

**Annabelle Townson, *We Wait For You: Unheard Voices from Post-Communist Romania*. Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2005. 164 pages.**

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Perhaps the worst book reviews are those in which the reviewers imply or openly admit that they want the author to write a book other than the one that is already published. When I first received my copy of Annabelle Townson's *We Wait for You: Unheard Voices from Post-Communist Romania*, I thought it puzzling that the publisher would send this book for review in a journal that is entirely devoted to the study of religions in Central and Eastern Europe. Townson is neither a religionist nor a sociologist of religion. As far as I could discern from a cursory on-line background check, she has never demonstrated any scholarly interest in religious issues in any region. From 2001-2003, she was a Peace Corps worker in Romania: a noteworthy accomplishment but seldom the platform for academic research. I set the book aside. Better, I thought, not to say anything than to criticize a book for being out of sync with the mission of *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*.

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A week or so later, it occurred to me that even if the book did not merit review in this journal I owed it to myself to at least listen to Townson's "unheard" Romanian voices. I unearthed her little volume from beneath a large stack of other books and cracked the front cover. I was not disappointed. As I had originally concluded, this book is not especially valuable to religious scholars seeking to gain a comprehensive grasp of the interplay of religion with culture and politics in the region. Yet it should be received as a valuable contribution among the emergent group of young scholars, especially those in the United States and Western Europe, seeking to gain a richer understanding of the symbols and textures of Romanian culture. Townson writes the memoirs of her years in Romania, not from the perspective of one who studies the people, themes and ideas in Romania, but as one who lived with the subjects of her story and who entered into close-knit relationships with them.

*We Wait for You* does not breathe religion. Living among a people so strongly allied to Orthodoxy and other religious traditions, Townson could—and probably should—have found more voices to inform her readers what it means to be religious in what was, not all that long ago under Nicolae Ceausescu, among the most brutal communistic states. She does not interview religious leaders. Nor apparently does she discuss at any great depth the role of the transcendent in the lives of the common people she befriends. Yet the religion she discovers in Romania, she describes, and she does so from a perspective that, if not objective, is appreciative.

On the second Monday following Orthodox Easter, Townson witnessed the widely-celebrated *Pastele Blanjinelor* ritual: "I encountered wagons of gypsies and walkers of all sorts headed for the cemetery. . . . The priest was working his way to each group to bless the family's deceased souls." While in the

cemetery, Townson was surprised by the jubilant festivities among the families she encountered. “The entire atmosphere was contrary to the subdued demeanor of any religious observance I have ever experienced. This was an honest, real life scenario of people, not groomed in overt pious behavior, gathering in a sincere effort to interact with their beloved deceased.” (97-8)

Townson notes the profound role of religion in Romanian society and remarks on the “increased religious fervor since the 1989 revolution [that] spelled the downfall of Communism throughout Eastern Europe and gave freedom once again to religious observance.” (108) Yet because she relies heavily upon the voices of those she knew while in Romania, Townson's readers soon recognize that even in the darkest hours under communism religion, like poetry and other core cultural expressions, while driven underground could never be exterminated. Townson quotes two close Romanian friends who told her that the communists “could forbid musical performances and religious observance; they simply closed the concert halls and churches. They could prevent publication of the written word, but they could not eradicate the poetry in our hearts and minds.”

If readers determine that this is a bad review, it will not be because its writer suggested that it would have been better if Annabelle Townson had written another book. This is a fine book. It is a worthwhile read because the author demonstrated a willingness fully to immerse herself in the culture in which she lived and worked for two years. Townson seems genuinely inclined to steer away from Western paternalisms. While she observes and explicates the social and political weaknesses she encountered in Romania, she discovers in the hearts and minds of the people she now knows as friends many values, traditions, and intellectual gifts that Americans and others in the West have either misplaced or never knew. Within the scholarly community, *We Wait for You* will not appeal to those seeking a comprehensive examination of the role of religion in Romania. Yet for those scholars who wish to look beyond a bricks and mortar study of Romanian culture, this poignant unleashing of Romanian voices will be a welcomed addition to the field.

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