

## Sworn Virgin

**Elvira Dones**

**Clarissa Botsford, Translator**

And Other Stories (May 13, 2014)

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*A glimpse at how sworn virgins allow women to have some semblance of independence in Albania, even if it means giving up most of their identity.*

Identity, culture, and tradition get both honored and skewered in Elvira Dones's English debut, *Sworn Virgin*. In recounting the story of Hana Doda, an independent woman in male-dominated Albania, Dones explores the fascinating history of "sworn virgins," those women who take on male roles in order to reject arranged marriages. With sensitivity toward a compelling main character, the author provides a fascinating story that offers a window into Albanian culture.

When the novel opens, Hana has already spent time living as a man and has emigrated to America, where she's thrown into confusion over her place in the world. Still wearing the slightly oversize clothes of her mountain village, Hana encounters a country that's completely unfamiliar, but it's her own landscape where most of the attention is centered.

She'd agreed to become a man in appearance and manner, as dictated by the customs of her village when she refused an arranged marriage, but when faced with the opportunity to "turn back into" a woman, she wrestles with what gender really means.

In telling Hana's story, Dones uses a third-person perspective, along with present tense, and she occasionally dips into the second person to relay Hana's thoughts. The effect can sometimes be uneven but often works, creating a sense of immediacy within the story. For example, when she first transitions to becoming a man, calling herself Mark, she tries to make her gait heavier and more masculine and curses her own impatience: "Don't run, don't make a noise, don't think," she writes. "There's no hurry. Not anymore. There's all the time in the world, nobody is waiting for you. You don't have to worry anymore about how soft your hair is; you don't have to worry about finding nice clothes."

Using that style draws the reader into Hana's world and allows Dones to create a fascinating stream-of-consciousness perspective that pairs with the character's attempt to become Mark. Just as the reader tries to identify with Hana's struggles, the character herself is laboring to identify with all the men she's known.

Artfully written by one of Albania's most distinguished authors, *Sworn Virgin* is a story that resonates far beyond one country's borders.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (Summer 2014)

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