

REVIEWS

FOCUS: THE BALKANS AND POST-COMMUNISM

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Clarissa de Waal, *Albania: Portrait of a Country in Transition*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. 350pp. ISBN 978-1-78076-484-9. (Reviewed by Antonia Young.)

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Fatos Lubonja, *The False Apocalypse: From Stalinism to Capitalism*. Translated from Albanian by John Hodgson. London: Istros Books, 2014. 252pp. (Reviewed by Antonia Young.)

Elvira Dones, *Sworn Virgin*. Translated by Clarissa Botsford, London & New York: And Other Stories, 2014. 275pp. ISBN: 9781908276346. (Reviewed by Tom Phillips and Antonia Young.)

Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014. 188pp. ISBN: 9780415 85491-7. (Reviewed by Antonia Young.)

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## *Central and Eastern European Review*

**W.E. Lee, M.L. Galaty, O. Lafe and Z. Tafilica (eds.), *Light and Shadow: Isolation and Interaction in the Shala Valley of Northern Albania*. (Monumenta Archaeologica), Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press (Monumenta Archaeologica), 2013.**

In 1909, Edith Durham wrote in High Albania of the village of Theth in the Shala Valley, Albania ‘I think no place where human beings live has given me such an impression of majestic isolation from all the world. It is a spot where the centuries shrivel.’

This image of the small community high in the ‘Accursed Mountains’ was—for me, like many travellers—an enchanting one, and from my arrival in Kosovo and first reading of Durham’s High Albania in 2006, I had a longing to visit. My relationship with Shala developed through my involvement with the British charity, the Balkans Peace Park Project, which runs an annual summer programme in Theth, for which I was one of the co-ordinators in 2009. This experience, combined with my research into the life of Edith Durham and my own adventures in Kosovo formed the basis of *Edith and I; on the trail of an Edwardian traveller in Kosovo*, published in 2013. I then moved to live in Albania and returned to Theth this year in a bizarre trip to feature in a Land Rover commercial feature titled ‘Into the Valley’ produced for YouTube and the One Life magazine. Throughout this time and my multiple engagements with the Shala Valley, my image of it remained the same as Edith Durham’s—relishing the Valley’s isolation and timelessness.

Only now, reading *Light and Shadow: Isolation and Interaction in the Shala Valley of Northern Albania*, do I realize the mistake made by myself and by Edith Durham.

We are not alone, because as the book’s title identifies, the Valley has a long history of an identity which has alternated between assumptions of isolation and the imperatives for interaction. Particularly in the context of the current return of families to the valley, *Light and Shadow* sets out to locate the Shala Valley more accurately in relation to the concepts of isolation and interaction. It does so through an impressively comprehensive analysis of the Valley, with each chapter focusing on a different lens—survey archaeology, excavation, ethnographic study, and multinational archival work—through which to view the Valley, and presenting the results of fieldwork gathered from 2005 to 2008. The book’s subject is thus the landscape, technoscape (houses, terraces, canals, walls, paths) and ideoscape (sacred landscape)—a scope helpfully redefined for a layman like myself as ‘the movement of people, animals, ideas and things in and out of Shala’. The result is a detailed survey (e.g. 338 fields and 460 structures were mapped and documented) with the rationale that ‘the highland

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tribes of Shala and Shoshu have no archives and little written history... part of the motivation for this project has been to seek alternate ways to recover their past’.

The results include some useful reminders that will be familiar to anyone who has visited Shala that the community cannot, in fact, be completely isolated, as well as fascinating insights, new facts and references which help to set the Valley in perspective(s).

The dramatic physical geography of Shala makes an immediate impact on anyone arriving—whether on foot or on bike or in coughing minibus—after the labour up the mountains from Shkodra, through a pass which is snow-bound until April. To find at the top of these barren mountains a spread of pasture land, small stone houses with lighted windows, and a community of fervently hospitable families gives any traveller the sense that Edith Durham had of a world apart. You talk with other travellers about the isolation, and sagely agree with one another about the wonder of a community which lives so remote from the wider world. You drink coffee with a village family and communicate in broken English, and they agree with you too.

And yet, you got there. So did your fellow travellers—whether from Albania or beyond. Indeed, the coffee (that currency of Albanian hospitality, according to rules set out in the centuries-old Kanun of Lek Dukagjini) got there. And the broken English got there too. How isolated can such a place be?

*Light and Shadow* reminds us of some obvious facts such as the exogamous marriage structure of Albanian families, meaning that brides are always taken from beyond the village. By definition, a community with such a structure is not isolated (the book also makes the point that those tough women of Shala, whom any visitor will have seen, knitting as they watch their goats on treacherous slopes, or bowed under a weight of firewood tied to their backs with ropes, on their way home to slap dough and children into shape in their kitchen, are the members of the community with the best social capital and knowledge of a world beyond the valley). I knew about Albanian exogamy, but it’s as if the dizzying view of the mountains mesmerized me into ignoring such basic structures as I persisted in my image of the Valley’s isolation. I would have been wise to have heeded de Bernieres, quoted early in *Light and Shadow*—‘the truth is that the mountains are a place where you can find whatever you want just by looking.’

Indeed, the mountains themselves are not quite the barrier we think them to be. *Light and Shadow* tells of how, in January 2008, Galaty, Lee, and Tafilica made a trip by snowshoe over the Qafa Thorës and into Theth. They say ‘this trip generally reinforced our perception

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that Shala was not nearly as isolated as it is purported to have been. The journey from Boga in Kelmend to Theth through deep snow, guided by a native of Theth, took the better part of a day only. The return trip was equally fast and was made with several males from Theth, one of whom was a septuagenarian’.

Another of the book’s challenges is to the relationship between Shala’s isolation/interaction and the Communist regime. It might be easy to think of Communism as a time of increased hardship for the people of a mountain community, but although the book doesn’t sugar the truth of the dictatorship’s excesses and exploitation, and the impact of the atheist regime on an observant Catholic community, it is useful to be reminded that Theth’s population reached its all-time peak in 1991—just before the fall of Communism—and that during the regime, food was brought into the mountains in winter, offering support for the community’s continued existence which was conspicuously lacking in the early years of democracy. Likewise, we learn of the Communist impact on the physical landscape, not in grim concrete, but, for example, in the forward-looking health regulations which required barns to be built free-standing rather than combined within family homes.

The myth of the valley’s isolation during Communism is also undermined by the reminder that Theth was the site of one of the regime’s workers’ camps, meaning that the phenomenon of summer tourists from beyond the valley was a feature of life under Enver Hoxha as it is today. Nor are tourists the only points of contact for the valley—one of the young men from Theth recently starred on Albanian Big Brother, and *Light and Shadow* quotes Blumi (2003) that even as far back as the nineteenth century ‘most village groups had family members serving as guards, merchants and Catholic priests in lowland trading towns... Many of these migrants also traveled abroad, serving in Rome or as soldiers of fortune, particularly in Austria’.

Similarly, the effect of New World plants such as maize, beans and squash, on which most of the Valley have depended for many centuries for their calories, as well as the existence of coffee and sugar, tobacco, gunpowder and bullets is identified as another element of the Valley’s fundamentally interdependent relationship with the world beyond.

Even the iconic kulla fortified structures built for families to defend themselves during blood feuds, and unique to northern Albania and Kosovo, turn out not to be symbols of proud self-sufficiency but built by itinerant masons from Dibra in the east of Albania.

Amid such insights in the service of discussion of isolation and interaction, the book shares fascinating incidental details which bring the Valley and its history alive. These

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include the traditionally bent drainpipes to prevent injury or death from a defending family in bloodfeud if attackers shot up the pipes. Or the requirements of the Kanun for fixing boundaries, with one long stone with 12 little stones, each set by a different person. At the setting of the boundaries ‘aside from the households concerned, there must also be present elders of the village... and as many young people and children as possible from the villages of the district so that the boundary will be retained in memory’.

There is also an account of the process by which residents evaluated the suitability of newcomers for acceptance into the group. It has an incongruous similarity to the apocryphal stories of rituals with cherry stones through which the suitability is determined of candidates for All Souls College, Oxford. In Shala, newcomers were apparently invited to a feast with the food deliberately placed ‘on the sofra (a low communal table) a bit out of their reach, on the far side of the table from them. If the newcomers reached out and pulled the table and the food on it towards them, this was taken as a sign that they were suitably strong-willed and apt for inclusion.’

For a scientific survey this is a lively and informative read as well as a laudable academic approach. Within this approach some elements grated – most fundamental of them for me being the assumption (never made explicit or subjected to refutation) that the resilience of a culture is a good thing. This spirit informs unscientific phrasing (‘the men and women of Shala struggled valiantly, for 500 years, against... impositions’ – my emphasis) and leads to an uncritical acceptance of elements of tradition or the Kanun which can and do deny human rights (e.g. the denying the right of girls to education, or the legitimization of domestic violence). I was disappointed by the chapter on the sacred landscape of Shala and wished that the chapter on archaeology had been as accessible as the rest of the book.

Nevertheless, these quibbles aside, this is an important and an immensely informative book, full of data which challenge our easy assumptions about locations remote in time and place. Perhaps my favourite fact included in the narrative is about the zebra hides of this review’s title, mentioned in the book as being seen by a traveller who visited northern Albania in 1929, where they were on display outside several shops. The hides had been sent all the way from South Africa for the manufacture of the ‘traditional’ ‘Albanian’ opinga footwear. There is a direct line between the South African footwear of the 1920s north Albanian villagers, and the 1st century Big Brother contestant from Theth. It’s a line of globalization which started many years before, and continues through every journey made there by outsiders, and every book—or review—written about the place by foreigners. **Review by Elizabeth Gowing.**

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**Clarissa de Waal, *Albania: Portrait of a Country in Transition*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. 350pp. ISBN 978-1-78076-484-9.**

I hope that readers will not be disappointed to find that this is *not* as I hoped, a sequel to de Waal's, *Albania Today: A Portrait of Post-Communist Turbulence*. A decade since that first book came out, it was very fitting that she should bring her readers further up to date. Instead we must be satisfied with an update in the form of a new 'Preface to the Paperback Edition: Plus ça change', with two maps and one more Appendix 'Extended Quotations from the Kanun of Lek Dukagjin' and an additional 10-page Conclusion. Maybe the greatest change recorded is the new highway linking Kosovo to Tirana and the Albanian coast, but de Waal notes that this has had a detrimental effect on the remote rural roads which are left untouched. Aside from these comments, I can only repeat what I wrote in reviewing the first edition:

Close interaction with a wide variety of Albanian families, mostly living in remote regions of the country, enabled de Waal to construct a very vivid picture of the myriad of complications and difficulties that these people faced at the fall of Albania's particularly brutal Communism, after 1991.

De Waal clearly spent a great deal of time putting together, and in great detail from a wide variety of people, a very full picture of turbulence with plenty of examples of how it has affected every member of Albania's population. She taught for a while in Tirana at the School for Foreign Languages (many of whose pupils were from rural areas to which they invited her on enthusiastically hosted visits). She discusses extensively the difficulty of her choice of a suitable village in which to undertake research.

She draws attention to the influence of Berisha's speech in 1995, proclaiming freedom of movement—his 'faces towards the sea' (p. 236) which encouraged highlanders to settle on the coastal plains, but that this lacked any concrete support. De Waal explains that the desperate search for work, forced Albania's exodus to be the greatest, per capita, of all the former European Communist countries, with at times as much as one tenth of its population residing in Greece

De Waal finds everyone in Albania to be very much influenced by *opinion*: of neighbours, peers, family and *fis* (clan). I would argue that Albanians would rather see it as *honour* which has such strong influence. Honour (rather than opinion) is seen as the force which demands attendance at the funeral of a member of one's kin, even if it incurs great cost

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to get there, and it is also the strength behind a woman reinforcing the demand that her husband fulfil his duty of ‘taking blood’ in revenge for the killing of a man of their own family.

Turbulence can be found in every aspect of life, first in the lack of security: physical, and economic and also even in expectations. In general, lesser Communist managers came out best following Communism’s fall. They were able to purchase their apartments at minimal cost and to take over assets which they had been managing. However those who had worked for the state in more lowly positions, when they were fortunate enough not to lose their jobs, found that the pay, when it was honoured, became miniscule as inflation mounted, forcing many to leave in search of work elsewhere. Unemployment benefit pay by 1993 was around \$5 per month. Teachers had been highly respected under Communism—there had been tremendous strides made in education, literacy was almost universal as night classes had been set up for adults. From the 1990s teachers could no longer survive on their pay. In rural areas emigration took two thirds of the population either to the towns or further, abroad. By 1993, 5,000 teachers had left the country. Meanwhile many children could no longer attend school, in rural areas it was often considered too dangerous to travel (usually on foot) to school; additionally their labour was needed at home,

The author found further support for the Kanun’s laws regarding arranged marriages, among young women in Mirdite, and not only those from *fanatik* (very traditional) families; they felt that it preserved their honour. She even found some who had married in the 1980s without formal family arrangement, still to be regarded locally as shameful, in line with the Kanun’s intricately detailed value system,

The greatest post-Communist problem concerns land distribution. To start with under the pro-natal government policies whereby a mother of 10 gained an award of high honour, the population trebled during the 40 years since land was first sequestered by the state. Although in 1991 the government declared that land was to be privatised, there was never any clarification of exactly which land should be distributed, and how to share the majority of buildings constructed while the land was still state owned. Several instances are recorded in which direct access to villages or regions had been cut off by new owners refusing to let the public through and forcing them to take longer and often quite precarious routes to reach homes or even public institutions.

Corruption became endemic in all spheres of life, but De Waal found that the worst feuding developed especially within families.

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There were immense upheavals involved on the path to transformation of Albanian society. From the first months of change, there was fury vented against anything considered to belong to the state. Little thought was given to the fact that this would adversely affect the future of all. Destruction was country-wide: of all co-operatives, of government buildings, schools, factories, mines, olive groves, vineyards, the massive greenhouses which had produced tomatoes for export, and other produce and even mills. On the other hand, there was an attempt to compensate political prisoners and other *deklasuuar* (persons of poor political standing under the Communist regime) who had suffered particularly severely. De Waal learned that at the notoriously grim prison of Spaç, the bodies of prisoners who died during incarceration were not freed to their families until their sentence was completed, at which time they were disinterred for reburial. In many instances men who had spent years in solitary confinement were given positions of authority under the new regime: as head men of villages and ministers in government. Although this honoured the individual, it very often did not lead to effective work in the office conferred upon them.

De Waal's comments on religion show her to be rather sceptical of the usual claim that the country is 70% Muslim, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholic. All her evidence proves that much religious practice is based on superstition and that preference for one religion over another is not very strongly felt, and furthermore that a very large section of society claim to have no interest at all in religion. She was present at the centenary celebrations of the famed Abbey of Orosh which had been known in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for its unusually wise abbot. Maybe for this reason its destruction under Communism was particularly vehement. Of much greater influence than religion, is that of the Kanun, although many are found to confuse the two.

This book combines fascinating accounts of glimpses of individual families' situations and modes of dealing with extraordinary difficulties following the fall of Communism. However, the book's format is muddled and repetitious (seven instances of the same point made, word for word, of the perception "that *s'ka shtet, s'ka ligj*—there is no state, there is no law" may be counted throughout the book). The chapter headings are unhelpful and the chapters themselves appear to have been written as conference papers all on a similar topic, but from slightly different angles and with occasional lapses in writing style. The bibliography is extraordinarily short for a study covering a whole decade. An early look at the work of the Norwegian anthropologist, Berit Backer, would have given de Waal



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extra insight into her own findings. Both she and Backer benefited from getting to know families with children of all ages, which proved a good way to be involved in all kinds of errands and chores contributing to the families, while also learning from them. As each anthropologist became more accepted they were able to help lull babies to sleep, wind wool, and collect mulberries for *raki*. But both had difficulty with sharing their visit to other households, or even talking to outsiders. Both were given all kinds of excuses to prevent them from visiting others—wild dogs, bad people, bad villages. Backer's remarkable documentary film 'The Albanians of Rrogam', made in 1991, in the Granada TV, Disappearing World Series portrays so many of the problems that de Waal discusses concerning the distribution of land.

Despite imperfections, there is a wealth of information and unique observation which responds to De Waal's goal of recording for posterity how she experienced through the people of Albania, the decade after its fall from Communism. She includes as Appendix I, four short essays written by her 12-year-old daughter who shared many of her visits and experiences in Albania and gained her own insights partly through younger contacts and friends.

**Antonia Young**

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**Marija Knežević *Ekaterini*. Translated by Will Firth. London: Istros Books, 2013. 163pp. ISBN: 97819 236135.**

Marija Knežević's novel may only extend to 150-odd pages, but it has a broad historical sweep. Narrated for the most part by her anonymous granddaughter, its ostensible focus is the story of the eponymous Ekaterini, whose life spans most of the twentieth century and its plethora of wars. This, though, is not a naturalistic biographical novel in the tradition of, say, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Episodic in structure, it eschews the conventions of plot-driven narrative. Instead it brings together a collage of anecdotes and, in so doing, bears closer resemblance to the kind of centrifugal storytelling associated with film or, indeed, epic poetry.

These episodes may be family stories, often domestic scenes, but Knežević's technique ensures that they are also exemplary or emblematic, continually referring to and illustrating the effects of changing historical circumstances in South East Europe between the First World War and the 1999 conflict in Kosovo. Given that these circumstances often involve war or conflict of some kind, it is as if the narrator is not so much engaged in creating a portrait of her near-legendary grandmother and her immediate family, as in an act of reconstruction and preservation, salvaging those things which have proved valuable in times of violent upheaval, the 'knowledge gained through trial and error [which] can come in handy some day'. As she remarks of the nation she's born into, Yugoslavia: 'Our history has forever been a history of resourcefulness.' Much the same can be said for the individual members of her family, but it also applies to the approach to storytelling taken here: it, too, is resourceful, drawing together stray memories and fragments to retrieve what might otherwise be lost or forgotten.

The first of these memories comes in the voice of a youthful Ekaterini herself. The short opening chapter and a few sentences at the beginning of the second are the only occasions on which we hear that voice from, as it were, the 'inside'. They offer a convincing glimpse of a childhood in Thessaloniki full of 'waiting and longing' and puzzlement at the behaviour of adults—the outbreak of war between Greece and Turkey, her father's business troubles and bankruptcy, her mother's anger at soldiers and priests, her parents' scandalous marriage. Both the outlines of Ekaterini's character and the origins of a narrative which will, like Homer's *Odyssey*, see her undertake a journey with many delays and diversions before returning to her homeland are already forming.

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It is at this point, though, that, in the first of many gear-changes, the perspective shifts. The unnamed granddaughter steps in as narrator and the story begins to accelerate—away from the troubled security of the ancestral home in Thessaloniki. Ekaterini's own memories of early childhood are foundational, but they too are only fragments contributing to the overall biographical-historical collage.

What follows is a story of hardship, endurance and often abrupt changes in fortune. A promising apprenticeship as a seamstress is curtailed; marriage to a Catholic Croatian (who pragmatically switches to the Greek Orthodox faith in order to secure reluctant approval from Ekaterini's parents) leads to a move to Belgrade; children are born, the Second World War breaks out and Ekaterini experiences a metaphorical (almost literal) journey to Hades and a kind of epiphany at what she believes to be the very nadir of her life. Thanks to this, she decides that, while her life will never be easy, existence itself is nevertheless 'full of wonders' and 'a miracle' in its own right. As the narrator sanguinely notes at this moment: 'Sure enough, Ekaterini never again had what we call a good life, and her prophecy lasted for sixty three years, until 1999, when she died in her ninety-eighth year.'

The remaining chapters, then, document Ekaterini's post-war years. These indeed prove to be ones which oscillate between suffering and 'wonders' even more wildly than before. In Tito's Yugoslavia, she both falls under suspicion (and loses a husband) and thrives when her sewing skills make her invaluable to the wives of senior Party officials. Her daughter, meanwhile, embarks on a singing career which brings her into the presence of the communist leader himself, sends her off on lengthy tours of Europe and means that, when her own daughter is born, it falls to Ekaterini to bring up the child (who is, of course, the narrator). The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter occupies the foreground of the final section of the novel, while in the background Yugoslavia starts to disintegrate and another round of wars breaks out. Finally, as NATO launches its 1999 bombing campaign, the cosmopolitan bohemia the granddaughter brings to 'the Serbian house' dissolves as Ekaterini embarks on the final leg of her journey, temporarily returning to Greece and an interlude of elegiac peace before, as the narrator has already revealed, expiring at the age of 98 back in Belgrade.

*Ekaterini* is far from being a remorselessly bleak account of war, injustice, poverty, totalitarianism and loss. These are all there—and perhaps all the more powerfully so for being refracted through the narrative rather than being chronicled in great detail—but there is humour here too (the mischievous father-in-law who teases Ekaterini, a best man singing

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Mexican *mariachi* songs to Tito) and, above all, compassion. Knežević's handling of Ekaterini's homecoming and her final farewell to her granddaughter—episodes which could easily become mawkish in lesser hands—exemplifies the understated, but determinedly humane tone of the book:

Ekaterini and I said goodbye to each other in the Gardenia ice-cream parlour in Asprovalta, a small town which had been raised to the status of a city just that year. *Aspro* in Greek means white. That crossed my mind as I was seeing her off back to Belgrade, as if it was just another trip and another bon voyage, one of our many. We both knew we wouldn't be seeing each other again.

Not unsurprisingly, *Ekaterini* also offers a very different perspective on the history of South Eastern Europe and the experiences of the region's inhabitants to those made available in English-language novels and non-fiction set in or covering a similar period. Despite its brevity and the myriad characters who come and go across its pages, it doesn't conjure up the world of villain-and-victims stereotypes which seems to underpin a good deal of (western) fiction and, in particular, travel writing on the region. That the book also offers a distinctively female perspective (on the conventionally 'male' business of war, on conventionally patriarchal cultures) means it has an added significance as a portrait of a world, a dwelt-in reality, which—again thanks to commonly held assumptions and proliferating stereotypes—all too often remains opaque to outside observers.

Ably translated by Will Firth (albeit with a smattering of typos), *Ekaterini* is a terse, unconventional epic, constructed around an archetypal myth, but rich with detail and observation. It has already been translated into Polish, German and Russian, and Istrosbooks have made a good choice in bringing out an English translation for their Best Balkan Books series. A leading Serbian author and columnist, Marija Knežević herself has some fourteen books to her name, ranging from fiction to essays and poetry, and hopefully some of those other works will now also be translated into English and other languages and help gain her the wider audience she readily deserves.

**Antonia Young**

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**Fatos Lubonja, *The False Apocalypse: From Stalinism to Capitalism*. Translated from Albanian by John Hodgson. Istros Books, 2014, 252pp.**

Following Fatos Lubonja's remarkable *Second Sentence*, his second book to be translated into English brings another highly dramatic autobiographical account.

After the dark days of Albanian communism under which Lubonja was incarcerated for 17 years, he threw himself back into political writing and activism. This, the early 1990s was supposedly a time of democracy in Albania, but one in which the world observed the country to flounder: starting in 1994, its anarchic culmination came in 1997.

The book is prefaced by an extremely helpful Foreword by *Guardian* journalist, Andrew Gumbel which sets the scene for the 1997 apocalypse (false, because it did not bring a real solution). The sympathetic translation is by an expert on Albanian literature, John Hodgson.

How could those of us, who were not there, day in, day out, possibly know what was really happening? None of the international journalists were able to convey an understanding of the sequence of events in the years leading up to 1997. Likewise, analysts at the time also failed completely to comprehend how the crisis grew. For Lubonja, and those few who could really interpret it, as he did, were silenced, alongside any journalists whose criticism was not approved by the ruling party. Such silencing was enforced through intimidation by gangs of armed civilians. Thus details were not reported of the extraordinarily devious actions of members of the ruling Democratic Party (DP), which prevented any activity of opposing political parties or groups, were not reported.

I was amongst the 2000 international Election Observers for the 1997 elections; it was the (mostly Italian) army support for the election observers which cleared the way sufficiently for voters to overcome fear and claim their voting rights. For example, I do not remember seeing any women voters that year.

With the sudden release of the extreme control of Hoxha's dictatorship (barely loosened under Ramiz Alia after Hoxha's death in 1985), it was hard for the general population to know how to use a new freedom or legality.

In such a climate, Lubonja describes how trafficking of people, especially through Vlora to Italy, was so openly practiced that it was seen as just another legitimate way to make a living. Thus what the West might call the 'black economy' became simply a form of

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livelihood, creating a wider market for hotels accommodating those working the trafficking routes.

Albania was not unique in having the former Communist élite become leaders of anti-Communist political parties. The same was happening in all the former Communist European countries during the 1990s, but Albania's Democratic Party turncoats were amongst the most outrageous. Sali Berisha, once Hoxha's heart-surgeon, was known to boast of having kissed Hoxha's hand. Only a few years later he ensured the imprisonment of Hoxha's wife. It was the DP members of course who were the people with power and influence, able to manipulate state resources: 'Abandoned by its intellectual supporters, it was now a rump of ex-communists who had now turned into anti-communists with a contingent of former victims of persecution who allowed themselves to be manipulated by a state that was crushing the first green shoots of democracy' (p. 44). Of these former political prisoners Lubonja observes: '... the elite envied the prisoners their moral stature, the prisoners envied the elite for their educational opportunities and their entry into the country's higher intellectual strata' (p. 56).

Lubonja's telling of the events are gripping, and we learn that below any surface visible to outsiders, there was an intelligentsia, silenced by covert violence. If only their voice could have been heard and supported, how very different Albania would be today. As a decoy to avoid criticism of the adverse developments from the pyramid schemes, the DP made it known that the cause of the major disruptions was the legacy of Communism of the South fighting against the new democracy of the North. As 'Qorri' (Lubonja) notes, Berisha's supporters gave this explanation to Western journalists whose reports were then recycled on Albanian state television, thus convincing the Albanians themselves of this false explanation. Words were put into Fatos (Qorri in this autobiography)'s mouth, that he predicted civil war. The media was creating rather than reporting the news. At the height of the anarchy, in March 1997, 28 British MPs were reported to have submitted a petition against a group of Labour MPs who criticized the Albanian government and also the BBC for reporting such criticism (p. 145).

Qorri/Lubonja had a major in the founding of the Forum for Democracy, if not leading role—for he avoided such prominence, even when many expected it of him.

The leaderless non-violent movement, attempting to offer an alternative to the political parties, met with the same hostility of other such attempts at political opposition to the Democratic Party. Its loosely-knit coalition of eleven parties tried to reach out to Berisha himself with an invitation to engage in dialogue, but this received no response, other than a

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refusal by the police to allow requests for a peaceful demonstration. Lubonja describes how this led to further scheming by the government, both through TV disinformation and other means, to discredit and violently disband the coalition. Demonstrators saw different reasons to demonstrate, many were hoping to retrieve their money lost to the pyramid schemes, which, unlike those in other former Communist countries, were not stopped before they became completely out of control (because, unlike those others, the Albanian pyramid schemes were fuelled by those in government). The Forum's honesty about the fact that they did not guarantee to be able to return lost (pyramid) money, contrasted with the Democratic Party's unfounded promises.

As in all his writing, Lubonja is not frightened to name names, and has an excellent memory for doing this. How has he managed to calmly steer so clear a course while acting out according to his conscience, recovering boldly from snares along the way? Given that he had spent 17 years in goal under the Communists, it should not be surprising to read that quite frequently Lubonja bumps into former prisoners or prison guards. More surprising perhaps is that they all seemed to welcome meeting up with him.

Information on the original date and place of publication of this fascinating book was surprisingly not included.

**Antonia Young**

**Elvira Dones, *Sworn Virgin*. Translated by Clarissa Botsford, London & New York: And Other Stories, 2014. 275pp. ISBN: 9781908276346.**

Originally written in her second language, Italian, Elvira Dones's eighth (of nine) novels is the first by this Albanian-born, USA-dwelling writer and film-maker to have been translated into English. It's the story of Hana Doda, an Albanian woman in her mid-thirties who arrives in Washington DC only weeks after the 9/11 attacks (not that this global event has any direct bearing on the rest of the book). Hana, though, is dressed as a man and—other than to passport officials—answers to the name of Mark. She is the eponymous sworn virgin—not a transvestite in the conventional sense, but a woman who has assumed the identity, role and social responsibilities of a man in accordance with Albanian customary law. She has come to America to stay with her cousin Lila and, it would seem, shed her persona as Mark and reinvent herself as Hana. Using a number of different time-frames, the novel both traces this reinvention and explores the circumstances which prompted Hana to take her original decision to become a sworn virgin fifteen years before.

It is not a decision she has taken lightly. As Hana explains to her cousin's incredulous (and consciously Americanised) daughter, Jonida, it is a matter of honour. According to customary law, when a family is left without a male heir, one of the daughters can assume that social function and consequently preserve the family honour, but only at the cost of sacrificing her identity as a woman and swearing to remain chaste for the rest of her life. In Hana's case, this situation arises when first her father and then her Uncle Gjergj dies. With no brothers or male cousins, and with her female cousin Lila already married, Hana is the only one left who can preserve the family honour—and she can only do this by taking the irreversible step of becoming a sworn virgin and taking an oath which, if broken, would render her own life forfeit (at least in the eyes of those around her in northern Albania).

Not that this is how the younger Hana expected to spend her life. Having lost both her parents, she's brought up in a small mountain village by her aunt and uncle, but leaves for the capital to study literature at Tirana University. She appears to embrace modernity, engaging in a faltering relationship with a fellow student and persuading her uncle to come to the city and undergo surgery even though, as a traditionally minded man, he'd rather stay at home, let fate take its course and die in his own bed.

Hana, though, also remains tied to the 'other world' of the mountains, regularly bringing medicines for Uncle Gjergj and staying to look after him when his wife Katrina



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unexpectedly dies first. Her terminally ill uncle's insistence that he find a husband for her eventually pushes her towards her decision—not to return to university and a putative career as a schoolteacher, but to stay in the village and become socially, if not biologically, a man. Not only will this preserve her family's honour, it will also provide her with some form of escape from the unwanted attentions of predatory males and enjoy at least some of the advantages of being a man in a patriarchal society where men 'do very little. The women do all the real work.' Ten years into her imposed chastity, however, she concedes to her friend Blerta—who has a career as an interpreter and has pursued a path very similar to the one Hana might have followed had she stayed at university—that being Mark 'has been hard ... No. I correct myself. It has been hell.' It is this realisation which comes to inspire her journey to the USA and her growing desire to transform herself back into Hana.

On one level, then, *Sworn Virgin* is a novel which, like Ismail Kadare's *Broken April*, offers insight into the workings of Albanian customary law, its foundation in an honour-based value system and its impact on individuals living within its complex structures of regulation and tradition. As such, it provides an imaginative introduction to a way of life which, for whatever reason, has often been portrayed as mysterious and exotic, archaic and somehow frozen in time. It also elucidates—in a non-judgmental way—some of the beliefs, assumptions and logic which lie behind that way of life and its—to non-Albanians—often unfamiliar rituals and routines.

Like Kadare's earlier book, however, *Sworn Virgin* is not simply a work of fictionalised anthropology. Rather than being an exemplar of a given cultural phenomenon, Hana is a fully realised character who responds to her own particular circumstances in complex, psychologically plausible ways. With cousin Lila and her husband Shtjefën's apparently successful transformation of themselves into Americans acting as a foil, her hesitant and careful reinvention of herself in the USA, away from the 'penetrating, attentive eyes' of her home village, is deftly plotted and enables Dones to explore questions of gender, sexuality and identity which extend beyond the immediate situation of her protagonist. Is gender a social construct or a biological 'fact'? How far can we change 'who we are' by adopting new clothes, new habits? And to what extent is identity biologically, psychologically and socially determined?

Above all, Hana's story is one of someone living in an in-between state or as, in her own words, 'a hybrid'—between conventional definitions of female and male, but also between tradition and modernity, country and town, past and future, communism and

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capitalism, Albania and the USA, east and west. In that, it resembles those of the many people struggling to adapt to the socio-economic and geo-political changes of the last twenty-five years and consequently reflects a concern with the liminal status currently conferred on Albania itself (and indeed the rest of South East European). This, of course, is not to say that *Sworn Virgin* can or should be read as a political allegory, but the resonances are there and again give the novel a wider scope. Dones is clearly aware of this and of the role that the category of ideological concepts usually referred to as balkanism has played in interrupting or preventing cross-cultural encounter. In the final section of the novel, Hana's first 'proper' relationship almost comes to grief when she suspects that her putative lover regards her, not as an individual, but as a cultural phenomenon, a representative of an exotic 'other'.

Curiously, perhaps, the book's denouement suggests some rather conservative answers to the questions it has raised *en route*—much like a character in a standard-issue romantic comedy, Hana's happiness appears to depend, ultimately, on her having secured a stable relationship with a man—but then this, too, is open to alternative interpretations and the episodic structure of the novel also suggests that while this may be the culmination of the plot, it may not be the end of the whole story.

Coming with a fulsome endorsement from Ismail Kadare in a new foreword ('Astonishing, brilliant ...'), Dones's novel has been ably translated by Clarissa Botsford and is an interesting addition to the relatively modest canon of contemporary fiction by Albanians currently available in English. Her use of the Italian place name, Scutari (for Shkodër) may jar with some readers.

**Tom Phillips and Antonia Young**

**Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese, *The Informal Post-Socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014. 188pp. ISBN: 9780415 85491-7.**

As usual with such collected papers, the geographical spread covered is quite random—for example three of the book’s ten chapters relate to the Ukraine but none are concerned with either the Baltics or the Balkans (unless, as some do, one considers Romania as a part of the Balkans).

It is clear from most of the papers that there has already been quite a large body of work on the subjects discussed, leading to the development of scientific terms to describe certain kinds of operation, for example *firma babochka* (butterfly company) relates to short-lived companies: in the Ukraine companies manage to live for the three months between tax-filing dates and declare bankruptcy a few days before they are due to pay tax (p. 89).

Besides a comprehensive Introduction, the 10 chapters are divided equally between the first section on ‘Entrepreneurial’ Informality, Self- and off-the-books employment on the one hand, and Cross-border ‘invisible flows of people and goods’ in the second section.

There is the suggestion that the informality of payments is a vestige of socialist-era practices, though it could well be argued that this is also very much present in capitalist societies. The editors note that post-socialist informality is both multi-faceted and socially-embedded; again this is also true of capitalist societies.

All three chapter that outline situations in the Ukraine, point to the lack of standardized state law and the web of contradictory implementation as well as lack of understanding either of the law or how to enforce it by individuals and those in authority, alike. Two of these chapters in the first section focus on individual lives: one chapter discusses the situation of a couple who are healthcare workers: they have managed to ensure that they have sufficient income for the lives they wish to lead, despite both having jobs poorly paid by the state. They both have a second, more substantial source of income through informal employment, which was more easily obtained through contacts they have in their formal jobs. Abel Polese’s chapter results from seven years of interaction with ‘Vova’ working in the grey area between legality and illegality. The third case study concerning a Ukrainian, described by Kristine Müller and Judith Miggelbrink, focuses on an entrepreneur who trades in groceries across the border in Poland. However, the implementation of the Treaty of Schengen and its subsequent regulations affected him considerably, forcing him to

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adjust, as well as to justify, what and how he conducts his informal transactions. These justifications may be in the form of considering as legitimate, within a close network of neighbours, friends and family, various issues, even if they circumvent the state.

Ida Harboe Knudson's case study concerns Sarūnas, a Lithuanian, whose cross-border interactions relate to casual, seasonal, unregistered work in Sweden. Sarūnas is typical of the 'invisible citizens of Lithuania' who 'make no claim to recognition and they have no organizational activities to promote certain rights or political points of view'. The author observes that this situation arose after the apparent economic success in Lithuania proved not to be beneficial to those like Sarūnas, who were unable to access jobs in newly established businesses; social exclusion grew as the state did not take responsibility for those on the margins.

Jeremy Morris, in his chapter on informality and blue-collar sociality in Russia describes how some prefer to take the security of low-paid jobs forcing them to remain with their parents, while others take up the challenge of using contacts and ingenuity to make a living through a variety of informal employments. These are possible choices in the many formerly industrialized cities of Russia, where industry has closed down, but former social interactions have led to informal employment. Though not alluded to in the book, this situation is also becoming increasingly the pattern of employment in Western Europe.

Borbála Kovács discusses the informality of nannies and local childcare markets in Romania, through two case studies. Formerly in Romania, childcare had been a state responsibility. The situations she describes in the post-socialist era might equally be found anywhere in the West. Both individuals had their employment for over seven years. In the one case a cleaning lady at a bank found she could earn more in the 'grey economy', by working for other employees, through which she also took on childcare for them, keeping exact account of her hours. In the other case, an elderly woman, living alone became a surrogate grandmother to a needy family—pay was extremely informal and not the major issue in the exchange of care, each side gaining from the personal involvement—an aspect that was of little importance in the case of the cleaner.

David Karjanen's chapter concerns cases studies from transit and trucking in post-socialist Slovakia, where he analyses how self-employed drivers manage to survive by sharing and trading not only labour but also equipment and vehicles. Many such exchanges are amongst kin. In order to survive, despite various legal restrictions, bribes are in frequent use; Karjanen estimates that one in four Slovaks had paid bribes.

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Anna Cleślewska's chapter analyses the informal bazaar economy in Kyrgyzstan in the situation of moving from rigid rules of central economy to the deregulated free market and the emerging and evolving bazaar trade with the expansion of informal activity. She also focuses on the life of one successful individual whose early petty trading gradually led her to become a successful businesswoman.

Shuttle trade on the Belarus/Lithuanian border is discussed by Olga Sasunkevich, noting that in this industrialized and highly populated region, cross-border trading is no longer directly related to need, but rather to advantage. She also found that it has become a way of life that allows its participants to find social aspects that they enjoy.

The final chapter, by Lul Yalçin-Heckmann, concerns the changing effects for Azerbaijani tomato and herb traders between Azerbaijan and Moscow. Lives of individual traders and the involvement of their families are put under enormous pressure by the short-term value of fresh tomatoes, and the care with which they must be packed and transported to ensure they reach their market. Fresh herbs are also highly valued in Moscow, but their transportation also involves many risks and bribes. As legal loopholes close, and Azerbaijani's feel increased prejudice, so trade also is affected. The author describes a remarkable (illegal) market, allegedly under the control of the mafia. It is a vast market, operating only at night. Watchmen pay off city officials. Azerbaijanis working here are able to bring money back to their families in their home villages for festivities and remittances to the older generation still living there.

The ingenious chart on the front cover shows five lines of relevance: Former Economy, Self-Employment, Informal Labour, Cross Border Trading, Transitions between Lines on Foot or by Gypsy Cab between. These are charted between axes of Individual/State and Skills/bribes, bazaars, household labour (pity about the typo for MutUal Aid).

There is a superfluous repetition of the same chart (Figure 1: a classificatory schema of labour practices) given also in the Introduction from the original in Williams and Onoschenko's Chapter 1. The simple figure shows Formal/Informal and Paid/Unpaid axes, and enables the reader to allocate each of the chapter subjects into one or more of the eight slots lying between the axes (on the formal/paid axis: formal employment, informal employment, reimbursed favours, paid household labour; and on the informal/unpaid: formal unpaid employment, off-the-radar organized unpaid labour, one-to-one unpaid labour and self-provisioning).

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Although some of the authors shielded their subjects by not supplying names of towns of operation, it still would have been helpful to have had an overall map, indicating rough geographic locations of those people/operations and the borders concerned.

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