

Kadare, Ismail (b. 1936), Albanian writer

Ismail Kadare is by far the best known Albanian writer and the only one to have gained a broad international reputation. Kadare was born in the southern Albanian town of Gjirokastër near the Greek border and studied at the Faculty of History and Philology of the University of Tirana. He subsequently attended the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow until 1960 when political relations between Albania and the Soviet Union became tense. On his return to Albania he worked as a journalist and became editor-in-chief of the French-language literary periodical *Les lettres albanaises* (Albanian literature). He carried out several formal political functions in the country, the most notable of which was as deputy head of the Democratic Front under Nexhmije Hoxha, the wife of the dictator Enver Hoxha. Kadare was not, however, politically active for or against the Stalinist regime. He simply did what was needed to survive in Albania and to promote what interested him most, his writing.

He began his literary career with poetry but turned increasingly to prose, of which he soon became the undisputed master and by far the most popular writer of the whole of Albanian literature. His works were extremely influential throughout the 1970s and 1980s and for many readers he was the only ray of hope in the chilly, dismal prison that was communist Albania. Ismail Kadare lived the next thirty years of his life in Tirana, constantly under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, Ismail Kadare left Tirana and applied for political asylum in France. His departure enabled him for the first time to exercise his profession with complete freedom. His years of Parisian exile were productive and accorded him further success and recognition, as a writer both in Albanian and in French.

Kadare became a member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (Paris, 28 October 1996) and the French Legion of Honor. On 27 June 2005 he was awarded the first International Man Booker Prize in Edinburgh and was earlier nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. His first major prose work was the novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (1963; *The General of the Dead Army*, 1971). In view of the early publication date - the author was a mere twenty-seven years old at the time - *The General* could almost be viewed as a work of youth, and yet, it is still one of Kadare's most effective novels, and one of his best known. It is the story of an Italian general in the company of a laconic priest on a mission to communist Albania to recover the remains of his soldiers who had fallen some twenty years earlier.

Of Kadare's other works translated into English, mention may be made of: *Kronikë në gur* (1971; *Chronicle in Stone*, 1987), set in the Second World War; *Kush e sollti Doruntinën?* (1979; *Doruntine* 1988), based on an Albanian legend; *Prilli i thyer* (1978; *Broken April*, 1990), which evokes the subject of blood-feuding in the northern Albanian mountains; *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (1981; *The Palace of Dreams*, 1993), set in the Ottoman Empire; *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (1988; *The Concert*, 1994), a vast overview of communist Albania's alliance with Red China; *Piramida* (1993; *The Pyramid*, 1996), an allegory of absolute power set in ancient Egypt; *Dosja H* (1990; *The File on H*, 1997), a tale of two foreign ethnographers doing field research in Albania; *Ura me tri harqe* (1978; *The Three-Arched Bridge*, 1997), set in the late Middle Ages and based on Albanian legendry; *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (1986; *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, 1997), on the Kosovo uprising of 1981; *Tri këngë zie për Kosovën* (1998; *Three Elegies for Kosovo*, U.S. title, *Elegy for Kosovo* 2000, three short historical tales of Kosovo set in different ages; *Lulet e ftohta të marsit* (2000; *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, 2002), once again on blood-feuding and its personal consequences; and *Pasardhësi* (2003; *The Successor*, 2005), based on the death of communist leader Mehmet Shehu (1913-1981).

Kadare entranced his readers at home and abroad with the magic realism of his historical novels, skilfully woven tales about various periods of Albanian history (Ottoman

rule, the pre-communist 1930s, and even the somber Stalinist era), in particular those novels first published during the dictatorship. His international success has been due in good part to the masterful French-language translations of his works by the noted Albanian aristocrat, Jusuf Vrioni (1916-2001), that served as a basis for the English and other translations. In Albania itself, despite continued international recognition, there was a marked slump in readership for Kadare's works following the end of the dictatorship in 1991. Whether the author had lost contact with his Albanian public after years in Paris, or whether his readers, who now enjoyed unimpeded access to world literature, had simply moved on, remained unclear in the early twenty-first century.

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