From One Reader to Another

An invitation to read internationally

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writers in Translation programme, English PEN is teaming up with The Reading Agency and Free Word to invite book groups to read and discuss titles from the World Bookshelf, a unique online showcase of the most exciting contemporary literature available in English translation.

There are over 100 books on the World Bookshelf but here is a suggested reading list to get you started:

- *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany (Egypt, Arabic)
- *Dreams from the Endz* by Faïza Guène (France, French)
- *Arab Jazz* by Karim Miské (France, French)
- *Compartment No. 6* by Rosa Liksom (Finland, Finnish)
- *The Lady from Tel Aviv* by Rabai al-Madhoun (Palestine, Arabic)
- *Vango: Between Sky and Earth* by Timothée de Fombelle (France, French)
- *The Devil’s Workshop* by Jachym Topol (Czech Republic, Czech)
- *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* (for younger readers) by Fabio Geda (Italy, Italian)
- *Bronze and Sunflower* (for younger readers) by Cao Wenxuan (China, Mandarin)
- *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* by Saša Stanišić (Bosnia-Herzegovina, German)
- *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* by Alain Mabanckou (Congo, French)
- *The Goddess Chronicle* by Natsuo Kirino (Japan, Japanese)
- *Allah Is Not Obliged* by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast, French)
- *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim (Iraq, Arabic)
- *Morning Sea* by Margaret Mazzantini (Italy, Italian)
- *Sworn Virgin* by Elvira Dones (Albania, Italian)
- *A Perfect Crime* by A Yi (China, Mandarin)
- *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck (Germany, German)
- *The Sound of Things Falling* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Colombia, Spanish)
- *The Whispering City* by Sara Moliner (Spain, Spanish)

Share your thoughts about these books by leaving a comment on the website or by getting in touch on Twitter: @englishpen, @readingagency, @FreeWordCentre
Sworn Virgin by Elvira Dones

Hana Doda is an ambitious literature student in cosmopolitan Tirana. Mark Doda is a raki-drinking, chain-smoking shepherd, living alone deep in the Albanian mountains. In fact, they are the same person. When Hana’s dying uncle calls her home from the city, he asks her to marry a local boy in order to run the household. Unable to accept the arranged marriage and resolved to remain independent, she must vow in accordance with Albanian tradition to live the rest of her life in chastity as a man – and becomes Mark. There is no way back for a sworn virgin. Years later Mark receives an invitation to join a cousin in Rockville, Maryland U.S.A. This is Mark’s opportunity to escape his vow and to leave Albania for modern America. But what does he know about being a woman?

About the author

Born in Durrës, Albania, Elvira Dones is a novelist, screenwriter and documentary film-maker currently based in the US. After seven novels in Albanian, she wrote the two most recent in Italian, her adopted language: Vergine giurata (Sworn Virgin, 2007), and Piccola guerra perfetta (Small Perfect War, 2010) about the Kosovo war. In her prize-winning documentary on the phenomenon of ‘sworn virgins’ in Albania, Dones interviews twelve survivors of the tradition, one of whom has recently emigrated to the USA, like Hana in the novel.

About the translator

Clarissa Botsford studied Italian at Cambridge and Comparative Education in London before moving to Rome, Italy. She has worked in the fields of teaching, intercultural education and publishing and is also a musician. She currently teaches English and Translation Studies at Rome University and translates contemporary Italian fiction and poetry.

For discussion

1. Though its subject matter is as culturally specific as the tradition of sworn virgins, do you think this book is universally relatable?
2. Can you empathise with Hana’s decision to become Mark?
3. Dialect is politically important in Albania, and when Hana arrives in the USA she is acutely aware of the plethora of different American slangs. What do language and translation do and/or signify in the book?
4. A Guardian review noted, ‘Her emancipation begins not by putting on a skirt but by picking up a book.’ Discuss how the book interrogates and disrupts linear narratives of masculinity and femininity. How does the story implicate literature in the way Hana/Mark defines her/his selfhood and sex?
5. The book parallels the story of Hana’s personal transformations with the narrative of Albania’s tumultuous political transition out of Communism. Was it interesting to read about Albanian history and customs within the story?