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Misfortunes of war

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OLIVIA MANNING always felt she was under-valued and little known as a writer, despite the critical praise and admiration her books received in her lifetime. "I don't want to be a novelist's novelist!" she once said. "I want to be a novelist that everyone reads."

It's even sadder she did not live to see Fortunes of War, the seven-part adaptation of The Balkan Trilogy and The Levant Trilogy, the sequence of novels that was her greatest achievement.

This handsome and well-cast BBC drama is sure to provoke new interest in her books, at last bringing the wider recognition for which she so longed.

Plans for dramatising The Balkan Trilogy were already afoot before Olivia Manning's death in 1980. Producer Betty **Willingale** (Tender is the Night, Bleak House) met her, and recalls her enthusiasm for the project. "She was very pleased at the prospect of us filming it but the problems were immense," **Willin-gale** said.

The main difficulty stemmed from the books' vast and intricate scope. The six novels sweep across the first four years of World War 2, moving from Rumania to Greece, Egypt and Palestine, observing the cruelties of war and the dislocated fates of civilian Britons caught on the far side of the German advance. At the same time, they follow, in penetrating detail, the course of the young and troubled marriage of Guy and Harriet Pringle (Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson).

As The Balkan Trilogy opens in September 1939, the Pringles, newly married within weeks of meeting, are bound for Bucharest, where Guy is to resume his lecturing post in an organisation not unlike the British Council. Already, Harriet's shrewd eye discerns painful differences of character and outlook. She, the detached and acutely intelligent observer, emotionally wary, conveys the books' central perceptions. With her, the reader discovers that Guy's easy charm and quick sympathies screen a hazier vision than hers. Though not lacking in love, the relationship falters on a discrepancy of commitment; while Guy the idealist gives his talents and energies with indiscriminate generosity to the world at large, Harriet suffers his unthinking neglect.

"I wasn't enamored with the character of Guy to begin with," Branagh, 26, confesses. "I found it hard to imagine that someone intelligent and sensitive about so many things could at the same time be so crassly insensitive to his wife. But as the books went on I could see there was a lot of insecurity under the hail-fellow-well-met behavior." Emma Thompson, 29, shares a certain spikiness with Harriet Pringle. "It's fascinating that some people like Guy and others hate him - Harriet too is ambiguous. It took me a long time to wriggle into the part because she's so nebulous. She's very intelligent and spots bullshit within seconds." Published between 1960 and 1980, the trilogies rework Olivia Manning's wartime experiences, beginning when she married a young British Council lecturer and went with him to Bucharest.

Like Harriet Pringle, "Olivia was reserved and something of a watcher, while her husband was the flamboyant one," according to Neville Braybrook, her friend for some 30 years, who is now writing her biography.

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Filmed on location in Yugoslavia, Greece and Egypt, and retaining many of Manning's vast gallery of characters, Fortunes of War has as its dramatic core the Pringles' marriage.

"We certainly didn't want to make it a sort of action and romance story. It's much richer than that," Branagh explains. "It's a bit like playing Chekhov: there are a hundred things going on under the surface."

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Fortunes of War , a seven-part series, starts on Channel Two on Friday at 8.30 pm - see preview page 8.

It was widely believed co-star Kenneth Branagh was the one Emma Thompson was talking about when she admitted, in a recent interview, that she knew what it was like to be wildly in love. Now she says: "Do you mind if I don't answer that? Just the question makes me palpitate. When you work with somebody you often think you've fallen in love. Being in love is very difficult, terrifying and it's hard work."

END OF STORY

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GRAPHIC: EMMA THOMPSON (AS HARRIET) AND KENNETH BRANAGH (GUY) IN FORTUNES OF WAR, WHICH WAS CREATED FROM TWO TRILOGIES BY OLIVIA MANNING (RIGHT).

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