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Generational perspectives in Ledia Xhoga's *Misinterpretation*

Abstract: *Through analysis of selected excerpts from Ledia Xhoga's 2025 novel Misinterpretation, this article uses the experiences and observations of the novel's nameless narrator, a thirtysomething community interpreter of Albanian origin now living in New York, to determine how generational perspectives are depicted in the work. The article summarises some definitions and overviews relating to the notion of generations and the often-indeterminate nature of the concept, before linking these to the broader Albanian sociocultural context in which the narrative largely occurs. Through textual analysis, the article then continues by presenting the narrator's relationships with three key characters in the novel: her mother, her cousin, and her husband. In the first case, the narrator's complex relationship with her only surviving parent is symbolised by their opposing worldviews and degrees of receptiveness towards new and different experiences. In the second case, a revealing conversation with a third party serves to contrast the narrator's socioeconomic and personal outlook with that of her more practically-oriented cousin, who is a recent arrival in the United States via the green card lottery. The final case study demonstrates some of the pervasive challenges between the narrator and her wealthy American husband, showing how the application of a generational perspective can also accentuate latent intercultural and economic differences.*

Keywords: *Albania; community interpreter; International Booker Prize; New York; transfiction; 21st century literature.*

Introduction

Longlisted for the prestigious 2025 International Booker Prize, Ledia Xhoga's acclaimed novel *Misinterpretation* follows the travails of an unnamed community interpreter in her thirties. Originally from Albania, but now residing in New York with her wealthy American film professor husband Billy, the narrator was formerly a linguist at the United Nations headquarters. Fluent in Spanish, Italian, and Russian in addition to English and Albanian, she primarily works with the latter two languages, and is sent by an agency to interpret in various contexts. Yet one day, after interpreting a dental appointment for Alfred, a torture

survivor from Kosovo, her general sense of ennui causes her to overstep ethical boundaries, a course of action which thereby leads to her becoming embroiled in a world of very different characters to her own carefully curated American existence.

With the narrator an immigrant to the United States from a country still marked by the legacy of communism, this article discusses how generational perspectives are displayed in Xhoga's novel via presentation of three main case studies, paying particular attention to cultural and other contrasts. The first includes the narrator's complex relationship with her elderly widowed mother, whom she visits during a trip back to Albania. The second concerns how the narrator interacts with another family member, notably Lina, her younger female cousin who has also immigrated to the United States from Albania but from whom the narrator differs strongly in personality and outlook. Finally, even though the couple may be similar in age, the study also contrasts the narrator's tense relationship with her American husband Billy, also observing how their clashing perspectives and worldviews can be articulated through a generational lens.

Generations and their perspectives: centring the novel in its geopolitical context

As a concept, 'generations' are often widely discussed by both traditional media as well as social networking sites. Indeed, the ubiquitous presence of designations such as Boomers, Millennials, Gen X, Gen Z, and Generation Alpha across popular discourse often obscures the term's seemingly catch-all scope. In anecdotal terms, generations can be linked or demarcated by factors varying from specific timeframes and periods, the availability and uptake of technology and related advances (such as the spread of the internet), core issues in domestic and international politics (elections, wars, or financial crises), as well as the impact of major global events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall (see Eldridge, 2025). Indeed, the broad range covered by these items linked to the notion of generation additionally underscores the somewhat "fuzzy" conceptualization of the term (see Campbell, Twenge, & Campbell, 2017, p. 130).

In consulting the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary, the lexicographical authority offers three core definitions of the noun 'generation', the first being "all the people of about the same age within a society or within a particular family", followed by "a period of about 25 to 30 years, in which most human babies become adults and have

their own children”, and finally, “all the living things in a group that are born or start to exist at about the same time, and are related to one that existed at an earlier point in time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026). This highlighting of the temporal and societal interlinkage of the term can also be found in the scholarly literature, where generational divisions have incorporated question of “lineages”, “birth cohorts”, and “historical participation” (Alwin & McCammon, 2007, p. 219). Indeed, noting the interdisciplinary scope of the term, there is a large literature on generational differences in the social sciences, primarily from management & organization studies as well as from education studies. These publications have predominately centred on discussing these generational differences within the institutional context – for example, within schools, universities, and the workplace (e.g., see Reeves & Oh, 2008; Twenge, 2010; Stewart et al., 2017, etc.).

Moving to the geopolitical level and the analysis of generational aspects in the specific context of Xhoga’s novel, the narrator’s native Balkans have naturally witnessed significant changes over the last few decades. Though the region is of course highly heterogenous, some of the changes experienced by Balkan nations in recent years have included rapid ideological shifts, socioeconomic developments, ethnic conflicts and the redrawing of national borders, as well as mass migration. In some instances, this has also been accompanied by changing sociopolitical orientations towards the European Union as well as ever-complex interregional relations (see Bakić & Jusufbegović, 2024).

Many of these macro-level changes can be illustrated by the case of Albania, which over the past half-century has transformed from a closed-off and isolated totalitarian state into a candidate country for EU membership (see Panagiotou, 2011). Yet, in going beyond the impact of these important political and societal changes for the country, recent non-fiction literary works have also sought to examine how the changing ideological and sociopolitical topography also impacted on individuals and their interpersonal relationship. Via Lea Ypi’s bestselling memoir *Free* (Ypi, 2021) and Margo Rejmer’s interview-based reportage *Mud Sweeter Than Honey* (Rejmer, 2021), both works explore the often-dark legacy of Albania’s recent past (see Voß, 2023), yet also look to the country’s future. As with elsewhere, different generations naturally differ in their views on many key factors, ranging from lifestyles and core values to mindsets and expectations (Çeçi & Çeçi, 2021, pp. 39-40). In addition, as observed in the broader Balkan context, it is

often challenging for these generational differences to be discussed (Kacarska et al., 2012, p. 2).

Through using the lens of literary fiction to examine these issues, *Misinterpretation* explores these aspects through its depiction of the narrator's rich – and often complex – interpersonal and intergenerational relationships. The book's author, Ledia Xhoga, is a writer and playwright born in Tirana, and is a graduate of the MFA programme at Texas State University who now lives in New York (The Booker Prizes, 2025a; 2025b). *Misinterpretation* is her debut novel, first published in 2025 to great critical acclaim, as demonstrated by its longlisting for the International Booker Prize. Indeed, following Ismail Kadare in 2005, Xhoga is the second Albanian to have been nominated for that literary award (Davies, 2025).

As its title, main character, and subject matter suggest, *Misinterpretation* can clearly be considered as an item of transfiction – i.e., a work of fiction involving a protagonist who is an interpreter or translator (see Kaindl & Spitzl, 2014). Interestingly, Xhoga is not a professional interpreter herself. As she mentions elsewhere (The Booker Prizes, 2025a), the creative inspiration for the novel came from her voluntary work via a specific request – which never actually came to pass – to act as an interpreter for an Albanian speaker from Kosovo. Though issues involving interpreting practices naturally play an important role in the narrative, the focus of this study is to examine generational aspects in the novel. Although the work has been briefly mentioned in a recent analytical classification and taxonomy of transfiction novels (Bergantino, 2026, p. 3), scant research has been conducted on *Misinterpretation* to date. Therefore, via textual analysis of three case studies drawn from selected excerpts, this article uncovers how the work's depiction of generational perspectives and differences influence and impact the narrator's interpersonal relationships in the novel.

Generational perspectives: the narrator's mother

The first case study involves the narrator's relationship with her widowed elderly mother. Although the reader learns the mother had, in her younger days, “travelled through the Balkans as a gymnast” and also “tightrope walked in Sofia” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 39), the old woman is now quasi-housebound in Tirana, preoccupied with her hypertension and the limited social world she inhabits. Indeed, the challenges inherent in the mother-daughter relationship are hinted at when, after a pe-

riod of marital difficulties when Billy decides to leave and head to Europe on a fellowship, the narrator telephones her mother to inform her that she too will be going back to Albania for a period of time: “The moment I heard her voice, I knew I had made a mistake. And yet the instinct to seek comfort was there, as undaunted as when I was a child” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 67). Therefore, in seeking to return to her homeland during a taxing personal time, the narrator recognises the need for maternal solace, even though she is aware that it may not be forthcoming.

On arriving at Tirana airport, the reader learns that the narrator’s family is of some prominence: she is met by an elderly paternal uncle who is “obsessed” with “the family’s role and position in Albanian history” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 160); however, in contrast to other family members of the same generation, it transpires that he is “nostalgic for the old regime” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 168), thereby illustrating the lingering socio-political and ideological tensions that still persist in parts of Albanian society. This sense of lineage is also echoed by the description of the dwelling where the mother lives. Although it is described as “a small traditional house”, nonetheless it has “belonged to her side of the family for two hundred years” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 164), thereby also illustrating the pervasiveness of tangible inheritance, especially in light of the enforced changes to property and society under the harsh communist regime. Indeed, similarly to the tales presented in the aforementioned works by Rejmer (2021) and Ypi (2021), there are suggestions of long-buried trauma and other challenges that the wider family faced during that repressive era.

The narrator’s mother welcomes her returning daughter, preparing traditional Albanian cuisine. Yet, after a few days, the narrator tires of her mother’s homecooked dishes and instead craves “something new” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 171). She decides that she will take her mother out for a meal, and although the elderly woman “would have preferred a family-style eatery that served the same dishes she cooked at home” the narrator opts for international cuisine, taking her to a trendy tapas restaurant in a nearby neighbourhood. In these surroundings, the mother becomes uncomfortable, with the strange and unfamiliar environment and food making her feel ill at ease. To soothe her discomfort, as well as to avoid missing an episode, she watches her daily Turkish soap opera on her mobile phone.

A humorous but revealing incident occurs when the waiter brings a plate of salad and other tapas dishes over to the table. The narrator states that

"I tried one of the anchovies, soft, moist, lemony. To my surprise, a cooked white breast of chicken appeared on the plate next to the crackers. Where had it come from?" 'I brought it with me', my mother said, her eyes glinting. "I had an idea of what kind of place this might be. Have some. It goes well with the white sauce". She seemed proud of herself. (Xhoga, 2025, p. 176)

In a nutshell, this interaction demonstrates the yawning chasm which has opened up between the mother and her daughter. For the narrator, presumably accustomed to the international dynamic from New York and her time at the United Nations, it is seemingly ordinary to eat cuisine from different countries, and to frequent restaurants serving international menus, thereby demonstrating openness towards new and different experiences. For the narrator's mother, however, her youthful openness has now been superseded by a desire for the predictable and the familiar, as demonstrated by her need to watch her regular television programme. This sensation is heightened by the fact that she even goes to the extreme of bringing food from home to a restaurant, thereby gaining a modicum of control over an unfamiliar situation and context. Indeed, after visiting the tapas restaurant, the narrator wants to take her mother out again, but the elderly woman evades her daughter's invitations, blaming her blood pressure issues for her inability to leave the house. As such, in highlighting her mother's behaviour, the narrator opines that "there was comfort in repetitiveness, in shunning all adversities, in letting life drift by, as if it wasn't even yours" (Xhoga, 2025, p. 191), thereby juxtaposing the old woman's approach to life with the narrator's own curiosity and eagerness to go beyond the humdrum regularity of everyday life.

Generational perspectives: the narrator's cousin

Turning to the second case study, Lina, the narrator's slightly younger cousin, is aged twenty-nine and also lives in New York. However, unlike the narrator, she is a recent arrival to the United States, having only just acquired a green card after a decade of unsuccessful attempts. Lina comes from the less well-off side of the family; her sister – the narrator's other cousin – works as a cleaner in Greece. Both are the daughters of the eccentric history-obsessed uncle who collects the narrator from the airport in Tirana.

Thirty minutes earlier than scheduled, Lina is introduced when she appears at a self-service Italian restaurant where the narrator is fin-

ishing lunch with Anna, a glamorous violinist from a privileged background who is a longtime friend of Billy, the narrator's slightly older husband. As Lina joins them at their table, the narrator observes that her cousin "placed a gaudy handbag embellished with crystals next to me. It was the kind of purse those Russian ladies who lived in Brighton Beach might prefer" (Xhoga, 2025, p. 86). From the outset, therefore, though the two enjoy a good relationship, it is clear that Lina is more materialistic and showy than the narrator, with a different sense of style.

Curious about the narrator's relative and, on learning that Lina has recently arrived in the country, Anna remarks that she had just learnt about the existence of the green card lottery, a scheme which allows foreigners from all over the world a chance to immigrate to the United States. The violinist asks Lina as to why she chose America instead of somewhere beautiful and picturesque like Prague, a city which Anna loves and knows from her work as a musician. In response, the narrator observes Lina's aghast expression:

My cousin had considered it common knowledge that one didn't immigrate to a country for its natural or architectural beauty, but for its economic opportunities [...]. Nobody moved to the Czech Republic, not unless you were a well-to-do American in search of adventure. (Xhoga, 2025, p. 87)

The stark differences between the two perspectives are strongly articulated. On the one hand, there is the angle of a recent immigrant from the Balkans who has lived a hardscrabble life, and whose arrival in the United States offers an unique opportunity to start anew and to better herself in economic terms. This can be contrasted with the perspective of the slightly-older American, born into a wealthy background which has largely cushioned her through life, and who is a highly-trained professional in the creative and cultural industries. Indeed, the narrator muses on the palpable contrasts between Lina and Anna and their clashing worldviews. Noting those Americans who hail from prosperous backgrounds (like Anna), the narrator differentiates their life experiences from the different lived reality of the Balkans, pondering as to how they could "understand water or electricity shortages, or helping out aged parents and relatives who had worked all their lives only to end up with a retirement that didn't even cover their basic necessities" (Xhoga, 2025, p. 87). As such, reading these divergent perspectives through a generational lens, Lina's experience of uncertainty and precarity in post-communist Albania is therefore neatly contrasted with

Anna's seemingly comfortable and curated life in prosperous New York.

As an observer in this telling interaction, the narrator acts as a pivot, occupying an liminal space between the two perspectives. In also originating from Albania and doubtlessly also having experienced the economic and social challenges that the country endured during its transition and beyond, the narrator is thus keenly aware of the situation faced by many in her native country. Furthermore, her work as a community interpreter also means that she is familiar with the experiences of recent immigrants to the United States, and able to comprehend Lina's focus on economic betterment. Yet, in addition to having been resident in the United States for many years, she is a highly-educated former employee of the world's major international organisation who is also married to a wealthy American. In this regard, the narrator is able to synthesise both perspectives, and is therefore able to understand and explain the vastly opposing worldviews held by her husband's friend and her cousin.

Generational perspectives: the narrator's husband

The final case study profiles the narrator's relationship with her American husband, Billy. In his mid-40s, he – like his violinist friend Anna – comes from a wealthy and privileged background and is a university professor of film studies. He does not eat meat, and comes across as sensitive and urbane, representing a somewhat different model of masculinity to that embodied by the Albanian and Kosovar men whom the narrator encounters through her interpreting assignments. Yet the narrator and her husband have been having marital difficulties, in part due to their disparate backgrounds and worldviews, in part informed by their radically different upbringings. An example of the challenges to come is foreshadowed in a ill-fated Valentine's Day meal at a upmarket restaurant. As the narrator contrasts herself with her husband, she outlines that Billy "purported to be a connoisseur of fine dining" but to the narrator "fine dining was a baffling diversion that hardly satisfied me. It seemed like the best kind of scam, for calling it that would be inappropriate" (Xhoga, 2025, p. 45). Thus, the experience draws the differences between the couple in sharp focus.

In the course of the meal, the narrator declines Billy's Valentine's gift of a short trip to Dominica, eschewing the chance of a luxury break in the Caribbean in order to spend more time interpreting for her male Kosovar client. The snub leads to the couple having an argument in the

taxi home, where the narrator brings up an incident from the recent past, asking her husband if he recalled: “when we were last in Albania you said that everyone there was a good-hearted ignorant?” (Xhoga, 2025, pp. 50-51).

The context for the unusual insult is provided: during the couple’s meal with the narrator’s relatives in the south of Albania, her family members were preoccupied about Billy, telling her that her non-meat-eating husband’s “face looked sickly. He doesn’t look well, they kept saying. He has no colour in his face. What did you marry a vegetarian for? What if he dies young? You’ll be a widow. You don’t even have any children; you’ll be sorrowful and alone in old age” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 51). Though their blunt comments are ostensibly marked as well-founded concerns, nonetheless it could be advanced that these pronouncements perpetuate several generational stereotypes. In addition, they highlight the way in which the couple have not conformed with what might customarily have been expected in a traditional Balkan context. For example, this includes the narrator’s childless status, as well as fears about her husband’s health owing to his dietary choices. Presumably aware of the possibility of causing offence, the narrator initially demurs from telling her husband:

I didn’t want to translate their prediction about my doomed future, but he insisted I should, then he got upset when I did, calling everyone there a good-hearted ignorant. Fortunately, nobody understood what he was saying. (Xhoga, 2025, p. 51)

In bringing up Billy’s reaction to the seemingly-insulting concerns of her relatives, the narrator brings the contrasts between the couple into sharp focus. By noting that the narrator’s family members don’t speak English, it also draws attention not solely to social and economic differences, but also to generational discrepancies in life opportunities. This is highlighted when the narrator angrily continues the argument, saying to her husband that “I think of all the opportunities you had growing up [...]. Your parents paid thousands of dollars for your schooling since you were three. And that’s the only reason why you’re not a good-hearted ignorant” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 51).

These frank words impact Billy and, once back in their apartment building, the narrator is “startled” to observe that her husband has been crying, a fact that leaves her hands “shaking” (Xhoga, 2025, p. 51). This demonstrates the surprise she registers at her husband’s reaction to something she believes to be a concrete fact. Therefore, borne from her bluntness in defining the very different circumstances and opportunities

that Billy has had compared to her relatives back in Albania, the narrator also underscores the latent intergenerational differences between the couple, magnified by cultural and socioeconomic factors.

Concluding remarks

In its examination of Xhoga's debut novel, the present study aimed to examine the relationships between *Misinterpretation's* narrator and three of its main characters through a generational lens, noting the imprecise nature of the term 'generation'. In the case of the narrator and her mother, the reader learns that the elderly widow is both physically and mentally trapped in Albania, reluctant to move beyond the confines of her home and thus limited by her own inaction and hypochondria. This can be contrasted with the narrator's international outlook and the vivacious nature of the life she has created for herself abroad, in the far-off United States.

Turning to the narrator and her slightly-younger cousin Lina, the excerpt reveals that, although both from the same family and country of origin, the two differ in terms of their goals, approaches to life, as well as socioeconomic concerns. As is demonstrated later in the novel, Lina and the narrator live in very different versions of New York and occupy different social circles. For the narrator and her slightly-older husband Billy, the generational contrasts between them are accentuated by his background of wealth and privilege, as well as the vastly different life opportunities that he and his friend group have had access to. Though Billy uses the term 'good-hearted ignorant' as a demeaning epithet for the narrator's relatives in southern Albania, it could be advanced that he and his friends also fit this designation, as Anna's strikingly unaware conversation with Lina demonstrates.

In sum, the narrator's keen awareness of these generational perspectives highlights her talent in moving fluidly between different social settings. This adaptability is also demonstrated by her profession as an interpreter, where transmitting another person's words allows her a window into their world, as well as to transgress certain social norms and perspectives in a given milieu. The analysis of the above excerpts has highlighted that there are fundamental differences between each of these various characters and how the narrator interacts with them, with generational aspects used as a prism to underline their perspectives and approaches. As further research on this novel will demonstrate, the evaluation of these case studies serves to enrich and drive forward the

work's compelling narrative, especially as the narrator comes into contact with people from social and ethical backgrounds quite different to her own.

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