

Refuge, lair and inner sanctum

A history and study of the concept of sanctuary

ALBERTO MANGUEL

SANCTUARY

Ways of telling, ways of dwelling

MARINA WARNER

416pp. William Collins. £20.

Marina Warner's latest book, *Sanctuary: Ways of telling, ways of dwelling* continues her examination of two subjects that she has long explored in her nonfiction books as well as in her fiction: how to engage ethically with our fellow human beings, and how to listen to what they have to say. The interweaving of both here suggests that perhaps the two questions are one.

"The idea of sanctuary has become synonymous in legal circumstances with asylum", says Warner. "A sanctuary thus spans ideas of a refuge, a shelter, a retreat, even a lair, an inner sanctum, a precinct, a stronghold, a place of safety from harm and a space reserved - 'asylum' as in a mental hospital." This epistemological generosity would have "sanctuary" mean not only the place one chooses for one's protection, but also a place others choose for you to sever themselves from you, such as the camp whose gates proclaimed "Arbeit macht frei"; leper colonies; prisons and reformatories; refugee camps in Kenya, Jordan, Bangladesh, Sudan; ferries and barges proposed as holding places for illegal immigrants in Britain.

The structure of her study, as Warner describes it in the introduction, reads like an afterthought. The book, she tells us, will proceed from the nature of sanctuaries in ancient Greece and in the Middle Ages, to the historical principles of the concept of sanctuary "on which it succeeded or failed", then on to the use of relics that can turn a place into a sanctuary, and finally to stories that can be read as examples or allegories of sanctuary. This sounds properly academic, yet, Warner being Warner, the pages that follow refuse to bend to these strictures. Since her earliest books - on the Virgin Mary, the Empress of China, *The Arabian Nights*, the tellers of fairy tales - Warner has let herself be guided by her delight in the tales that she discovers. Certainly, she is rigorous in her research and punctilious in her bibliographical backing, but the reader cannot help feeling that there is a playful Ariel behind her scholarly Prospero, disposed "to dive into the fire, to ride / On the curl'd clouds". Warner weaves her argument by passing seamlessly from Gilgamesh to video performances, from *Kalila and Dimna* to Harry Potter, and somehow it all makes sense, even if sometimes the point of the story is just the story.

Warner is concerned with the realities of life for refugees around the world - but even here, in the realm of practical action, she shows her passion for the survival tactics of the storyteller. Decades ago, discussing with a friend at the University of Palermo the plight of refugees in Sicily, she became aware of the fate of those who were unable to

A painting of Scheherazade by René Bull, c.1913



meet the bureaucratic demands of the sanctuary that received them. In Sicily, Warner says, "their stateless, paperless, homeless, unprotected condition makes them rich pickings for the Mafia ... who offer their protection in return for their

labour." She and her friend asked themselves whether there was anything that they, as academics and writers, could do. "Could literature in its broadest sense," Warner asked, "offer an alternative shelter?" Thus began an initiative in Palermo called Stories in Transit, in which refugees share their memories, folk tales, games, songs and even puppet shows. Warner calls this space "a sanctuary of the mind".

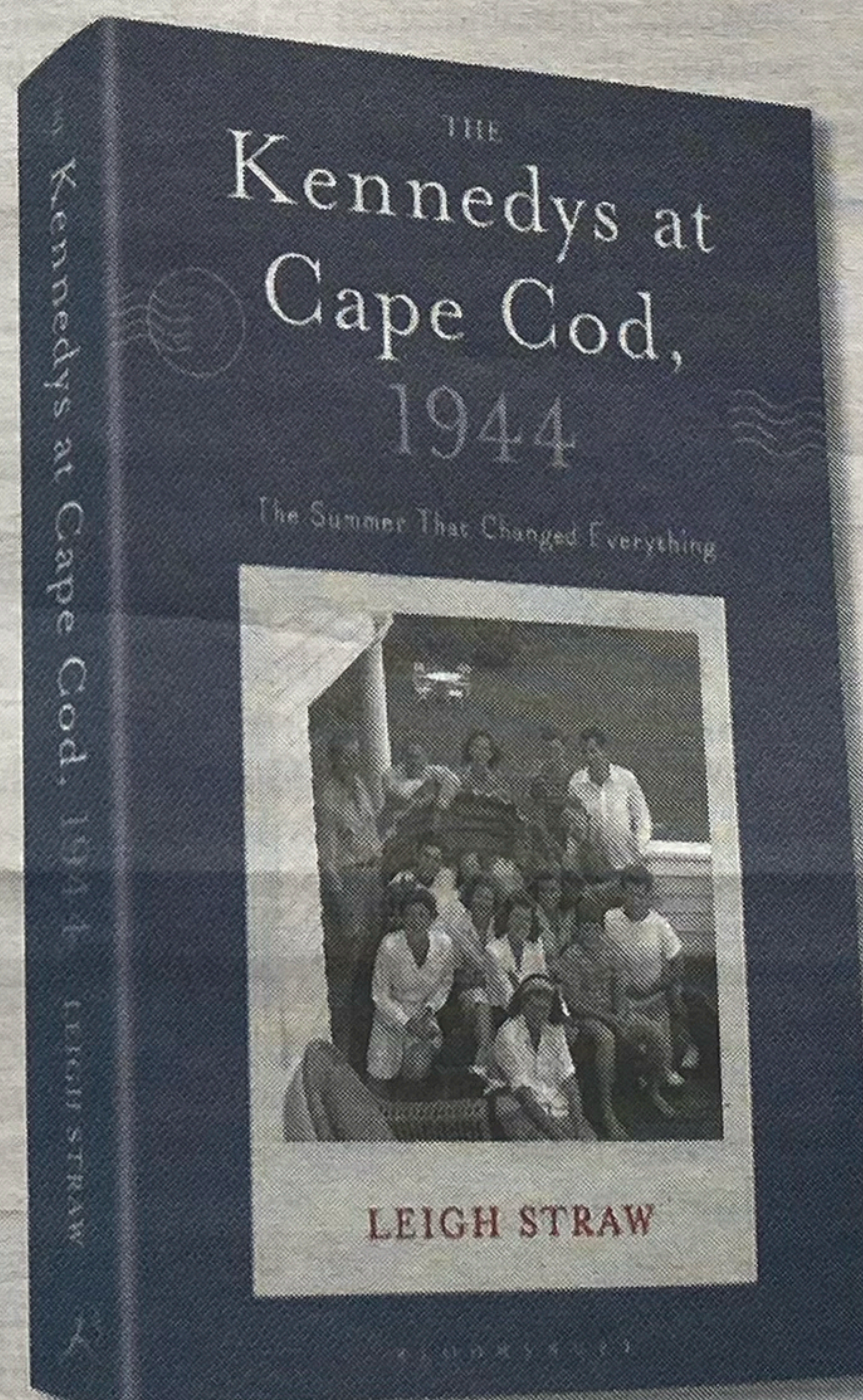
Scheherazade is the secret protagonist of Warner's book, perhaps of all her books. Scheherazade's storytelling creates a safe place made out of words. The tale voiced becomes a protective circle that enemies are not willing to break because, caught in the web of words, they too want to know what happens next. The chain of stories that she links together over 1,001 nights becomes her sanctuary thanks to the narrative power of the imagination our species has developed. We experience this power as a kind of blueprint for survival in the face of recurrent threat. It gives us hope, even if, as with any salutary dream, we rarely act on it.

"Fairy tales often claim the moral ground," Marina Warner wrote in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), "but their spellbinding power lies with the enchantresses and giants, the magic, the wonders, the mishaps and the good fortune they relate." The tales we have told for thousands of years build safe places of words in which the mind is free to explore our darkest deeds and to perform saving miracles. For those keen to explore the empathetic experience that stories offer, *Sanctuary* is an enlightening gift. ■

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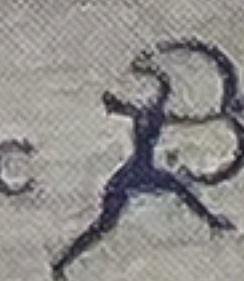
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