

# **The Albanian Virgin Study Guide**

## **The Albanian Virgin by Alice Munro**

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# Plot Summary

The plot of *The Albanian Virgin* jumps back and forth between different points of view. The story begins with the character Lottar. Lottar's guide has been shot and killed and Lottar has been taken prisoner by the tribe that has killed the guide. During the attack, Lottar's horse had been scared and bucked. Lottar is thrown from the horse and injured. The tribe takes Lottar up to the mountains to their town, Matsia e madhe. Lottar is taken care of by Tima, one of the women in the tribe. A priest visits Lottar during her illness, and she attempts to communicate to the best of her abilities. The priest explains that the tribe members are not robbers as Lottar thought, but they were defending their family honor because the guide had killed a member of their tribe. Lottar asks the priest to either contact the British Consulate or go to the police. She does not understand that this will not happen.

After Lottar recovers from her illness, she is put to work with the other women and receives no special attention. She is treated like a member of the tribe and is taught to harvest tobacco, make fern beds for the tribe to sleep in at night, and to cook. She learns the way of the tribe in which the men and women are always separated except for at dinner and certain times during the night.

The point of view changes to the narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the story. The narrator is visiting a friend of hers, Charlotte, in the hospital after Charlotte has fallen ill. Charlotte is in St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria, British Columbia with an unidentified illness. It turns out that the story of Lottar was created by Charlotte, who has hopes that it will be made into a movie. Charlotte explains that the story takes place in Northern Albania in a town called Matsia e madhe during the 1920s.

The story of Lottar continues. The tribe lives in a *kula*, which is a great big stone house with a stable and living quarter. The *kula* has a veranda that stretches all the way around. An older woman is always sitting on the veranda making clothing for the tribe. It is then that Lottar realizes that she does not want to leave the tribe. Desperate as she was in the beginning to return home, she has now grown comfortable in her place. One day, the women dress her up and shave her head. Lottar is confused until the priest arrives. He tells her that she has been sold to a Muslim man for money, and asks her if she wishes for this to happen. She says no, and the priest swears her in as a Virgin, warning her that she must never go with a man. After being sworn in as a virgin, Lottar is sent to live on her own.

Meanwhile, the narrator is having some success with her bookstore and gets invited to Charlotte's house for dinner. This takes place before the story of Lottar is created, as the narrator is just beginning to meet people in her bookstore and Charlotte is one of them. The narrator attends Charlotte's house for dinner and gets an insight into the woman and her husband. It is shortly after the dinner invitation that Charlotte is hospitalized and the narrator visits.



Lottar is rescued by the priest. As winter approaches, the priest takes her to Skodra, the nearest town. He plans to take her to the Bishop's house because the Bishop will know what to do with her. When they arrive at the Bishop's house, the narrator is unaware that the British Consulate has been contacted and that arrangements are made for her to return home. She is unwilling to leave the priest and calls his name several times before seeing him on the dock as the boat pulls into the Trieste to take her home.

# Short Story

## Short Story Summary

The short story *The Albanian Virgin* begins in the mountains in a town called Matsia e madhe. The reader is introduced to a woman named "Lottar". The woman's name is in parenthesis because her true name is not revealed just yet. It is assumed that the people of Matsia e madhe have not been able to pronounce her real name and decided just to call her Lottar.

Lottar has a fever and a wound on her leg from when she fell onto rocks after her guide was shot. The people have carried her up the mountain strapped to a horse's back while she is bound up in a rug. She is given water a few times a day and sometimes some brandy. She finds herself on a lake and later in a hut for the sick and dying.

She remains in this hut for weeks, lying on a bed of ferns and being tended to by a woman named Tima. Tima is responsible for changing Lottar's bandages and tending to her wound. Lottar, during the time of her illness, is delirious. She imagines the cobwebs that coat the windows to be black lace curtains. In her delirium, Lottar asks her dead mother, "why have you hung up those curtains? They look horrible". Lottar also feels that a big board is being pushed against her face, perhaps a coffin plank. In actuality, it is a wooden crucifix that a priest is trying to get her to kiss. Lottar is unable to understand either the priest's English or the language of the townspeople, the Ghegs. After her fever goes away, the priest tries again to communicate with her, this time in Italian.

Lottar asks the priest to go to the British Consulate or to the police. Lottar does not understand that nobody will go to the police. She now belongs to this tribe, the *kula*. The *kula* had not meant to take Lottar as a prisoner, but they had done so and had been embarrassed by their mistake. The attacking of a woman is shameful and it was unintended. The tribe had shot and killed her guide, hoping that her horse would be startled and take off. However, that is not what happened. The horse Lottar was riding was so stunned by the event that instead of fleeing, it stumbled and threw Lottar off. Lottar landed on rocks and injured herself.

Lottar questions the priest about the incident. She asks why the tribe robbed the guide and not her. It is then that the priest corrects her error; the motive was not robbery, but family honor. It turns out that the history goes back between the two *kulas*; the guide had killed a man of the *kula* that took Lottar prisoner, so in retaliation, the tribe killed the guide. The priest explains that this is how it will continue because sons will always be born.

The events leading up to the ambush of the guide are revealed next. Lottar is staying in Italy with a few friends of hers, Mr. and Mrs. Cozzens and Dr. Lamb. Lottar and her friends are staying in a hotel in Italy. It is revealed that Lottar does not think very highly



of her unadventurous friends. She describes them as middle-aged and fussy. Lottar wakes up in the middle of the night and cannot get back to sleep. When the first sign of daylight begins to show, she goes downstairs with plans to take a walk down the road and see some ruins that lie behind the olive trees and the Austrian Fortress. The weather is nice and the hotel clerk readily produces a guide and his horse. While out on the walk, she gets hungry and decides that she will soon turn back. The next thing she knows, Lottar is being carried on a horse, thinking that there must be some sort of search going on for her.

The narration of the story changes to an unnamed person. The narrator is visiting a friend, Charlotte, in St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria, Canada. To help Charlotte with her recovery, the narrator brings flowers and chocolates. Charlotte loves the presents and reveals that even though she cannot smell, the flowers are beautiful. Charlotte also tells the narrator that the narrator must eat the chocolates instead of her because everything tastes like tar. Charlotte asks the narrator to pull up a chair because she has been making up a story, perhaps for a movie. Charlotte is unsure if the story would make a good movie and would like her friend's opinion. She begins to tell the story of Lottar, the woman previously mentioned. The reader learns that Lottar is a made up character who lives in the 1920s and is traveling alone.

Charlotte begins to tell her friend the story, acting highly animated as she does so. Her hands fly up and down and her blue eyes widen at certain points in the story. Charlotte puts an end to the storytelling for the day and tells her friend that she will tell more of the story tomorrow. Her friend agrees to return the next day.

The story of Lottar continues. The hut where she is being held is a stone house with a veranda all the way around. On this veranda there is always an old woman sitting and making the men's trousers. Other women either work the looms or sew. Knitting is not something that is done sitting down, but rather while collecting water from the spring or collecting fallen branches. It is a rule in this tribe that women's hands should never be idle. Whether it is baking corn bread, sweeping the house, or collecting ferns for the beds, women are always in motion, except for sleep.

To create some fun in the daily chores, there are competitions among the women such as who can carry the heaviest load of wood, or can knit the fastest. Tima, the woman who took care of Lottar in her sickness, is the most admired, while Lottar is the most pitied. Many times, Lottar would be smacked with a stick; most times not out of cruelty, but out of exasperation. Lottar tries to teach the girls how to speak English, but the girls take the words as jokes.

In this village, men stay with men while women stay with women. The only exceptions to this are at certain times during the night and at suppertime when women serve men their food. What the men do during the day is none of the women's business. Men go off on killings, and when a man goes off on his first killing, a big fuss is made. The women fuss over the man's clothing and his haircut as to wish him luck and to encourage him. If the man does not succeed, no woman will marry him, and this is a great deal of



embarrassment to the young man. The women are eager to have new brides in the house to help with the duties.

One day when Lottar is serving food to a male guest, she notices that he is not young, but speaks with a womanly voice. Confused, she asks the girls if he is indeed a man, only to be confronted with teasing and told that the man is a virgin. Lottar does not like the teasing and does not ask any more questions. Instead, she waits until the next time she sees the priest and asks him what a virgin is. He explains to her that it is a woman, but one who has become like a man. The woman had no desire to marry and she took an oath that she would never marry and that she would never be intimate with a man. Women who take that oath are free to dress like men, hold a gun and a horse, and live as they please.

Lottar is becoming quite accustomed to living with this tribe. In the beginning, she would ask the priest if anyone was looking for her and he always told her sternly "no one". She is ashamed at how little she knew when she first arrived. She knows that sooner or later, she will have to leave, but she does not want to leave now. She wants to help the women with their work.

She enjoys being with the women. During the day when they work in the tobacco fields, they work half-naked. The tobacco juice is comparable to molasses: thick and sticky. At the end of the day, the women go down to the river to scrub themselves clean from all of the tobacco juice. Lottar also hears a lot of stories while spending the day with the women. One of the stories that she hears is of the *Striga*. She hears of the children and the elderly that died because of the *Striga*. The *Striga* is a normal-looking woman so you cannot tell her apart from other women. She sucks blood from people. There is only one way that a person can catch the *Striga*. On Easter Sunday, a cross is laid on the threshold of the church while everyone is inside. The *Striga* cannot come out. A way to become immune to the *Striga* is to follow the woman that is the suspected *Striga* and pick up some of her bloody vomit. The vomit is then placed on a silver coin, and as long as a person carries that coin with them, no *Striga* can touch that person.

After the tobacco is harvested and the sheep are brought down, the humans, along with the animals, are shut up in the house for a few weeks during the rain and the snow. When the spring begins, the women place Lottar in a chair on the veranda. They shave her head and run dye through what little hair she has left. After this, the women start dressing Lottar up into fancy clothing. When Lottar questions their actions, the women state that they are dressing her up for beauty, and say she looks beautiful. The priest arrives in the midst of the girls dressing Lottar up and screams, "shame on you all! Shame!"

He continues to scream at the women, "I know what you have dyed her hair for, I know why you have put bride's cloths on her". He explains to Lottar that the women have sold her to a Muslim. He tells Lottar that he will make her a Virgin so that the Muslim will not have to shoot any of the men. He also explains to her that she may never go with a man. It turns out that the women who bore only girls and those who would bring no money anywhere else were sold. The women remove the fancy clothing and one chops

off most of the rest of the hair that remains on Lottar's head. The priest swears her in as a Virgin in front of twelve men who serve as witnesses.

The story changes back to the narrator, who is visiting her friend Charlotte in the hospital. Charlotte is being served dinner and asks her friend to leave and return tomorrow. The nurse is talking to the narrator about her friend. When the nurse asks if the narrator knows Charlotte's husband, the narrator replies yes. She remembers back to a week ago when Gjurdhi, Charlotte's husband had come into the bookstore trying to sell his books. He had asked her to run her hands over the spines of the books, and as she did so, she agreed that the books were in good condition, but then states that she just does not handle secondhand books. It was at this time that she asked Gjurdhi how Charlotte was. He said bluntly, with an attitude as if it were none of her business, that she was sick. She had given Gjurdhi a book to take home to his wife when she learned that Charlotte was in the hospital.

Lottar is living in a stone hut about a half hour hike from the *kula*. She is forced to live there after becoming a Virgin. Lottar's job is to make sure that the sheep do not leave the herd or become otherwise endangered. Lottar eats a lot of rabbit, hunting for them and then stewing them over an open fire, flavored with some wild garlic. She does not want to sleep inside of the shelter that has sheep droppings everywhere so she sets up a bed of ferns outside with a branch roof overhead. She acknowledges that everything has changed. She no longer sees the women and no longer is a constant worker. The little girls arrive in the evenings to pick up the milk from Lottar. Every now and then, the little girls bring her some corn flour that Lottar mixes with water and bakes as she used to with the women. She is allowed to keep some of the milk that she obtains for the women. She prefers to let it go sour so that she may have some yogurt.

At night after the little girls leave, the men come up to hang out and smoke and drink. They are not coming up to check on Lottar's well-being, but just the same, they bring her presents of tobacco and coffee. The men also offer advice on how to maintain her shelter, how to keep the fire going all night long for warmth, and how to use her gun.

The time soon comes that Lottar had to move inside. The mornings are very cold and the sheep have been taken down to the *kula*. The men laugh at her attempt to winterize the stone hut. They tell her that the snow falls and accumulates up to your chest and there will be no work and no food. They explain that since Lottar does not formally belong to the *kula*, she has no father to give her land since she has decided to become a Virgin. She would not be allowed to return to the *kula* to sleep and eat or to mingle amongst the women. The priest pays her a visit shortly after the encounter with the men. He explains that he believes the *kula* will try again to sell Lottar to a Muslim, whether or not she's been sworn. When the time comes to leave, Lottar reflects back on all that she has learned: the milking of the ewes, her coffee pot, and the stones around her fire. She knows that she will never forget any of her experiences.

The Priest and Lottar begin the trip to Skodra, which is the nearest town to the *kula*. The priest warns Lottar to be quiet on the trip as they walk, and if they see anybody on the path, they are to hide. They continue on walking for hours without hesitation and without





rest. The priest pulls out a loaf of bread and a knife, which he shares with Lottar as they walk. When it is time to stop walking, they stop near the river on some stones. When she asks where the priest is taking her, he tells her that he is taking her to the Bishop's house. Lottar wishes to stay with the priest, but the priest sternly tells her that no woman is allowed to stay in the priest's house because, "trouble comes from having a woman in the house."

As Lottar and the priest continue on they stop and rest often, but never look for a comfortable place to sleep or lie down. The priest becomes less stern in his voice and begins to talk to her the way that he used to when they first became acquainted, back when she was sick. The priest explains that he was born in Italy and that is where he became a priest. He also explains that when they arrive in Skodra, the Bishop will send a message to Matsia e madhe that it was right to take her away. Lottar listens as the priest explains that the people in madhe are barbarians with no manners. He explains that despite being barbarians, the people are also loyal and will not betray. When Lottar brings up the point that they would sell her, the priest tells her it is only because they are poor and wish to gain money. They continue walking on even after the sun comes up, and continue walking the rest of the day. The priest advises Lottar not to speak to anyone because they may wonder about her true identity if she does.

The narrator explains that she has painted her bookstore a yellow color because "yellow stands for intellectual curiosity". The bookstore was opened in 1964. The publishers' representatives had warned the narrator only to stock certain books because that was all people would buy. Rather than take their advice, she stocks the bookstore with complicated topics such as philosophy and relativity. The business is slow, with gaps of hours in which nobody enters the store. The customers who do come in often are looking for a certain book to which they do not know the title, or customers who browse for a half hour before spending seventy-five cents.

The narrator finds a one-bedroom apartment with a kitchenette. This is the kind of apartment in which the bed folds up into the wall when company comes over. The narrator hardly bothers to put the bed up into the wall because she never has company, and she is afraid that the bed might fall out of the wall one day and kill her. In her apartment, a window is always open because she fears that she smells gas even when all of her appliances are off. Because the windows are always open, it is necessary for the narrator to bundle up in sweaters or dressing gowns. She expresses her disappointment in the city of Victoria, and the business that her bookstore is doing. She reveals that nothing really ever happens in her small town. The reason businesses open in Victoria is because people hope to grow rich or because people keep themselves so sheltered in their businesses that it becomes a refuge. Of course, customers are needed because the bills become due and the stock does not pay for itself. The narrator is worried that her bookstore may not survive until the end of summer if more people do not come into the store. Gradually, she says they do come and she is grateful just to talk to them and to have their business and that it is not necessary for her to know their names.



The story of Lottar continues. Lottar and the priest reach Skodra after walking for days. Skodra is a town of mud flats, streets that are paved with stones and full of people, and carts pulled by donkeys. The town smells of dung and cooking. The priest asks people along the way if they know the way to the Bishop's house. Many do not bother answering, or talk in a language that the priest does not understand. One boy says that he will show the way for money. In the beginning of the trip to Skodra, Lottar fantasized about running away from the priest. These thoughts leave her mind as she realizes that without the priest she cannot communicate, and that the priest is actually an ally of hers.

After a brief rest, the priest jumps up and tells Lottar that he has remembered the way to the Bishop's house. They hurry through narrow streets in which the fences are so high that houses cannot be seen, and arrive at the Bishop's gate. A servant opens the gate, and after an argument, lets the priest and Lottar through. Lottar sits inside the gate as the priest goes into the house to see the Bishop. A British Consulate arrives at the house and the servant leads Lottar to the Consulate. Lottar is given a bath, her clothes are taken away, and her vermin-infested hair is cut off. She has to learn to sleep on a mattress again, to eat with a knife and fork, and sit on a chair. She is put on a boat as soon as it is possible. Charlotte interrupts the story. "That part is not of interest," she says.

The narrator tells the story of how she came to live in Victoria. She explains that it is the furthest she could get from London, Ontario where she used to live with her husband. Her husband and she rented out the basement apartment in their house to a couple by the names of Nelson and Sylvia. Her husband, Donald, was a dermatologist, and she was a writer, writing a thesis on Mary Shelley. She had met Donald when she went to see him about a rash. Donald told her that her rash was probably due to stress and that after the problems were cleared up, she was probably going to be a wonderful woman.

When Sylvia would work at night as a nurse, the narrator and Donald would invite Nelson to dinner. Nelson was a very picky person, but they came to understand his moods and his shyness. The narrator reveals that an affair began between her and Nelson. After the affair begins, Nelson tells the narrator that they are going to have to leave town. Shortly after, however, Sylvia and Donald find out about the affair and they both leave their spouses. The narrator finds herself on a train, trying to escape from everything. This is how she ends up in Victoria, British Columbia. She muses over the fact that Donald and Nelson both have endearing qualities and that if they could be one person, she would be eternally happy.

The focus changes again to the bookstore, and the narrator describes some of the customers who have changed into more than acquaintances but not quite friends. Among those people are a middle-aged woman, a civil servant, a notary public, and a woman that she comes to know as Charlotte. The narrator discloses that she begins to write letters both to Donald, who is now living with his secretary, and to Nelson, whom she knows nothing about since she left Ontario. Donald begins to write back to her, but discloses nothing personal, only informal information. Nelson, on the other hand, does not write back at all. When the narrator begins sending registered letters, she knows that he has at least picked the letters up.



Charlotte and her husband, Gjurdhi, are regular customers in the store, which is how the narrator becomes friends with Charlotte. Charlotte is described as a heavy woman with bright blue eyes and a pink face. Her hair is white and flows over her shoulders in waves. Her husband is the opposite. He has a yellow face, brown droopy eyes, and a scraggly mustache. Both Charlotte and Gjurdhi dress like peddlers, complete with lugging a wagon behind them full of goods. Charlotte offers to have the narrator hire her to run the store so that the narrator can get out and enjoy the sun. The narrator expresses her desire to do so but explains that she cannot afford it. Charlotte says it is for the better because she is the type that would argue with people over the books that they have chosen to purchase. Charlotte also refuses to pay sales tax, stating that paying tax on books is immoral. The narrator lets her get away with not paying sales tax on the books on this visit and all others.

The narrator receives a letter asking her to supper on a Sunday. The invitation is from Charlotte and Gjurdhi. While the narrator confesses that she would be embarrassed to receive this letter from any of her other customers, she feels pleasure at being invited by Charlotte. When the narrator arrives at Charlotte and Gjurdhi's apartment, she is amazed by how untidy it is. Papers are everywhere, books are stacked against the walls, but yet she muses that it does not smell. Charlotte thanks her guest for coming to dinner, although she confesses that she did not expect the narrator to come. Charlotte clears off a wicker chair for her guest to sit in while Gjurdhi pours a glass of wine. The narrator enjoys the dinner with her newfound friends, a meal that consists of a plate of cucumbers and yogurt for an appetizer and chicken that was cooked with raisins, sour bread, and rice.

Over dinner, Mary Shelley becomes a topic and the narrator is surprised at Charlotte's knowledge of the storylines. The narrator is hoping for a chance to tell the story of her life in London, Ontario but she never has the chance. Sherbet is served after dinner, and following sherbet is strong coffee. The narrator is unsure of how to feel about Charlotte, knowing that Charlotte lives in a completely different manner than the narrator. It is while the narrator is at Charlotte and Gjurdhi's apartment that Gjurdhi first tries to sell her used books. She apologizes but remains firm in her decision to handle secondhand books. She continues a conversation with Charlotte at the same time that she is telling Gjurdhi she will not buy the books.

When the narrator leaves Charlotte and Gjurdhi's apartment, she has a headache and feels inadequate. She feels that she has disappointed Charlotte and Gjurdhi and in turn feels disappointed by them. She is homesick for Donald, longing for Nelson and is unsure of what to do with herself. A few days later, she receives a letter from Donald. Donald wishes to marry Helen, his secretary, but in order to do so he needs a divorce.

Back at the bookstore, the narrator hires a college girl to work part time in the bookstore so that the narrator might get some errands done. Charlotte notices the college girl and tells the narrator that she is right in hiring someone else than Charlotte because Charlotte is too full of opinions. The college girl tells the narrator that there is something she must know about Charlotte.



In the hospital, the narrator asks Charlotte why the part of Lottar being put on a boat is not of interest. The narrator's mind is wandering to the notary public who had been beaten, is still alive but possibly blinded, and she does not know the motive. She continues talking to Charlotte telling Charlotte that she loves the story and that it is fascinating. Charlotte is not happy with this explanation. The narrator begins to worry about Charlotte's health, wondering if she might die. The narrator, wanting to keep the story going, asks Charlotte where the story came from. "From life", is Charlotte's response. Then she begins to tell a little bit more about the story.

Charlotte did not die. When the narrator goes to visit her the next day in the hospital, Charlotte is gone. The nurse, seeing the look on the narrator's face, immediately tells her that Charlotte is being transferred to a long-term hospital and her husband had checked her out that morning with intent to take her to the hospital. However, Charlotte and Gjurdhi had never shown up at the place. Gjurdhi had brought her a pile of money and Charlotte was throwing it up in the air. That was the last that was seen of them. The narrator attempts to visit their apartment, but finds that they had moved.

Now the narrator feels exceptionally lonely, having lost her only friends, and her husband and lover before that. The narrator lets herself slip into a daydream in which she and Nelson end up together and fall in love with other people. They play a game of distance, closeness over and over again. It is when that she walks back into the bookstore to let the college girl go home that she notices a man standing near the door. He moves toward her and bumps her. She gets the shock of her life when she realizes that this is Nelson. He has come for her to see what will happen.

The story of Lottar comes to a close, as does the short story by Alice Munro. Lottar is leaving the Bishop's courtyard, assisted by the British Consul's servant who is explaining to her where they will be going. She has not seen the Bishop yet and has not seen the priest since they arrived at the Bishop's house. Lottar calls out for the priest in one last attempt to see him. She finally sees him half concealed behind an orange tree and then he is gone. As she calls for him some more, she finally sees him on the dock as the boat comes into the harbor at Trieste.

## Short Story Analysis

*The Albanian Virgin*, by Alice Munro, is a story within a story: the story of how the narrator came to live in Victoria, British Columbia, and the story of Lottar. The female narrator remains unnamed throughout the story. She has left her home in London, Ontario and opened a bookstore in Victoria. The reason for her leaving London is that she had an affair with her downstairs neighbor, Nelson. Her husband, Donald, a dermatologist, leaves her when he finds out about the affair. Desperate for a new start, the narrator moves to a new area and opens a bookstore in hopes of starting a new life. It is while she owns this bookstore that she comes to know and befriend Charlotte and Gjurdhi, her only mentioned friends in this story. Charlotte and Gjurdhi make a unique couple, dressing like peddlers and dragging a wagon behind them wherever they go. Gjurdhi comes into the store by himself one day trying to sell the narrator secondhand

books for money, which is how the narrator learns of Charlotte's illness. Nothing is revealed about Charlotte's illness other than it may exist in her chest. It is upon visiting Charlotte in the hospital that the narrator comes to hear the story of Lottar.

Lottar is a young woman who is traveling both alone and also sometimes with friends she meets while traveling. On one journey, she wakes up in the middle of the night and is unable to go back to sleep. Her companions have no sense of adventure, so she plans to have an adventure before they return home. At the first crack of dawn, Lottar is in the hotel lobby asking the hotel clerk how to get to the ruins that lie among the olive trees. The hotel clerk provides a guide and his horse. While on the walk, the guide is shot and killed. The horse that Lottar is riding bucks and throws her into some rocks where she is injured. She is then taken prisoner by a tribe that lives in a *kula*. The tribe introduces Lottar to their ways of constant work and the separation of women and men except for suppertime and certain points during the night. Unbeknownst to Lottar, the tribe has sold her to a Muslim man in hopes of making money. The priest quickly puts an end to this by declaring her a Virgin. In front of twelve men who serve as witnesses, Lottar takes the oath that she will never be with any man. After the swearing in, she is sent to live about a half hour walk away from the *kula* in a little stone hut. She is getting by, but the priest fears that she may again be sold for money. The priest helps her to escape, and brings her to the town of Skodra. When she arrives at the Bishop's house, she is given a bath, taught to sleep on a mattress, eat with a fork and knife, and sit upright in a chair. Shortly after this, she is put on a boat by the British Consulate.

# Characters

## Narrator

The narrator is an unnamed woman from London, Ontario. In London, she was married to Donald, a dermatologist. The narrator and Donald decide to rent out the basement apartment of their house. They rent the house out to Nelson and Sylvia. Shortly after the couple moves in, Nelson and the narrator begin an affair. When confronted with the affair, Sylvia leaves Nelson while Donald leaves the narrator. After making love one final time, the narrator packs up her belongings and leaves to live in Victoria. In Victoria, she opens a bookstore and rents a one-bedroom apartment that has a fold-up bed that retracts into the wall. Business is slow at first, but eventually picks up. Missing her husband and her lover, the narrator befriends a couple, Charlotte and Gjurdhi. It is while she visits Charlotte in the hospital that she hears the story of Lottar, a creation of Charlotte's. In the end of the story, Nelson, the narrator's lover, shows up in the bookstore to see her.

## Lottar

Lottar is a made-up character created by Charlotte, the narrator's friend. Lottar and her story are an escape from Charlotte's illness. Lottar is a woman who is traveling alone in Italy. She wakes up in the middle of the night and is unable to go back to sleep. When dawn arises, she and her guide are walking toward the ruins that lie just among the olive trees. It is while she is on this walk that her guide is shot and killed and Lottar is taken prisoner by the tribe. Lottar learns the language of the Ghegs, and learns how to work hard from sun up to sun down during the spring, summer and fall. While she knows that she is a prisoner, she becomes reluctant to leave the tribe and only does so after she is almost sold to a Muslim. She is sworn in as a Virgin by the priest in front of twelve men who serve as witnesses. After being sworn as a Virgin, she leaves the tribe to live on her own about a half hour hike from the tribe. Being away from the tribe, Lottar is not working constantly anymore and only gets visits from the men at night. When winter is on the verge of arriving, the priest comes to rescue her and brings her to the Bishop's house. It is when she reaches the town of Skodra with the priest that the British Consulate takes her back to where she originally came from.

## Tima

Tima is the most successful woman in the tribe, winning all of the competitions that the girls instill on one another. Tima is the woman who nursed Lottar during her time of sickness; she changed her bandages and fed her.





## Priest

The priest is a dominant presence in the novel. While almost nothing is revealed about him, Lottar learns that the priest is from Italy and had learned the language of the Ghegs from his parents. The priest arrives in the story when Lottar is sick and delusional and remains a presence until the end when Lottar is being sent home. Lottar develops an attachment to the priest after he saves her from being sold to a Muslim man.

It is the priest who saves Lottar from being sold to the Muslim man and swears her in as a Virgin so that the Muslim man will not have to kill a man of the tribe for dishonesty. After Lottar is sworn in and sent to live on her own, the priest visits her one day and says that they have to leave out of fear that the tribe will once again try to sell her to a Muslim man for money. The priest takes her to a nearby town, Skodra, and contacts the British Consulate, which comes to take Lottar home.

## Charlotte

Charlotte is a heavyset older woman. She has white hair that hangs over her shoulders and bright blue eyes. Charlotte is an opinionated woman who feels that paying sales taxes for books is immoral so refuses to. Charlotte and her husband, Gjurdhi, invite the narrator for dinner one Sunday evening. Shortly after that dinner, Charlotte gets sick and winds up in the hospital. The narrator visits Charlotte in the hospital and it is Charlotte who creates the story of Lottar and wishes for the story to be made into a movie. Charlotte is the narrator's only friend and the narrator feels lonely after Charlotte and her husband disappear after Charlotte is released from the hospital.

## Donald

Donald is a dermatologist and is also the narrator's husband. Not much is revealed about Donald except that when he finds out about the affair between the narrator and Nelson, he leaves his wife and moves in with his secretary. He does write letters to his wife, but they are informal and show no emotion. In the last letter that he sends, he is asking for a divorce so that he can marry his secretary.

## Nelson

Nelson is an English major at a university. He is described as short and muscular. He is a shy, twenty-two-year-old student who is married to Sylvia, a nurse. His shyness disappears in bed, as is revealed by the narrator who begins an affair with him shortly after he moves into the basement apartment. Nelson tells the narrator that they are going to have to move in order to continue the affair. When the truth finally comes out, Nelson spends that night with the narrator, and then chooses to go downstairs to his own bed to sleep. It is then that the narrator leaves him behind while she treks to

Victoria to begin a new life. The narrator tries to write to Nelson, but Nelson does not respond. In the end of the story, Nelson shows up at the narrator's bookstore out of the blue.

## Tribe

The tribe is a group of men and women who live in Matsia e madhe. They are described as a group of barbarians who will do anything to survive, yet they will not betray anyone. The men and women are separated for most of the day except during certain times at night, and when the women serve the men supper at dinnertime. The women work all day harvesting tobacco, making clothes, and gathering water from the stream. They also cook and clean the *kula*, the house in which they stay. The men clean their guns, hang out, smoke, and drink for entertainment. The men are responsible for going out on killings and any man who does not kill on his first killing will never wed because the women do not want to marry men who have not killed and who therefore bring shame on their family.

## Gjurdhi

Gjurdhi is Charlotte's husband; he is also a peddler of books. Described as a tall, lanky guy with a wallowing face, he dresses the part of a peddler. On more than one occasion, Gjurdhi has come into the narrator's bookstore looking to sell her secondhand books. When the narrator is invited over to Gjurdhi's apartment, he tries to sell her books there, as well. At the end of the story, it is Gjurdhi who has checked Charlotte out of the hospital shortly before they disappear.

## Mr. and Mrs. Cozzens

Mr. and Mrs. Cozzens are Lottar's friends from Italy. They have joined her in traveling down the Dalmatian Coast. Mrs. Cozzens is a finicky woman who will not stand for Lottar's of adventure. It is because Mr. and Mrs. Cozzens are unadventurous that Lottar ventures out on her own at the break of dawn the morning that she is taken captive by the tribe.





# Objects/Places

## Matsia e madhe

Matsia e madhe is a town in the mountains in Northern Albania. It is in Matsia e madhe that the tribe that has taken Lottar prisoner lives. The town is full of barbarians who are very poor and will make money in any way that they can, including selling women to the Muslim men.

## Kula

The *kula* is a big stone house in which the tribe lives and works. The *kula* has a veranda that runs all the way around. A stable is down below while the living quarters are the top floor. The *kula* is where the tribe sleeps and eats and stows away during the wintertime when it rains and snows. The animals are shut up in the *kula* during the wintertime, as well.

## St Joseph's Hospital

St. Joseph's Hospital is where the narrator's friend, Charlotte, is recovering from her illness. The narrator pays a visit to the hospital three days in a row to visit her friend and to hear the story of Lottar. The story of Lottar is told by Charlotte as she is recovering from her illness.

## The Bookstore

The bookstore is owned by the narrator and is located in Victoria, British Columbia. The narrator opens the bookstore after moving from London, Ontario. She needs a way to survive and to make money, and the bookstore serves as the perfect outlet. Instead of listening to the publishers' representatives and only stocking books about certain topics, the narrator stocks the bookstore with many complicated subjects such as psychology and relativity. The bookstore's business gets off to a slow start but eventually picks up business. It is also the place where Nelson shows up out of the blue to see the narrator.

## Narrator's Apartment

The narrator's apartment is only shown briefly, but it is a one-bedroom apartment with a kitchenette. The bed folds up into the wall, but the narrator refuses to put it in the wall because she is afraid that she will be killed if it falls. She also keeps one window open in the apartment no matter what the weather is like because she is afraid that she keeps smelling gas.

## **London, Ontario**

London, Ontario, Canada is where the narrator lived with her husband Donald, the dermatologist. She and her husband lived in a house with a basement apartment. When they rented out the basement apartment to Nelson and Sylvia, the narrator began an affair with Nelson, the twenty-two-year-old student. The narrator leaves London, Ontario after her husband leaves her. She wants a fresh start.

## **Victoria, British Columbia**

Victoria, British Columbia is where the narrator moves to after leaving her husband and her lover. She opens a bookstore and rents a one-bedroom apartment. It is where she meets her friend, Charlotte, and Charlotte's husband, Gjurdhi. She spends most of her days at the bookstore and the hospital when Charlotte becomes ill. Nelson shows up in Victoria after receiving many letters from the narrator.

## **Charlotte and Gjurdhi's apartment**

The narrator is invited over to her friend Charlotte and her husband's apartment. The narrator is both amused and horrified at the state of Charlotte's apartment. There are papers everywhere; a stack of magazines has to be moved so that the narrator may sit. Books line the walls and clutter surrounds the rest of the apartment.

## **Skodra**

Skodra is the neighboring town of Matsia e madhe, where Lottar is being held prisoner by the tribe who kills her guide. Skodra is the town where the priest is taking Lottar after sneaking her away from the tribe in an effort to spare her the winter. In Skodra, the Bishop resides. The priest is taking Lottar to the Bishop in order to find out what to do with her.

# Social Sensitivity

An intricately structured story within a story, "The Albanian Virgin" explores romance, a term used here in the broadest sense of relating to events or experiences defined chiefly in terms of the emotions and imagination, as an antidote to the divisiveness and rigidity that characterizes the two worlds central to the plot: the world of Claire, a woman who leaves both a husband and a lover in central Canada to move to Victoria, British Columbia in 1964, and the world of Lottar, a young Canadian woman travelling alone through Europe in the 1920s, who is captured in the crossfire of an intergenerational blood feud in mountainous northern Albania.

Claire's world is a place in which passion and a sense of the extraordinary in life have all but disappeared, from the magical experiences of reading poetry to the concupiscence of love.

Writing a dissertation on the later novels of Mary Shelley, but drawn intimately to the spirit of liberation that imparted energy to "Mary's life before she learned her sad lessons and buckled down to raising her son to be a baronet," Claire comes to see her life in London, Ontario slowly becoming one of monotony and routine. It is a world where the intense ideological and personal attachments that gave rise to the various passions of such Romantics as Byron and the Shelleys, what Claire calls a "mishmash of love and despair and treachery and self-dramatizing," have been replaced by a cultural discourse that privileges caution and "control." What Claire finds in her move and in her burgeoning friendship with a strange, gypsylike couple, Charlotte and Gjurdhi, is that the mysterious can and does survive amidst the misplaced "passions" of the modern world: in the almost surreal atmosphere embracing the odd couple living in a small apartment on the appropriately named Pandora Street; in the worlds created in the books lining the shelves of Claire's bookstore; and in the "layers" of life Claire admits having never "guessed at."

The framed story of Lottar, on the other hand, reveals an eastern world far removed from suburban Canada of the 1960s. Torn apart by brutality, this is a culture in which deep-seated hatred and ritualized violence have systematically redefined all customs and patterns of social interaction. A young man's transition from adolescence to adulthood, for instance, is marked by his killing a man from the rival community; it is a dangerous and murderous rite of passage that guarantees its survivors the respect of male contemporaries and the likelihood of securing a desirable wife, since "a woman of any worth would be ashamed to marry a man who had not killed." More deleterious is the fact that any sense of a shared mythology, the cultural "stories" through which communities communicate a constructive sense of wonder of or fascination with the unknown, has been replaced by misogynistic superstitions emphasizing pain, terror, and death.

Institutionalized religion has been similarly redefined within this ethos of violence. The village cemetery is full of grave markers of crosses made "into a very thin man with a rifle across his arms," and the local Franciscan priest, a man with whom Lottar develops

an especially powerful relationship, carries a loaded Browning revolver alongside his Bible and crucifix.

# Techniques

Whereas other stories by Munro in *Open Secrets* (1994) and earlier books are notable for subtle, almost seamless shifts in narrative chronology and perspective, "The Albanian Virgin" is shaped by abrupt breaks in point of view and time, sudden and significant gaps on the page that demand a reader's attention to the shift being signalled. This structure underscores the cultural, historical, and geographic distances separating the contrasting worlds explored in each of the stories within this story.

At the same time working against the obvious abruptness of these perspective and temporal shifts, Munro constructs a subtle narrative in which the two worlds and the two stories interpenetrate. Rather than reinforcing formally the notion of dissimilarity and separateness, the structure of the story underscores the mutuality of these two worlds. Both worlds are shown to be fragmented, divided according to numerous, often interrelated, and inevitably destructive binaries: male-female, knowable-mysterious, ordinary-fantastic, rational-intuitive. Complicating these relations is an apparently transhistorical, transcultural sexual politics that taints all cultural interaction with an imbalance of power and the potential for conflict. Moreover, the story's ending produces a moment of synthesis when time and space collapse with an almost magical effect. It is a subtle interpenetration represented most obviously in the character of Charlotte, who may or may not have lived the story she tells and whose presence in and sudden disappearance from Claire's life underscore the unpredictable intersection of the everyday and the magical. As Munro herself has suggested, "The Albanian Virgin" is a story that moves toward a sense of the possible rather than a myopic reliance on the probable.

Without seeming contrived or being weakened by a quasi-Victorian dependence on coincidence, the formal arrangement of "The Albanian Virgin" also connects thematically with Claire's hesitancy to acknowledge the magical in her life. Just as the essence of her experiences in Victoria resists subsumption within any illusive sense of stability and wholeness, the structure of the story as a whole resists our desire as readers to create a sense of clarity and order, that is, to gain control or mastery over the stories within the story through a sense of purposiveness and closure. Like Claire, the reader never knows how the stories of Charlotte and Lottar relate or where the story of Lottar ends and that of Charlotte begins.

# Themes

## Themes

Organized around Claire's first-person narration, the framing story in "The Albanian Virgin" is familiar from such earlier books as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), and *Friend of My Youth* (1990), in which female protagonists set out, with varying degrees of success, to make "a desperate change in [their] life." After arriving on the west coast, Claire opens a bookstore, hoping to gain some semblance of financial independence and to establish "connections" with the inhabitants and spirit of her new home. Although burdened by an initial sense of isolation and her guilt over past decisions, she is never totally despondent. Rather she is ambivalent, at times feeling like a woman who has "finally come out into the world in a new, true skin," at other times struggling to establish a new sense of balance and purpose in her life. It is in the bookstore that she meets and begins to form a relationship "both intimate and uncertain" with Charlotte and Gjurdhi, who visit regularly in their ongoing attempt to sell an eclectic collection of jewelry and antiquarian books. When Charlotte falls ill and is confined to a hospital bed, Claire becomes a frequent visitor, a role which soon involves listening to a dramatic tale Charlotte claims is her idea for a movie.

Structured as a third-person narrative, Charlotte's framed story opens in the 1920s with the discovery of a young Canadian woman in the mountains of northern Albania, her leg wounded "from a fall on sharp rocks when her guide was shot." Taken to a small village where she is nursed back to health, the woman awakens from an extended delirium to find herself with a new name, Lottar, given to her by the villagers, and a new "guide" to village life, an armed and fierce-looking Franciscan priest. Proving to be unskilled at all but the most menial of tasks demanded of the women in this alien culture, Lottar is to be sold into marriage to a wealthy Muslim. Her only other option, the Franciscan explains, is to take a public vow never to marry or have sex with a man, to become what the villagers call a Virgin. Conceding to this ritualized denial of her sexuality, Lottar escapes the arranged marriage and is left to her own devices tending sheep in the mountains. Later, when the villagers threaten to break their own cultural code and once again attempt to sell her into marriage, she escapes with the help of the Franciscan, first to a bishop's compound in the town of Skodra, then to the harbor in Trieste.

Unfolding alternately, these two apparently distinct tales merge at the story's end, when, in an unsettling moment of dislocation, Claire becomes unsure of the nature of the story she has been told. Relieved from her role as audience by the exigencies of her own life and the sudden disappearance of Charlotte and Gjurdhi, she, like the reader, is never sure whether Charlotte has lived the story she has recounted or if she has constructed it solely from her interest in books and movies. Indeed, when Claire asks Charlotte where the idea for the fantastic tale came from, the answer is intriguingly oblique: "'From life,' said Charlotte indistinctly."

Munro's juxtaposition of the stories of two women "travelling alone" in the world reflects her ongoing fascination with individuals who move beyond the borders of traditional roles and cultural expectations. Both Claire, who "disrupts" the apparent stability of her suburban life, and Lottar, who travels to Europe without a "suitable" companion, are independent women trying to situate themselves in relation to the powerful cultural forces shaping the worlds in which they live. For both, these personal quests are undertaken at a significant cost.

For Lottar, the cost is obvious and dramatic. With her status effectively reduced to that of a piece of property owned by the villagers, she attempts at first to situate herself within the local economy of domestic labor. When this strategy proves futile, she is prepared by the village women for the marriage market, a fate reserved for females "who could bring no price anywhere else, and widows who had borne only girls." Choosing instead to redefine herself through a ritual declaration of celibacy, a kind of ironic revision of the Victorian culture of the old maid, she reinscribes herself within village culture as an honorary man: "a woman who had become like a man . . . [who] put on men's clothes and had her own gun, and her horse if she could afford one, and she lived as she liked." It is only when she flees the mountain village, returning, as it were, to the "real" world that Lottar feels truly free.

For Claire, the decision to leave the "real" world of London also means bearing a significant emotional and physical burden. She too becomes a kind of accidental celibate, cut off from both her husband Donald and her lover Nelson. More important, however, is the deep-seated ambivalence Claire must resolve. Hopeful that her world can expand beyond the controlled boundaries of academia and suburbia to include new and wonderful passions, Claire is, at the same time, hesitant and almost fearful of acknowledging the presence of the magical and unexplainable in her life. Despite her quest westward, she remains a woman dependent upon a sense of clarity and order to structure her world; to move beyond this sense of order, even casually, is at once exhilarating and deeply unsettling. When she loses her bearings momentarily while trying to find Charlotte and Gjurdhi's apartment, for instance, she is overwhelmed by a menacing dismay, a feeling of sudden dislocation when her sense of "connection" with the empirical, knowable world becomes "frayed." The episode ends with Claire posing a question to herself (and to the reader) which resonates through the story, and through much of Munro's fiction: "Wouldn't we rather have a destiny to submit to ...

something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days?"

## Deceit

Deceit is a theme in the story in two instances. When Nelson and the narrator begin an affair, they are both deceiving their spouses. They continue to deceive their spouses when they do not come clean with the affair. When the affair finally comes out, both Donald and Sylvia feel that they have been betrayed. Lottar is also betrayed by the tribe

when she is sold to the Muslim man for marriage. The tribe expected to benefit from her being sold since they are so poor.

## **Family Honor**

Family honor is shown in the beginning of the story when the guide that is leading Lottar is shot and killed by the tribe. It turns out that the guide had killed a member of that tribe so the tribe is just retaliating. Family honor is an expected trait and it will continue along the family line as long as sons are being born.

## **Acceptance**

Lottar receives acceptance from the tribe after working among them for a while. Not only does she receive acceptance from the tribe, but she also learns how to accept the tribe for who they are, and along with that, she accepts the fact that she is now part of this tribe and there is no escape. After being with the tribe for a while, she finds that she has accepted the tribe to such a level that she does not want to leave them. Even when the priest comes for her after she has been banished to her own living area, she feels that the attachment to the priest has become part of her acceptance, and she is not willing to separate from the priest.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in this story jumps back and forth. The story is told through Lottar's point of view as well as that of the narrator. Lottar is a character created by Charlotte but re-enacted through the narrator's eyes. The narrator not only shares the story of Lottar, but also the story of her life and how she has come to be where she is today.

The story is told in both the first and third person points of view. When the narrator is discussing her life, the story is in first person. Lottar's story is told in third person through the narrator's eyes. The narrator gives the reader an insight into what she is feeling as her life progresses and how she feels when she visits her friend in the hospital, worrying that her friend might die.

By telling the story through two different points of view, it helps to separate the stories. The story, *The Albanian Virgin*, is a story within a story, so it can get confusing. By separating the two points of views and using first and third, it helps the reader distinguish between the real story and the hidden story.

## Setting

The setting of the story is constantly changing. The story starts out in Matsia e madhe as the story of Lottar is told. The focus then changes to Victoria, British Columbia in Canada as the narrator tells her story. The narrator's current life takes place in Victoria, but before she moved to Victoria, she lived in London, Ontario. She moved to Victoria after her husband left her when he found out about her affair with Nelson, the twenty-two-year-old student. Some of the story takes place in St. Joseph's hospital when Charlotte is sick. The narrator visits the hospital for three days while her friend is recovering.

Lottar's story takes place in Matsia e madhe in the 1920s as she is living and working with the tribe. Lottar is originally from Canada. She and was traveling alone in Italy when her guide was killed and she was taken as prisoner to Matsia e madhe. Lottar's story ends as she is being rescued and taken to Skodra, the nearest town in Albania. She is sent home at the end of the story.

Lottar is Canadian, so the reader can only assume that she is being sent home to Canada, although it does not reveal that she has left Albania. When the story ends, the priest, who has been there for Lottar during her captivity and her excursion, is standing on the docks as the boat is pulling in.

## Structure

The structure of the story is quite confusing. The story is forty-seven pages long with two different points of view. There are breaks between the points of views, but not during the breaks in time. The story is confusing to read since there are no clues as to what years and times the story is taking place and the reader must constantly check back to ensure that all the facts have been taken into consideration.

Another important fact to point out is that *The Albanian Virgin* is a story within a story, which adds to the confusion of the structure. Not only does the reader have to distinguish between the breaks in the story, but also it is necessary for the reader to keep in mind which story is being read; the story of the narrator or the story of Lottar and her excursion.

## Quotes

"But why rob the guide and not me?"

"Oh, they are not robbers! They are honest men. They shot him because they were in blood with him. With his house. It is their law."

"They are always ready to die for their honor."

"I've been making up a story, for a movie! I have it all in my head and I want you to hear it."

"Is that a man?"

"Oh, Lottar, you are so stupid! Don't you know when you see a Virgin?"

"Shame! Shame! Shame on you all! Shame!"

"You! You sitting there in your paint, don't you know what it is for? Don't you know they have sold you to a Muslim?"

"Take off that gold trash! Take those clothes off her! I am going to make her a Virgin!"

"Tomorrow you would have been a bride, now you will never have a son."

"How can I go back to the *kula*? I am a Virgin, where would I sleep? What kind of work would I do?"

"I am taking you to the Bishop's house, he will know what to do with you."

# Key Questions

Munro has acknowledged that the eight stories collected in *Open Secrets* are "riskier" than much of her earlier fiction. The tight structure of "The Albanian Virgin" produces a richly allusive and multilayered plot which should prove conducive to compulsive rereading and energetic discussion. It is a structure that Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields has described as "two stories caught on a single thread, each touching and turning against the other, each shedding its share of light." An interesting question to pursue is whether readers agree with Munro's assertion of the probability (as opposed to the possibility) of alternate realities existing alongside (not above or below) the reality that each of us lives. Moreover, "The Albanian Virgin" is collected in *Open Secrets*, a book that was recommended as one of the Best Books of 1994 by the editors of *The New York Times Book Review*.

1. One reviewer of *Open Secrets* suggests that "The Albanian Virgin" is one of many stories in the collection that "pivot on reality's slipperiness." Discuss.
2. In "Carried Away," the first story in *Open Secrets*, Munro's protagonist comes to understand her sense of reality as defined in terms of "[s]udden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations." How does this observation apply to "The Albanian Virgin"?
3. Given that Munro's short stories have a breadth of perspective usually considered the purview of longer literary forms, critical and scholarly discussions of her work often approach, with some hesitation, the question of length, that is, the critical definition of a "short" story. Is "The Albanian Virgin" a short story, a long short story, a short novella, or some form altogether new?

Can we compare it to stories of four or five pages?

4. In "The Albanian Virgin," as in much of her fiction, Munro pays special attention to individuals whose lives are connected with books, as readers (a term Munro uses in the broadest sense) or in more formal/ commercial relationships as booksellers or librarians. Indeed, Munro herself has stated that the story was shaped, in part, by her own reading of Mary Edith Durham's Victorian travelogue *High Albania* (1909). What are the roles, symbolic and otherwise, of books in "The Albanian Virgin"?
5. What are the parallels between the life Lottar "chooses" to lead as a Virgin and the life Claire "chooses" to lead as a bookseller?
6. Is Charlotte's story of Lottar autobiographical?

## Topics for Discussion

Do you believe in the way the tribe honors its family? Explain.

Why is it that nobody will call the police or the British Consulate for Lottar?

Why does the priest decide to help Lottar after she is a Virgin and not before?

If taking Lottar prisoner would bring shame on the family, why did the tribe bring her with them instead of leaving her where she was after they killed the guide?

Why do you suppose that Lottar was so eager to leave at first but then decided she didn't want to leave the tribe?

Why do you think the narrator left London, Ontario after her husband left her? Would you do the same in your position?

What do you think the reason for creating the story of Lottar was? Is Charlotte living a fantasy or trying to bring one to life?

Why do you think that Lottar forms such an attachment with the priest despite his unwillingness to help her?

## Literary Precedents

"The Albanian Virgin" shares a sensibility with the works of such short story writers as Elizabeth Bowen (especially her "Mysterious Kor" and "The Happy Autumn Fields") and Flannery O'Connor, writers whose meticulously crafted fiction reveals the presence of the magical amidst female lives defined by layers of conflict (international, civil, domestic, psychological) and shaped to varying degrees by a yearning for an illusive sense of romantic wholeness. Indeed, Eudora Welty's oft-cited description of Bowen's short fiction could apply readily to many of Munro's stories: She has an awareness of the magic of place that seems "to approach the seismic . . . equalled only by her close touch with the passage, the pulse, of time."

With its emphasis on the complex and open-ended interpenetration of the real and the magical, "The Albanian Virgin" may be considered too within the loosely defined tradition of so-called magic realism, or the marvelous real. With its most well-known roots in the works of such Latin American writers as Miguel Angel Asturias, Julio Cortazar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, magic realism is generally constructed upon a firm base of actuality, a representation of the world which avoids the obvious distortion that characterizes fantastical writing or science fiction in favor of a careful and verisimilar delineation of events and things. But whereas writers working within a traditional realism assume that such careful representation underscores the "reality" of a knowable and probable world, magic realists attempt to capture the fantastic and mysterious that lies alongside the everyday, what one critic describes as "the conjunction of these two worlds in one place."

## Related Titles

Munro has stated that "The Albanian Virgin" had its genesis, in part, in an unverified story recounted to her by her husband about a small-town librarian who, during a trip to Europe, was captured by bandits in Albania sometime before World War I. In fact, this single anecdote also gave rise to two other stories in *Open Secrets* — "Carried Away" and "A Real Life" — which can be considered related to "The Albanian Virgin" through their explorations of what Munro calls the growing sense of "alternate reality" which comes to define the lives of their female protagonists.

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