

Project Seeking Publisher

Amanat: Stories by women writers from Kazakhstan

An anthology of Kazakh women's writing from the last three decades (1991-2018)

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Total estimated words in stories 61,000

The Kazakh word *amanat*, taken from the title of an Oral Arukenova story to be included in this anthology, means "sacred trust". Indeed, the proposed project is meant to be more than a collection of attractive literary gems; because it comes from Kazakhstan, a place where good writing often struggles to be recognized, we feel we have a moral obligation to showcase this work—not as an additional accolade for world-renowned artists, but as an urgent report to the English-speaking world that these authors and their work do, in fact, exist.

Kazakhstan is the largest country by landmass to emerge from the breakup of the Soviet Union aside from Russia itself, but it has had an undersized impact on world literature. Its rich oral storytelling tradition has so far gone largely unrecorded outside the Kazakh and Russian languages. When we take into account that the region has had very little experience as an independent state but a centuries-long history of colonialism—Mongolian, Russian, and most recently Soviet—we start to understand how it is that no specifically, identifiably Kazakh body of literature has yet surfaced separate from those overbearing influences. Most of what we have comes from poets and novelists working within the boundaries of Kazakh socialist realism during the Soviet era, and those works, and indeed, similar work from around Central Asia, have never generated much interest from abroad.

Yet inside Kazakhstan, nearly thirty years after independence, the late Soviet writers, with their sweeping national epics of hard-working, virtuous heroes, still retain their monopoly on public esteem and public resources. Only recently has a greater sense of artistic freedom begun to filter into the writings of Kazakh poets and novelists. This new writing is still difficult to find both inside and outside the country. At home, stories featuring ordinary men and women with flaws, limitations, and weakness are viewed as less than literary by the official establishment. Authors writing in new ways find it difficult to tap into the existing system of grants, awards, and publication that has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times and has remained in the firm grasp of the government. Accessing this system is doubly difficult for women, who remain seriously underrepresented in Kazakhstan's state-sponsored literary elite. That, in turn, affects their access to international publishers and translators who could bring them to the attention of the larger world.

We are attempting to start the work of overcoming those obstacles with a collection of short stories by contemporary Kazakh women writers who persistently transgress the boundaries limiting them. As far as we have been able to determine, *Amanat* will be the first book-length collection of Kazakh women's prose ever to appear in English.

We feel this is a good time to make the effort. Kazakhstan is currently more in the news than usual. Geopolitically, it's a huge resource-rich country caught between the demands of Russia and China and sometimes the United States. Domestically, Kazakhstan may be undergoing political changes, with 2019 bringing its first new president since the end of the Soviet Union, and the world is watching to see what happens next. Street protests during the recent political transition may have piqued the world's curiosity about what the Kazakhstani people, as opposed to the ruling oligarchs, want and

need for their country. Finally, in the English-speaking world, Sarah Cameron's thoroughly researched recent book *The Hungry Steppe* is bringing more attention to the demographic, political, and cultural legacy of Kazakhstan's Soviet history. As things change (or don't change), we want to share how creative work is changing there, too.

For *Amanat*, we have selected stories, both purely imaginary and based on real life, recommended to us by respected independent literary critics. The authors represent several generations, but with the notable exceptions of Nadezhda Chernova and Zhumagul Solty, who started writing and publishing in the 1970s, the other writers in our collection began publishing only in the post-Soviet period. Their stories address various themes and are written in diverse styles, sometimes comic, sometimes ironic, and often extremely touching. What they have in common is, obviously, presenting their stories from female points of view, which has never been a popular trend in Kazakh literature. In doing so, they provide us our first glimpse into the variety of writing that is in fact happening inside Kazakhstan today, difficult as it is to find.