

Project seeking publisher

The Story of a Good, Kind Man

A novel in free verse

By Dastan Kadyrzhanov

Translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega

Description of work

Dastan Kadyrzhanov's История про хорошего и доброго парня ("The Story of a Good, Kind Man") is an epic tale in free verse from one of the leading public intellectuals in Kazakhstan today. It retells an ancient tale, that of Jesus and the twelve Apostles, but reframes the story as a universal human quest for meaning and belief in a world released from the constraints of time, place and religious schisms. It is what the author calls a historical phantasmagoria that draws inspiration from the Gospels, but also the Quran, ancient Turkic legends, the European Renaissance, and current events, and blends them with sly doses of humor and striking turns of poetry into a work altogether unique, both in Central Asia and elsewhere.

Plot and structure of the novel. The poem consists of multiple shorter stories that connect within the framework of the work as a whole. Some chapters are devoted to the life of a single Christian apostle. While the New Testament provides some information about the lives of the apostles after they join Jesus of Nazareth, little is known about their lives prior to meeting the Good, Kind Man who gives Kadyrzhanov's work its title (and who gave Western civilization its greatest icon). Kadyrzhanov uses that lack of information as an invitation to invent for each apostle a family history, career trajectory, and personal story that sheds light on each man's decision to devote his life to a new spiritual project. The Apostle Peter, for instance, is introduced as a talented entrepreneur who once thought that money was the solution to everything (he changes his mind). Mathew Levi was a financier, desperately in debt, who suffered a tragic love affair and became a tax inspector who fervently believed in the justice of the state's interests; later he comes to realize that the state can be extremely cruel to its subjects. Simon the Zealot was a soldier; his verse, called "The Warrior," contains references to mental-health syndromes afflicting veterans. Judas worked in advertising and politics; James organized dock workers; Thomas was an architect who traveled the world; and James, son of Alphaeus, came from a family cursed to experience the most devastating upheavals in human history.

The apostles' stories are unbound in time. Thomas debates philosophy and art with Leonardo da Vinci, for example, and James tells of his family's involvement in everything from the Russian Civil War to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the Hitler Youth. All the stories also contain commentary on current events relevant to Kazakhstan today. For example, Philip's story is the history of the city of Chorazin, which, legend has it, was destroyed by Jesus Christ. In this book, it becomes the story of a city whose quiet, traditional mores are upended by cultural change and new social trends. The chapter relates the conflict between three sects of Judaism (the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes), in which readers will recognize the clash between modern-day

ideologies. In Bartholomew's chapter, entitled "The Czar," the future apostle travels a long path of gain insight, leading from the last Egyptian pharaoh up to Earth's envoy to the planet Nibiru. The chapter touches on themes of self-sacrifice and a monarch's responsibility to the people. It also explores how fanaticism and bigotry can destroy even the most progressive civilization. In yet other chapters, computer hackers, Mahatma Gandhi, and Central Asian rebels against Russian colonial power make appearances.

The stories of the apostles conclude with the verse "The Poet," about John the Apostle, who writes a new Book of Revelation on the orders of the archangel Gabriel who appears to him one more time. This new Revelation contains stories from multiple sacred books, and indeed, it is written in a way to obscure the differences between Christian and Muslim visions of the Day of Judgment, between Gabriel and Jabrail, and to construct a new vision of a way to bring humankind together, finally, to work together for good.

Strewn between the tales of the apostles, the novel also contains individual, lyrical verses which record imagined conversations between the apostles or monologues by the Good, Kind Man. These include verses such as "Grief" and "A Conversation on Science and Evolution with Thomas and the Pupils." In an exceptional chapter called "Proverbs," the characters reconceptualize classical proverbs and folk stories which Kadyrzhanov draws together from a diverse collection of peoples and teachings. All told, the stories and poetry within this novel offer a meditation on the nature of faith, the brotherhood of man, and vital questions of war and peace that are intended to reach far beyond national, linguistic, or religious boundaries, emphasizing what those traditions have in common.

Motivating influences. Kadyrzhanov calls *The Story of a Good, Kind Man* his magnum opus. Its writing coincided with the end of his political career in Kazakhstan, a time when he was becoming disillusioned with many of the driving influences of his old life and forging a new start. As he wrote this novel, Kadyrzhanov was also transitioning from working within Kazakh politics to working outside of it, as a critic and thoughtful analyst.

In the novel's foreword, the author dedicates the work to the members of his generation, who began their adult lives just as the Soviet Union crumbled around them—bringing down not just a formidable political, economic and military system, but also the spiritual certainty that had been provided by the official ideology of atheistic Communism. When religious belief in general suddenly became available to a young Kadyrzhanov and his contemporaries, they faced the awkward question of what, exactly, to believe. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Kadyrzhanov asks, must ethnic Russians be Christian and ethnic Kazakhs be Muslim, for example? Were there other options? How does one choose? In a sense, Kadyrzhanov argues, his generation embarked on a spiritual quest similar to those undertaken by other waves of First Believers, including the Muhajirun who first followed Mohammed and the Apostles who followed Jesus. The difference, he acknowledges, is that his generation has no prophet to lead them, and they have had to forge their own way.

This book is also a challenge from Kadyrzhanov to the world's expectations of what a Kazakhstani author can do. He argues that Central Asian authors have been relegated to a "reservation" by the rest of the Russophone literary community and by the world at large, where they are expected to write about "horses, sheep, and nomads in funny hats" and other subjects of strictly local interest.

Kazakhstani writers are implicitly expected to stay away from loftier philosophical musings, and those who dare to write about the greater human experience risk being dismissed as outside their league. Kadyrzhanov very ably challenges those assumptions and stereotypes with this novel, and as his translator, I would be honored to work with him to further that goal.

Importance and critical response. *The Story of a Good, Kind Man* also breaks other unwritten rules of Central Asian writing. Critic Gulmira Musina points out that there is no tradition of reading or writing free verse in Kazakh literary culture. She calls the book “unique, encyclopedic, undistilled, with its own vocabulary” and says it is “a revolution of form, a linguistic turn in texts by Kazakhstani authors.” It is also groundbreaking in its treatment of the subject matter. Independent Kazakhstan has not been fertile ground for a diversity of opinions, beliefs and worldviews. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Soviet functionary who happened to be in charge when the Soviet Union disappeared, has maintained his hold on political power for over thirty years, even since his recent retirement. Change, reform, and uncertainty are anathema in a system like the one Nazarbayev built, and questions are seen as serious trouble. In such an environment, publishing a book about a spiritual quest and spiritual doubt might seem a risky endeavor. But doubt as the beginning of faith is a theme that threads through the entire novel, along with an emphasis on the importance of the choices that human beings make. This situates Kadyrzhanov as a rare voice outside the mainstream of current Kazakhstani art, society and culture.

Central Asian writing, even in Russian, rarely attracts much critical attention (good or bad) in Russian literary or academic circles. This book, however, was published in Russia and later excerpted in the respectable *Literaturnaya gazeta* in 2015. It has been praised by Musina and also by noted Kazakh cultural figure Murat Auezov. It has not been translated previously.

Beyond breaking new ground in Central Asian and Kazakh literature, the book offers real value to thinking readers around the world, as it addresses vital themes of the unity and disunity of humankind.

Style, approach to translation. Free verse offers both poetic challenges and poetic freedom to the translator. In the samples prepared so far, my approach has been to match the original beats and line lengths of the verses as much as possible, while striving to create poetry that “sings” in English. The original style owes much to the singing, chanting style of Persian oral storytelling and has what Kadyrzhanov calls a distinctly Eastern feel. It also harkens back, naturally, to the Christian Gospels, which some call the first free verse composition.

Despite the gravity of the subject matter, Kadyrzhanov’s style is not always serious. The anachronistic references frequently add humor, and many of the stories are told in a conversational tone. There are lines that could appear in the King James Bible interspersed with offhand comments that any twenty-first-century man on the street might use with his friends. The translation strives to capture all that variety of tone and style. So far, at least, my efforts have been successful; Kadyrzhanov has reported to his social media followers that my translation of the verse “Poet,” which he had considered almost untranslatable, does a brilliant job reproducing the meaning and the sound of his work. He and I would both very much like to continue what we have begun.

The diversity of Kadyrzhanov’s influences requires extra work for the translator as well as the

eventual readers of the English version. Some more obscure references will require footnotes, and each allusion to a different holy book or ancient myth will require research. The demands of the style and subject matter mean that translating this book will require my full dedication. A grant will make it possible for me to set aside other projects and give this work the concentrated attention it deserves.

About the Author

Dastan Kadyrzhanov is a historian of the Eastern world, political commentator, filmmaker and writer. He was born October 2, 1966 in Almaty, capital of the then-Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. He studied at Moscow State University's Institute of Asian and African Countries and wrote a doctoral dissertation about managing the Republic of Kazakhstan's national brand and international image.

After his Soviet military service and the collapse of the Soviet Union, he worked in the television and news industry in the newly independent Kazakhstan. From 2004-2009, Kadyrzhanov served as advisor to political leaders in the Senate, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Security Council, but he no longer has a government affiliation. Currently his political work focuses on election strategy for opposition forces and writing analysis and commentary of current affairs in Kazakhstan.

Kadyrzhanov has written several books in Russian: *Dialogi v otsutstvii sobesednika* ("Dialogues With Nobody Listening"), a poetry collection, published in 2000; *Istoriia pro khoroshego i dobrogo parnia* ("The Story of a Good, Kind Man"), the long poem that is the subject of this grant application, published in 2013; and *Serditse rodiny* ("Heart of the Motherland"), a political thriller co-authored with Ajjiro Kumano, in 2019. He is a frequent commentator on Kazakh political culture and government policies, and his articles and interviews with him are regularly published on Kazakhstani media websites (especially non-official media) and on Facebook and YouTube.

He is fluent in Kazakh, Russian, English and Persian and speaks some Dari and French.