

Something Good in the State of Denmark

By Thomas McCarthy

Book Review:

In the Company of Angels, by Thomas E. Kennedy
Bloomsbury, 2010.



Thomas E. Kennedy was born in New York City where he lived until completing his education. After service in the U.S. Army, he began to travel, settling in Copenhagen, where he has lived for the past 30 years. His novels and short stories are well known and critical successes and, until *In the Company of Angels*, appeared exclusively in the literary magazines and small presses of Europe and the United States.

In the Company of Angels takes place during one summer in Copenhagen. Thorkild Kristensen, a doctor at the Danish Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims, treats Bernardo (Nardo) Greene, a Chilean refugee and translator. Nardo was a teacher in Chile until arrested and tortured by the dictator Augusto Pinochet's secret police, who accused him of trying to subvert the regime by teaching poetry to his pupils, in particular poetry that extols freedom.

Now, Nardo cannot stop himself from reliving his many months of torture. Despite the gentle knowledgeable probing by Thorkild Kristensen, Nardo is withdrawn and suspicious of all authority and is fearful of another period of incarceration. Consequently, Dr Kristensen finds it almost impossible to assist him in beginning the process of healing.

Nardo remembers the inquisitor's words:

Even if you live to go out and tell this Nardo, no one will believe you. Do you think they will? No one will . . . To make them believe, you will have to edit, to distill, to tell only the tiniest little portion." Nardo hung by one foot and one hand, and

Frog-eyes pushed him like a swing. . . . Nardo could hear the cartilage that held arm to shoulder creak and pop.

So fearful is Nardo that even a car door slamming, a stranger lingering on the street outside his apartment, the sound of the postman's footsteps on the stairs are enough to send him cowering beneath the blankets. He has lost belief in himself and does not think he will ever be a man again. What gives his life some equilibrium, and enables him to go on living, are his angels, a belief he uses to protect himself. There is also a woman with eyes of blue light, Michela, who smiles at him when they see each other in a café.

At times, *In the Company of Angels* enralls and, in places, horrifies. It is also a timely reminder of the long-term physical harm caused by torture, and, more pernicious, the damage to the psyche. Although it is a novel about loss, *In the Company of Angels* is also about the redemption of hope through love. The hope comes from the selfless and dedicated work of the Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims and the heroic efforts by the good Doctor Kristensen. Beyond that, the novel offers a vivid backdrop of the inner city, lakes, cafés, and parks of Copenhagen—one of its many delights.

Thomas E. Kennedy's awards include the prestigious O. Henry Award, the Pushcart Prize, and the National Magazine Award. His many admirers will welcome this first mainstream U.S. novel publication. This is a matter for celebration and surely marks the beginning of another stage in his distinguished career.