Various alumni of Santa Maddalena - Andrew Miller, John Banville and Zadie Smith among them - had returned for the prize-giving. The Italian edition of Smith's *On Beauty* featured on the shortlist. So did Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* and Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World*. But the victor, revealed after a leisurely preamble that saw a speech by Isabella Rossellini competing with the peal of the abbey bells, was Matar's partly autobiographical tale of a father's disappearance and a family's exile from their fear-stricken land.

In the Country of Men tempers bleak episodes of loneliness and loss with bittersweet memories of affection, happiness and sensory delight. Its pain does not extinguish recollected pleasures. As Matar put it, "I wish the place and time I was writing about had not been so deeply shaped by political strife." For all its anguish, his novel confirms what

Zadie Smith said about her own book: that "There are also truths on the side of beauty. It's not just an idea that blinds and fools." In Vallombrosa, that's pretty easy to believe.