



THE SCHOOLS' LAUREATE 2026 BOOK GUIDE

MISINTERPRETATION

By Ledia Xhoga

This novel opens in late January in Washington Square, New York and closes in early Spring in the same square. It follows a few weeks in the life of an Albanian woman who works as a translator and interpreter in New York. Her assignments, which range from translating a refrigerator manual to interpreting for a Kosovan asylum seeker suffering from toothache, take her to various dingy offices. Outside work she goes to glamorous parties and catches up with friends, many of whom are rich, artistic or both. She also tries to provide practical support to various recent migrants to New York, whether they are friends, family, clients or former clients – the lines are blurred. It's increasingly apparent that the narrator's husband is trying to tell her something. A visit to Albania provides a perspective shift but throws up different complications.

In the final chapter, a film director says this about his recent film: "'That's not how I had intended the ending to come across. ... Such interpretations surprise me.'" One reading of this novel is that it is about misunderstandings, deception and self-deception. Do you have a different interpretation?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ledia Xhoga was born in Tirana, Albania and lives in New York. She completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. *Misinterpretation* is her debut novel.



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RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The world of the book

- How many misunderstandings can you find in chapter 1?
 - What about differences in perception?
 - Can you find moments of insight or understanding?
- The narrator is jokingly called 'Clara' by her Albanian cousin, Lina.
 - Do we ever discover the narrator's real name?
 - Does it matter?
- What does this book say about appearances?
 - Are the streets of New York and Tirana like stage sets?
 - What costumes and disguises do you spot?
- The narrator is surprised to learn that her neighbour, Helen, who wears extraordinary hats, has been evicted because she has run out of money.
 - Why do you think we are told that she was trying to earn money as a life model? (Chapter 8.)

'Ledia Xhoga's ruminative debut novel interrogates the darker legacies of family and country, and the boundary between compassion and self-preservation.'
The Booker Prizes website

Style – or, How is this book written?

- Is the narrator reliable?
 - She observes that her uncle has a 'tendency to lose himself in his own interpretation of reality' (final line of first paragraph of chapter 9).
 - Might the same be said of the narrator?
 - Who is telling us that Alfred's wife is wearing 'a flowery dress too small for her body ... arms bulged out of her short sleeves' (chapter 6)?
- What, for you, is the effect of the Albanian phrases that are scattered through the book?
- What is the function of characters like:
 - Helen
 - The doorman in chapter 13 who is talking on the phone about a medical bill?
 - Why are they included in what is already a wide cast?

FURTHER READING:

Going, went, gone by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated by Susan Bernofsky

Refugee Tales: The Interpreter's Tale, as told to Carol Watts, read by Amelia Bullmore

Tell me how it ends: An essay in 40 questions by Valeria Luiselli

Wider Themes

- Why is Leyla afraid of reporting her stalker to the police?
 - What is the significance of paperwork for Leyla, Alfred and Zani?
- By contrast, who is waiting for paperwork in Tirana?
 - Why do the narrator's mother and uncle (her deceased father's brother) not get on?
- Is it better to speak or to leave things unsaid? Does this book take a clear position?
 - Are words always understood in the way that they are intended?
 - Are people always clear about what they intend when they speak?
- The narrator's husband, Billy, who is a film professor, likes to compare films which tell the same stories in different ways.
 - If this novel were to be retold from Billy's perspective, how might it differ?
 - If you were to re-write this novel in another language, what challenges or choices might you face?
 - Is there a story that you know well that has been re-told in different ways and perhaps in different languages? Is there a re-telling that you particularly like?
 - If so, why?

- *Reading the world*
- Alfred is an Albanian from Kosovo.
 - What do you know about Kosovo?
 - There is information about the country [here](#).
- New York, Tirana and Berat (south of Tirana) are precisely mapped in this book.
 - Which setting did you most enjoy?
- The narrator is drawn to a map of New York on which the artist has plotted her personal interactions with the city: a 'map of emotions' (first paragraph of chapter 10).
 - Could you draw a similar map of a place that you know well?
- One more thing
- Certain Albanian expressions are quoted in the book. For example,
 - *'U bë sa një grusht – He became small as a fist'* (chapter 1)
 - *'She looks like the sort of person ... you might have a fight with while eating baklava'* (chapter 6)
 - *'Një ftyr l ikte, një ftyr l vinte – A face would leave and a face would come'* (chapter 6)
 - *'Çdo gjë është e shkruar – Everything is already written'* (chapter 12).
- Are there turns of phrase in English or in another language that you particularly like?
 - Is this because the image evoked brings the meaning to life?
 - Or do you like the sound the words make?
 - Or perhaps it makes you laugh?