



*Burnt Sun*, Elvira Dones's first novel written in Albanian and Italian, explores the darkest corners of the Italian Albanian relationship in the 1990s, immediately after the collapse of the ferociously repressive Communist regime. The relative innocence of the people, together with their frantic desire to get rich quick and catch up with the rest of the world after 40 years of isolation made Albania a fertile terrain for financial scams, such as the notorious Pyramid schemes, and ruthless trafficking: in drugs, beggar kids and, most lucrative of all, young girls. Italy, a traditional trading partner, just across the Adriatic Sea, was the obvious first port of call for expanding and ambitious gangs and, unfortunately, every desperately poor Albanian's dream destination.

The novel opens and closes - and is interspersed by - entries from Leila's diary, which provide a rational framework for what is otherwise an accumulation of horror. The girl's almost detached description of the events that lead to the opening entry - her finally going home to see her parents after three years from Hell, in a coffin - provide the sorely needed backdrop and explanation that no other protagonists in the novel are able or willing to bestow on the reader. There are no place names - the countries are referred to as Down Here or Down There, Up Here or Up There according to the speaker's point of view - and the time frame is dictated by the short space of time Leila survived as a sex slave and wrote her diary.

In the gaps between Here and There and Leila's entries, 14-17 year old girls are kidnapped from their homes, schools, or discos (or tricked by family members or trusted friends into believing they are destined for good jobs in Italy), held in warehouses, shipped, beaten, threatened, chained, officially certified as virgins by complicit doctors, mercilessly broken-in, and then set to work ten-client-a-night shifts - when they are not personal slaves of the gang members or killed off; families fight police indifference and write desperately naive letters to the Italian police; new thugs are enrolled in the gangs, negotiations for conditions and prices veer out of control, and sharper minds attempt to re-shape the business; Albania precipitates into chaos, corruption and anarchy.

Dones shifts narrative point of view constantly: the more sickening and cruel the description of events that befall the girls, the more Soraia, Laura, Entela, Elena, Suela, Milica, Minira, Delina and Teuta's minds float, revealing flashes of their past, their family lives, their dreams, their determination not to reveal emotion or fear to their torturers, their desire to protect each other, their desperate clinging to hope of escape, their childish trust in the better-mannered clients and in the police. Surprisingly, perhaps, gang members have a voice. Leila's captor, unworthy of a name, referred to as "Him" throughout her diary, Bajran the brain, Aranit, hard-nosed, ambitious and devoted to his family, Angelo, who chains his sex slave Minira to the radiator and holds her baby son prisoner in another apartment in order to keep her docile - Dones gives these men back stories, none of which justify their behaviour, but which provide a context for their misogyny and violence. Their dialogue and innermost thoughts while dealing with their women - slaves, lovers, wives, daughters - is shockingly real and, far from creating sympathy, increases the reader's sense of dread. Dones's narrative becomes lyrical and almost surreal in the sections of the novel

devoted to an anthropomorphised City – the heaving humanity of Tirana undergoing such momentous changes.

*Burnt Sun* is not a comfortable read. The novel is a fierce denunciation of human trafficking and its inhuman cost, perhaps at the cost of sacrificing psychologically rounded characters and a satisfying plot. The inter-weaving of so many names - some of which appear as if from nowhere and disappear again into thin air, with as little consistency as the lives and deaths that these invisible girls have in the public consciousness - can be disorienting, as can the shifting back and forth from one country to the other and from the present to the past. The sex and sadism is extremely hard hitting, and makes no concessions to the reader's sensibility or to a politically correct world picture. Despite all this, it is a novel that needs to be read, and the one Elvira Dones herself has said she would most like to see published in English.