

Central and Eastern European Review

Kadare, Ismail, *The Accident*. Canongate, Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne, 2011. 263pp. Translated by John Hodgson. Reviewed by Antonia Young.

Kadare's historical writing is catching up to the present, with *The Accident* (first published in Albanian in 2008) focusing on the aftermath of the 1999 Kosovo War. Preceding this were Kadare's other responses to current events through his literature, producing *Three Elegies for Kosovo* (1998) at the time of lead up to the 1999 War there, and *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* (2002) which portrays the consequences of Albania's newly gained freedom after Communism's fall in 1991.

It was Kadare's *The Successor* which finally won him a major literary prize for which he had so often been proposed—the International Man Booker Prize, and gave him his greatest breakthrough for worldwide recognition. This put his face on the front page of the *Guardian* (3rd June, 2005), and doubtless on many other newspapers and journals. For those already familiar with Albanian literature it was just another remarkable work of this brilliant and extremely prolific writer, whose talented works has already been translated into dozens of languages. However, *The Accident* has generally been treated with less enthusiasm than most of his previous books.

Kadare has lived for the past 20 years in Paris. He claims that his native country besides being or having been difficult, isolated and dictatorial is also an “epic zone” and thus he addresses universal themes. All his works are based on historical fact, but their adherence to accuracy varies. His first novel, *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), gives a gripping account of an Italian general carrying out the task of finding the remains of thousands of Italian soldiers who died anonymously on Albanian soil during World War II. This along with his *Broken April* (1979) are most people's favourites, the latter often being the book which introduces readers first to many other of Kadare's works.

However the current book's links to events are even more tenuous than in his other books. The very hazy plot is based on a 12-year passionate affair between two Albanians: he (known as Besfort Y) who worked as an analyst on Balkan affairs for the Council of Europe with some vaguely implied threat of being called to the War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague; she (Rovena) an intern at the Archaeological Institute in Vienna. The affair is conducted intermittently at hotels in major cities across Europe.

Central and Eastern European Review

The accident occurs at the start of the novel: the two lovers are killed outright as passengers in a taxi driven along the autobahn to Vienna airport in torrential rain. The rest of the book focuses on various attempts to solve (at all kinds of levels) what could have been the true cause of their deaths. The taxi-driver who survives the accident is unable to throw any light on the cause of the accident: his only comment—that it seemed as though the couple were trying to kiss—is brought up several times throughout the narrative. At one level a lengthy inquiry is demanded by the governments of both Serbia and Albania. Many testimonies are collected both from immediate witnesses as well as from people (no family members) close to them, including two of Rovena's lovers (one female). These testimonies are considered and reconsidered; and looked at in a new light by a latecomer to the investigation (an “independent researcher”).

Interspersed with unclear and dreamlike testimonies are accounts of other dreams and imagined dialogues, many negating previous ones. Intense discussions between the lovers at various times are outlined without any clear detail, though much discussion focuses on their own difficult relationship, but apparently veiling obscure external meaning. Neither of the lovers seem clear about what they expected from the relationship, but nonetheless desperate to keep it alive in some manner. Allusions to their relationship to one another, as well as intricate ongoing implied political difficulties, are all described too vaguely to enable the reader to deduce any solution. Even the outcome of the accident itself is suspect, and references made to the possibility of suicide, murder or double murder are suggested. The reader must focus on such situations for example, as the deeply injurious, probably lethal, shooting of Rovena followed in the next paragraph, with no further explanation, by her life continuing as though no such action had occurred.

John Hodgson must have experienced greater difficulty with this translation than other of Kadare's works.

Antonia Young is author of the annotated bibliography *Albania* (ABC-Clio, 1997), also the essay ‘Albania’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2010), as well as ‘Bloodfeud Mediation’ and ‘Peace Parks’ in the *Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace* (New York, 2010). She is Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford.