

The File on H - Context and discussion themes.

For Melikian Center reading group, at <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674>
Thursday, 25 March 2021, at 6pm: offered by Keith Brown.

The File on H is a novel by Ismail Kadare, first published in Albanian as *Dosja H* in 1981. Since the 1970 French translation of his first 1966 novel, *The General of the Dead Army*, Kadare has won international acclaim as a critic of repression and totalitarian thinking. Following the banning of several of his books by the Albanian authorities in the 1980s, he sought asylum in France in 1990. Over 20 of his novels are now available in English.

Like several of his other novels (notably *Broken April* and *Doruntine*), *The File on H* is steeped in the world of the *kanun*, the code of honor and conduct that served in place of a centralized government to maintain order in the Albanian highlands. It is so omnipresent that we see only glimpses: a rhapsode's travel may be the result of "a wedding, a funeral, or a murder he's gone to commit" (84); or highlanders in the mist whose very gait "had been formed and modeled by the *kanun*" (88). Kadare often juxtaposes that world—cold, hard, dry, fateful—with the banalities of provincial, small-town life—were everyone knows everything so well, they can tell it is time to end a social event by the state of decay of the postmaster's wife's make-up (34).

The File on H adds two international dimensions. It throws two young and ambitious American (and Irish) Homeric scholars into rural Albania, inspired by a radio lecture to bring a tape recorder to the last "foundry" or "laboratory" of epic poetry to gather ethnographic evidence for theory-making. Their enterprise is wrecked by Serbian malice and fear of technology, when a Serbian monk (intelligence operative?) whips up local sentiment that their recordings will appropriate, or destroy, a national treasure—like walling up a man's shadow (154).

Both international aspects are grounded in fact. Milman Parry, a Harvard professor, and his student Albert Lord did spend a year recording epic poetry in the Balkans in the early 1930s (though in Montenegro, not Albania). In Albania, Bernardin Palaj and Donat Kurti (Catholic clergy) recorded and published epic poems, including several of those named in *The File on H* (Akjuna, Zuk the Standard bearer). And Serbian police agents did murder Milan Sufflay, a Croatian scholar studying Albanian folklore, in 1931 (referenced on p.199).

In an otherwise highly critical and joyless review of *The File on H*, Gabriele Annan wrote that Kadare's work is always worth reading for "the peepholes he opens into what it's like to be Albanian" (in *London Review of Books*: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v19/n18/gabriele-annan/rainy-days>). More than that, I look forward to discussing:

- Kadare's storytelling through multiple points of view, of people whose communications with one another are so tragically constrained: in particular, Daisy and the (unnamed) governor.
- The apparatus of surveillance, and the rivalry between oral/written, and aural/visual bases of authority and communication (especially as expressed in Dull Baxhaja)
- The framings of Serb-Albanian resentment and rivalry: and the specific references to Kosovo as the location where a "Slav tide" was held back (92).
- The *Kirkus Review*'s claims that the book "skewers both scholarly tunnel vision and nationalist paranoia" and "implies there are mysteries not meant to be solved."
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ismail-kadare/the-file-on-h/>
- The leads that aren't followed: Max's wife's jealousy; the researchers' Irish identities; Daisy's seduction/assault by the English-speaking spy; and the theme of fertility/reproduction.