

**‘Book review for the New Statesman published in 6-12 March 2020 edition under the heading “Pop With Chips - Broken Greek by Pete Paphides, Quercus, 592pp, £20”**

“Which two things connect Greek Cypriot immigrants Stavros Georgiou, Kyriacos Panayiotou and Christakis Paphides?

The first is the more prosaic. They all ran catering establishments. The second is an intriguing bit of rock’n’roll history. All three fathered sons who have made an enormous contribution to pop music - Cat Stevens (now known as Yusef Islam), George Michael and Pete Paphides.

Pete’s contribution is through music journalism. He’s never been a song writer so far as I know, and so has never written anything as beautiful as ‘The First Cut is the Deepest’ or ‘Jesus to a Child’ - until now.

The beauty of this book, like a good moussaka, is layered.

At it’s base is the childhood memoir of a sensitive, savvy English kid whose first language is Greek. His parents, Chris and Victoria, speak it all the time at home and when Pete is four he’s taken with his older brother on a two month holiday to Greece and Cyprus. When he returns to start school he refuses to speak to anyone at all in any language.

His silence is finally broken in 1977 thanks to a clever ruse by his brother. By then young Pete is so in love with pop music that he’d lift his parents telephone most days to add 2p to the bill by listening to British Telecom’s ‘Dial a Disc’ service.

Pop music for him, was “a place where the big issues were addressed.” ‘Waterloo’ by Abba was a history lesson; ‘Roxanne’ by The Police taught him about prostitution and ‘House of Fun’ by Madness mirrored what he and his friends were going through when puberty erupted.

This coming of age story observed from the perspective of the Great Western Fish Bar in a suburb of Birmingham is wonderfully told but the meat in this dish is the story of his parents. I’ve never read anything that tells the immigrant’s story with such clarity and tenderness.

Chris(takis) and Victoria (from Athens) Paphides married young and wanted more than Chris’s small village in Cyprus could offer. They came to England

and, like many Greek Cypriots, borrowed the money to buy a fish and chip business.

From the very beginning, Chris strove for excellence. Whereas other owners had their fish delivered every other day, Chris got up at 5am daily to buy his fish fresh from the market. He used Maris Piper potatoes.

But fish and chips was never served to their kids. Victoria made dolmades and keftedes. If she couldn't go back to Athens "at least she could try and serve it up on a plate."

Chris and Victoria miss their homeland terribly. That two month holiday makes them work even harder so that one day they will be prosperous enough to return for good.

I admit to falling a little bit in love with Victoria reading this book. Her childhood ambition to be a lawyer would never be realised and, following the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus, she knew they would never return to her husband's birthplace.

Still she hopes that their sons will marry nice girls from the Greek Cypriot diaspora and take over the business when she and her husband retire.

But the sons have no intention of complying with their parents' ambitions. Pete unilaterally changes his name from Takis at primary school. Both sons prefer listening to Billy Joel than Mikis Theodorakis. They have no ambition to work in the chip shop.

Pete's sensitivity certainly wasn't inherited from his father.

When Victoria has to go into hospital her husband, a typically macho Mediterranean, can't even manage to Hoover the carpet. Expecting him to do even the simplest household chores was like "expecting a guide dog to round up sheep."

For Victoria's 40th birthday he buys her a book. Unfortunately it's the 'F-Plan Diet.'

As Paphides deftly records, the closest Chris can get to telling his wife he loves her is to admit that he needs her.

Victoria works in the shop alone to give her increasingly tetchy husband Thursday's off. When pensioners ask for a few chips unable to manage a full portion she shovels some in for free. When word gets around it leads to many

more pensioners coming to the shop on Thursdays, “slowly advancing” towards the chip shop “like turtles on a moonlit beach.”

Pete Paphides’ crafted prose carelessly scatters such brilliant metaphors; Mick Ronson on that famous TOTP appearance singing ‘Starman’ with Bowie looks like “a hod carrier in drag”.

Cliff’s strange late 70’s/early 80’s ‘dance’ was “that of a man carefully emerging through a foggy clearing at night in a glade where a puma has been reportedly sighted.”

I can’t tell you how good this book is. Incredibly it’s Paphides’s first - I’d be amazed (and disappointed) if it’s his last.”