

Pânză în două aghi

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IV. Book Reviews

Ana Pascu, and Valeria Olenici. 2021. *Povești în șezătoare*. Illustrated by Beatrice Iordan. Bucharest: Martor, 160 p.

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Modern society, and even more so today's hyper-technological society, as Michel de Certeau remarked as early as the 1980s, shows an unfortunate strong tendency to replace stories and storytellers with "citation" and "recitation" of stories, in the simulacrum performance produced by a power, pretending to offer the truth (1984: 189). The danger here is that the everyday as human invention and creation is evicted, and memory and stories are replaced with ideology and Manichean totalitarian thinking.

Ana Pascu and Valeria Olenici's book *Povești în șezătoare* [Storytelling bee], illustrated by Beatrice Iordan, works as a counterweight for this harmful tendency, an antidote against oblivion, a plea for coming together around perennial values. It is the result of the serendipitous encounter between an ethnologist passionate about fieldwork, Ana Pascu, and a gifted storyteller belonging to the old village world, Valeria Olenici, a simple peasant woman from Horodnicul de Jos, Suceava County. The warm, friendly dialogue between Ana and granny Valeria, as she is lovingly nicknamed in the book, is reminiscent of Maurizio Catani and Suzanne Mazé's seminal oral history study *Tante Suzanne, une histoire de vie sociale* (1982). Storyteller Suzanne Mazé takes on the challenge of answering histo-

rian Maurizio Catani's questioning about her personal life at various points in time and in various contexts. Instead of the objectivity so much touted by the social sciences and humanities, we are offered the truth that springs from the weave of recounted history, from the confrontation with one's personal history. Moreover, we witness the friendship born out of the many meetings between the historian and the storyteller. Instead of cold, dry science—in Certeau's terminology, "citation"—we get to participate in a living reenactment summoned up by the memories skillfully brought forth by the specialist who, in his turn, swears off distance in favor of subjectivity and lived truth. This is also the case for Ana Pascu and Valeria Olenici, as they successfully make the collective imaginary and the living memory of the traditional village relevant today.

Ana Pascu is an ethnologist at the Romanian Peasant Museum, deeply dedicated to her profession. Interested in the study of folklore, villages and children, as well as of current transformations of memory and heritage, Ana Pascu is the initiator of several cultural projects. In 2009 she obtained her PhD in Philology with the thesis *Texte și contexte ale jocurilor cu reguli în mediul urban* (Texts and contexts of games with rules in the city), and she is the author

of several research papers (Pascu 2019; 2020; 2022, among others).

As we learn from the biography with which the book opens, Valeria Olenici was born to peasant parents in Horodnicul de Jos. She grew up with five siblings, Calistrat, Anița, Ileana, Ion, and Raveca. “Despite having only attended primary school for four years, she was endowed with an exceptional memory, she knew dozens of poems and songs by heart ...” (p. 7). She married Ilarion, a boy from her village, and they had five children together, Dimitrie, Ileana, Marioara, Dionisie, and Constantin “whom they raised to be hard-working sensible people” (p. 11).

Valeria’s stories are admirably enhanced by Beatrice Iordan’s illustrations, who is both a consummate artist and a specialist in peasant culture, working as illustrator, musician passionate about peasant-inspired music, and actor in theater plays for children. For several years now, she has also worked as a museum educator with the Romanian Peasant Museum, organizing several interactive workshops for children.

As its contents page reveals, Pascu and Olenici’s book includes fantastic tales, animal stories, riddles, legends, shouted verses that accompany dancing, true stories, satirical songs, and children’s songs. However, it is more than a folklore compendium, standing out as a comprehensive cultural product, a remarkable combination of folklore passed along generations and memory of everyday family and community life. Beyond the plot of the story, an entire background of the peasant world is reenacted, most prominently the regular bees at which the villagers would gather, from November to March, to work together but also tell made-up or real stories, sing, and dance. At the bees the girls would sow, spin, knit sweaters and socks, crochet lace, and the boys would keep them company, with friendship or marriage on their minds. The adults and older villagers would also take part in the bees, headed by the hosts who would serve snacks and entertain their guests.

Beyond the bees, however, as the book suggests, there unfolded family life, with its set roles, with the grandparents acting as mediators between generations. Here and there, excerpts of conversations about life in the traditional village, kin and neighbor relations, household work or reciprocal exchange of labor, punctuate the stories. These “bites” of living memory are there to create the background for the fantastic tales, bringing folklore closer to modernity. The book also stands out as an inspired exercise in “translating” the remnants of popular culture, told in local speak, for today’s urban fluid yet multipolar world.



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