

Albanian Literature

Albanian literature is one of the least known national literatures of Europe. Many interested readers will have heard the name Ismail Kadare, but few other literary associations will come to mind. When the Stalinist dictatorship imploded in 1991, Albanian writers found themselves free to write and publish whatever they wished and, after forty-five years of isolation and silence, they had much to tell. The late nineties marked a turning point for the Albanians of Kosova and Macedonia, when the communist system in Yugoslavia had collapsed, but although the Albanians in Kosova published poetry and prose in Prishtina even in the darkest hours, the focal point of Albanian written culture remains Tirana.

Ismail Kadare represents the best example of creativity and originality in contemporary Albanian letters. His talents have lost none of their innovative force over the past two decades, which he has used productively to gain further success and recognition at home and, especially, in France. The 2005 Man Booker International Prize finally accorded him broad exposure in the English-speaking world as well. Fifteen of his novels have now been published in English.

Kadare's international renown has cast a bit of a shadow over all other Albanian writers, yet others are worthy of sharing the limelight. Fatos Kongoli has recently become a forceful and convincing presence. Kongoli studied mathematics in China during the years of Sino-Albanian alliance and chose not to publish any major works during Enver Hoxha's dictatorship, but his narrative talent and individual style are evident in his first major novel, *I humburi* (1992, *The Loser*, 2007) a chronicle of the long and numbing years of that dictatorship.

One recent surprise on the Albanian literary scene was the 2008 novel *Të jetosh në ishull* (2008; *living on an Island*) by Ben Blushi. Though of no particular literary sophistication, it sold over thirty thousand copies within months of its publication, a record for the Albanian market. It offers a broad and not uncontroversial treatment of three centuries of Albanian history and sparked a lively public debate on the role of Islam in the development of Albanian identity.

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