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Reviews of *The Story of a Good, Kind Man*

A novel in free verse

By Dastan Kadyrzhanov

Translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega

Description of the 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. A long synopsis and discussion of the plot is available for download [here](#).

Praise from critics

Gulmira Musina:

Dastan Kadyrzhanov's novel in free verse is a premium book, one that sets a precedent in modern-day Kazakhstani literature, on the one hand, like a shovel digging deep into the centuries, uncovering the primeval muck of tests of faith and the meaning of meanings, and on the other hand, like a mirror on the events of the Gospels, reflecting the phenomenal runic writing of criss-crossed time, crossed with the blood of the eternal war between brothers... This novel is an act of historical verification, sometimes a checking of accounts... with a high concentration, in quality and quantity, of Faith in the soul of the population.

Kadyrzhanov's narrative is unique, encyclopedic, undistilled, with its own vocabulary. It is a revolution of form, a linguistic turn in texts by Kazakhstani authors.

In the Kazakhstani reading environment, there is no established tradition that accepts free verse as a form of writing, especially linear. ... In that sense, in Kadyrzhanov's free-verse novel, we have a book that pioneers free verse in symmetry with prose and poetry on sacred themes. The Christian gospels are sometimes considered the first free verse. Kadyrzhanov's novel is a remake and reincarnation of the Gospels in an original interpretation from the heights of the 21st century. The author may have taken a risk with form, but the results were successful. The acoustic organization of the free verse allows it to convey the key moments of the book and definitions of abstractions such as doubt (Verse 5), amazing feats (Verse 7), justice, talent (Verse 13), debt (Verse

16), Satan (Verse 22), and more in an exquisite emotional key. For me, though, that exquisiteness was present on every one of the almost 1350 pages.

On post-modernism in the novel: ... [Kadyrzhanov] uses double coding (Bible stories, Turkic legends, and proverbs all inserted into a philosophical novel). He uses responses to the epoch of modernism. Black humor. Irony. Borrowed styles, references to texts (sacred and otherwise).

Catharsis, for me, came in Verse 25, The Architect (with Turkic legends of the battle between Man and Wolf and an interpretation of Oguz khan's dream), Verse 27 (on the curse of the ancestors and descendants of the mail carrier from Zhitomir), and Verse 28, Proverbs.

Of course, the book demands some preparation on the part of the reader, or at least the author's commentary on each Verse, itself worth studying at the university level.

Musina posed a dozen questions to the author about his book, which he answered in batches on Facebook in fall 2019. Those questions and answers are another valuable source of insight into this intriguing work.

Vera Saveleva:

A style in concert with the theme

The volume of the free-verse novel is impressive. The novel consists of two books, each of which is 600 pages long. That is the size of Homer or of "Faust," *War and Peace* or *A Man Without Qualities*. I won't try to guess why the author chose this format for his novel; I'd rather try to understand it. Free verse is unrhymed poetry broken into metrically asymmetrical lines. It's a modern form and easy to read, and the favorite of many poets and rappers today. Here is part of a monologue by the Hungry One (an alias for Satan), addressed to the Good, Kind Man:

*You are incapable
of banishing decent, disciplined demons,
You banish the random idiots who make a show
Out of their presence in a human being
In the form of random asystemic outrage.*

*Go on and try banishing vanity, gluttony,
Greed, misanthropy and general lack of manners.
The hoarding of capital, jesuitism,
Moronicity in Christ's name and fake religiosity,
Tyranny, hypocrisy, even double standards.*

*Go on and banish loutish ill breeding,
Faith-based discrimination, fanaticism, egoism, the devil-may-care
Drug addiction, prostitution — a challenge, am I wrong?
And You're here walking through Galilee and Samara
Letting us think you work miracles.*

The story is told in the first person, but who the storyteller is revealed only at the end of the novel. It begins with a very mundane story: *"This was long ago... A man lived there, who was*

Good, and Kind.” One day he was walking down the street when God walked by and started talking with him. “*And what am I supposed to do with all of this, now? / With what I wrought here in Israel, and the whole world too?*” And the Man answers him: “*Why so dissatisfied, Alahi?*”; “*Surely you’re not the one who invented Justice?*”. And God agrees:

*Yes, that’s true. Justice was never my idea.
Surely some have to be richer and more talented.
Some people have health insurance, and some people don’t.
Doesn’t it all depend on the person
What place he occupies in the world I created?*

And God gives this Man he has met an assignment:

*Ask the people: Maybe I conceived something wrong.
Maybe this kingdom of man is no good?*

This event marks a starting point for a never-ending story:

*That was the moment when the world changed
Forever and ever and ever.
And our Good, Kind Man changed
Forever and ever and ever.*

The narrator is not only a witness to this event; he also knows about the future (like the lyrical hero in Pasternak’s poem “The Christmas Star”):

*Later, and only later, there will be various people,
Emperors, apostles and Martin Luther
Later there will be Muslims and they will beget other Muslims.
Later there will be a whole flock of Paters, though there will only be one Mother.
Later a great many things will occur!*

The lines of free verse are grouped into quintains, and that feature persists throughout the novel. It contains forty long chapters (numbered verses), many of which also have titles. Most of the forty chapters have epigraphs, sometimes two or even three of them, sourced from sacred books, parables, and the works of philosophers, poets, and writers.

The stylistic hybridity of the novel appears at the lexical level, where high style coexists with everyday speech. The novel contains numerous scientific terms and concepts, as well as English-language vocabulary brought into Russian from the era of globalization: *notebook, talk show, trend, fractal, Higgs boson, comics, punk, bifurcation, climate change*, and more. Key phrases and concepts are set off in italics to serve as a guide to the author’s intentions and the most meaningful ideas: Path, Road, Book, Beloved Friend, Soul, Faith, and Fear, to name a few. All these markers are the result of the author’s painstaking work. They should prompt the reader to experience the novel not only as an entertaining story, but as a cipher.

The events take place in a setting that might be considered a mirage: now it expands, now it contracts, and there, both the distant and recent past coexist with the present. The reader has to keep his bearings in this historical mixing bowl, where the Roman Empire exists alongside the United States, where the people “claim” the Romans “as their great-grandfathers.” In this novel, anything is possible. For example, Leonardo can discuss Malevich’s “Black Square.”

*What did Malevich depict in his square?
Maybe it's not a geometric shape at all,
But a reflection of unified field theory?
Or maybe it's just the Kaaba?*

The whole long history of human civilization comes alive here, associatively or directly, in creative reconstructions and the conceptual structure of the work.

The deep religious and mythological ties between Judaism, Christianity and Islam are very important to the concept of the book. This is stressed by the proximity of epigraphs and equal presence of different names for the same people in the book's pages: the archangel Gabriel, aka Jibrail; Jesus and Isa, Iblis and the Devil, as well as equivalent terms for different concepts: paganism and *jahiliyyah*, sin and *shirk*. [...]

One of the long chapters in the first book, Verse 25, is called “The Architect.” Thomas tells the story of his dream: to build a temple unlike any others that exist. But starting in his youth, everyone recognizes his talent and compares what he builds with other buildings, including the great ones. His life lasts for many centuries. In one of his later periods, in despair, Thomas allows his imagination to take flight, and he creates a building that mixes styles from various epochs and peoples. He is surprised to find that only then is he declared the creator of a new style, his own.

It seems to me that this story of the architect is the key to understanding the syncretism and eclecticism of the novel’s style, which is also a mix of genres and plots, pathos and satire, the eternal and the topical, poetry and prose. From the visual imagery, the reader can sense the strong influence of portraiture, architecture and cinematography. [...] The free-verse text includes a diversity of generic forms. Neomythologism and desacralization of the evangelical texts coexist with genres including parable, dialogue, adventure, biography, confession, exhortation and prayer. [...] All the complexity of form does not make the storytelling any less engaging or suspenseful as it describes events that Kadyrzhanov reconstructs and rethinks in his own way.

The twelve companions of the Teacher and Beloved Friend

Readers of the novel will guess immediately that the main subject is the story of the Gospels, about the life on earth of the Son of God, whom the narrator introduces at the start as simply a “Good, Kind Man.” His twelve companions call him the Beloved Friend or Teacher, and he considers them his brothers, friends and, only after that, his pupils. Kadyrzhanov describes in detail the appearance, character, habits, and life story of each of the twelve.

They bear the apostles’ names and trace their genealogy from them, but these are literary, which is to say imagined, characters. The author invents a long biography for each one, in which the character is a witness or participant in many events before joining this circle of the selected and summoned.

In my opinion, these big dramatic, tragic, confessional novellas are the most interesting aspect of the author's creative idea. Each apostle speaks about himself, judges his own acts, rants, repents, regrets his mistakes, mourns the loss and death of loved ones, and then receives words of comfort and valediction from the Teacher and Friend. [...] The first man to tell his story is Peter, called Simon, who goes by the nickname Kefah ("Rock" in old Hebrew). Verse 30 of the novel, "The Rock," begins with this request:

*Tell us, Kefah, about your Path until this day, today.
Quietly the fire crackled in the desert,
Quietly Judah's coins clinked together in Kiriath,
Quietly the stars scorned us for not going to work,
Nor would we go tomorrow, either – that much was decided.*

And Kefah, a "fisherman from a simple family of fishermen," begins to tell his story, starting from his childhood. The story resonates with today's realities, as well. It is the tale of strong, quick-tempered young man who is fed up with being a loser and with seeing his father humiliated. He goes to serve the powerful, organizes his own "business," and consents to the idea that money solves all problems: *"All doors open to gold, even the doors of the temple."* Now Kefah repents many things, and considers his talent his "curse": *"Had I not been such a talented organizer [...] I would not have landed in that circuit of vice."*

Matthew followed a different path. His story is told in Verse 16, entitled "The Resurrected Heart," and his confession begins with the words: *"Kefah, you told us not to play with power, with the strongest of this world / But I was that power you speak of myself."*

Verse 18 is called "The Warrior." In this verse, Simon the Zealot tells how he disobeyed and followed his father's path, becoming a warrior like him. He killed, he became a terrorist, and suffered a contusion. Simon tell us that war attracts the young with its deceptive simplicity: *"There your enemy is seen and known, there he is in front of you. / As simple as assembling and disassembling a Kalashnikov."* Simon admits his guilt, asks for forgiveness, and is grateful to have been admitted to the circle of brothers.

This short tale reveals how Kadyrzhanov constructs his imagery. Not the way Thomas Mann does in *Joseph and His Brothers*; for the Kazakh novelist, it is not just historical veracity and the precision, or psychologism, or dramatism that are important. He strives to aggregate to the greatest extent possible, creating mega-images, each of which builds on the dominant idea.

The Gospels from Dastan in an era of globalization

Kadyrzhanov presents his understanding of the story of the New Testament, seen through the prism of modernity. The novel in free verse contains no historical reconstruction of events. Its characters are eternal types and, simultaneously, people of our time. [...]

Verses 35 and 36 describe the events of the Passion, when the Teacher and Judas make their choices. Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Teacher predicts the future and asks his Father to halt the Circle of Time. He sees new tyrants arising, sees "blindness gathering strength," "the land of Jerusalem divided," and false prophets and new Caesars on the coins.

Father! I see youth of future times, suffering

*Just as I do, is that me?
I see Men who are Good and Kind,
Perishing, not betraying themselves,
Is that You?*

*I see people tormenting them, laughing, rejoicing after their punishment.
Is that Us?
I see a body harrowed by hawks
that were not born of birds.
I see countries bearing up their thrones
And building a new Babylon.*

At the end of the prayer, he asks a favor for his brothers and pupils:

*For my brothers I ask of You
The boys will do it all, they'll find You on the Path.
But still –
Do not forget their names.*

The scenes of the judgment and execution are written as a palimpsest, a modern text on a sacred text: the names and events remain, but all action is given more detail from our own time, in which satire and the grotesque dominate. The yellow press, public relations men, and Dismas and Gestas, now the defense attorneys for the two thieves, all make appearances. The scene comes together as a well-rehearsed, cynical performance, and the crowd is eager for a spectacle.

*Roaring and cheering, they shuffle where they stand,
Awaiting a celebratory show.
Tomorrow would be Pesach, after all,
And what could be nicer for entertainment
Than executing some criminal for Pesach?*

*They who gathered this day in the square,
They who sat glued to the television screens,
Annoyed at all the commercial breaks –
Nobody could wait to see how this story ended.
Producers from Jerusalem were probably behind it.*

The crucifixion scene is cinematographic, blending drama with satire and an evil irony. The author caricatures the behavior of the attorneys directing the scene; Caiaphas, who waves his arms “encouragingly” before a “chorus of the screaming elite”; and the savvy high priest, who tells Pilate: “We need the system that you represent / To hand down an important and necessary verdict.” But later: “You are locking up Heaven above you / And washing your hands.”

Dastan Kadyrzhanov’s intellectual, neomythological novel in free verse was created at the

intersection of many different cultural traditions and is saturated with life-changing issues of the globalization era. In style, this is a new epic poem, incorporating both ancient and modern generic forms. Reading a text like this one enriches the reader, enlightening his thinking and his understanding of the historical past and modern world. Time spent reading this book is time well spent.

Saveleva, a scholar of literature, wrote an extensive review of the novel entitled "Eternal History in an Unusual Novel by Dastan Kadyrzhanov," which appeared in online newspaper Ekspress K on April 15, 2020. Read the full text in Russian [here](#).

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.