

In Place of a Preface

A Poet and Bin-Laden is a novel set in Central Asia at the turn of the 21st century against a swirling backdrop of Islamic fundamentalism in the Ferghana Valley and beyond. It tells the story of the poet Belgi, who may be a grown-up version of “the boy” in Hamid Ismailov’s book *The Railway*. The new novel is equally rich in descriptive passages and teems with vivid personalities but, whereas the mood of *The Railway* was nostalgic and its setting a provincial backwater in Uzbekistan during the Soviet years, *A Poet and Bin-Laden* tackles the most urgent and topical subject of today’s world – the “war on terror” – and the novel’s scope is correspondingly international, with the action straddling the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. However, in *A Poet and Bin-Laden* documentary elements, instead of folklore, are used to propel the narrative. Real events and characters, including Osama bin Laden, who has a walk-on role, bulk large and give the novel its unique quality.

The hero of *A Poet and Bin-Laden* is Belgi, whose presumed death in 2001, while fighting on the side of the Taliban, prompts the narrator to ask, *Citizen Kane*-style: how did a Sufi recluse living in harmony with nature come to die with other Islamic militants on the hilltops of Afghanistan? To answer this question, he retraces the story of Belgi’s life in the setting of some of the key events of Central Asia’s post-Soviet history: the purging of the democratic opposition, the rise of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (“Party of Freedom”) and the emergence of Islamic militancy, the cross-border wars of the 1990s, including the 1999 terror attacks in Tashkent, and the Batken insurgency of the following year. The novel also includes flashforwards to fighting in Vaziristan and the May 2005 massacre of civilians in the Uzbek town of Andijan. But the primary focus of the narrative is the image of this poet who becomes a terrorist in the eyes of the world. This wonderfully original construct allows Ismailov to explore the relationship between the timeless and dreamlike aspects of Uzbek culture – already familiar from *The Railway*, and now personified in Belgi – and the harsh reality of life caught between the dictatorship of President Karimov and jihadism.

The story begins on the eve of 9/11, with the narrator's haunting description of the airplane attack on the Twin Towers as seen on TV while he is on holiday in Central Asia. Subsequent chapters shift backwards and forwards in time, but two main themes emerge: the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan under the charismatic but reclusive leadership of Tahir Yuldash and Juma Namangani; and Belgi's movement from the outer edge of the circle, from the mountains of Osh, into the inner sanctum of al-Qaeda, and ultimately to a meeting with Sheikh bin Laden himself. His journey begins with a search for a Sufi spiritual master and ends in guerrilla warfare, and it is this tension between a transcendental and a violent response to oppression, between the book and the bomb, that gives the novel its specific poignancy. Along the way, Ismailov provides wonderfully vivid accounts of historical events (as witnessed by Belgi) such as the siege of Kunduz, the breakout from Shebergan prison – a kind of Afghan Guantanamo – and the insurgency in the Ferghana Valley.

In the Tajik village of Hoit, an IMU stronghold, he is recruited by the Islamists and subsequently crosses the border with Afghanistan during the US bombings. He is taken prisoner by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, but after escaping from Shebergan is reunited with his defeated comrades – and all this time he is writing poetry!

His poems, along with the stories of eyewitnesses and participants in events leading up to the Andijan massacre, grant the reader insight into the very heart of a secretive world previously concealed from outside view. This, of course, is a very topical book, with reports of the death of the Taliban in 2001 now clearly exaggerated. From a journalistic point of view, it is so rich in first-hand and exclusive material, not least the appearance of bin Laden, that it is certain to attract a great deal of interest. But the real achievement of *A Poet and Bin-Laden* is an imaginative one – this is a very powerful story about the forces of extremism in human nature, good and evil, poetry and terror. It is in every way a grown-up version of *The Railway*.

Hugh Barnes