

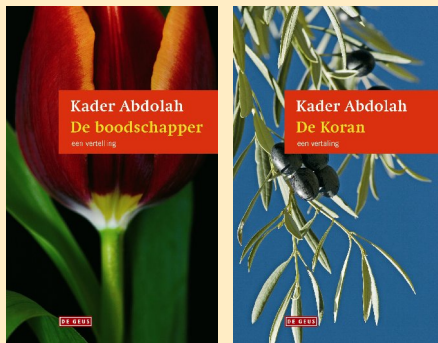


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Kader Abdolah

The Messenger and The Koran

Original title: *De boodschapper en De Koran*



**Two extraordinary books, inextricably
bound together**

***The Messenger*, an account of the life of
the prophet Muhammad**

***The Koran*, a translation of the book of
Allah**

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Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

About the author

Kader Abdolah (Iran, 1954) is the pen name for the Iranian exile Hossein Sadjadi Ghaemmaghami Farahani, who dreamt of becoming a writer like his great-great-grandfather, Qhaem Megham Ferahani.

From the age of twelve, he secretly pored over Western literature, catching a glimpse of the freedoms enjoyed in other countries. He covertly listened to Western broadcasts as well as clandestine resistance radio stations. As a physics student in Tehran, he joined an underground left-wing political party that first rebelled against the Shah and later against the ayatollahs. He wrote for an illegal paper and secretly published two collections of stories under the pseudonym 'Kader Abdolah', the first names of two of his friends from the resistance who had been murdered. After being forced to flee Iran he took up residence in the Netherlands in 1988.

Kader Abdolah grew up in Iran, in a large house annexed to the mosque. His father and uncles read in the Koran several times a day. They knew fragments of it by heart and read it without truly comprehending the meaning of the text. Setting aside the Koran, young Kader Abdolah immersed himself in politics. After his flight to the Netherlands, others once more confronted him with the Koran and gradually he felt the need to set the book as much as possible within the western reader's grasp. In order to understand the Koran texts, some knowledge is required of the times when Mohammad, the Koran's deliverer, lived. Hence Kader Abdolah's invocation of Mohammad's right hand, Sa'eed the chronicler.

Sa'eed visits Mohammad's contemporaries, describing the life of the prophet through the testimonies of his peers.

Bibliography

De adelaars ('The Eagles') (1993, stories)

De meisjes en de partizanen ('The Girls and the Partisans') (1995, stories)

De reis van de lege flessen ('Journey of the Empty Bottles') (1997, novel)

Mirza ('Mirza') (1998, columns)

Spijkerschrift (*Cuneiform*) (2000, novel)

Een tuin in de zee ('A Garden in the Sea') (2001, columns)

Portretten en een oude droom ('Portraits and an Old Dream') (2003, novel)

Karavaan ('Caravan') (2003, columns)

Het huis van de moskee (*The House of the Mosque*) (2005, novel)

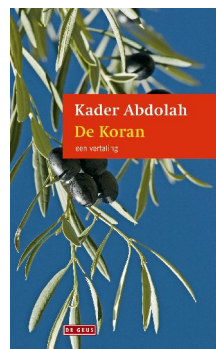
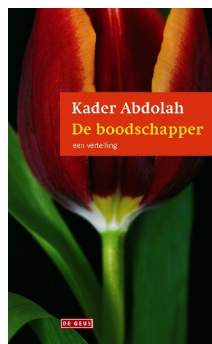
De koe ('The Cow – Kalila and Dimna') (2007, novel)

De boodschapper ('The Messenger') and *De Koran* ('The Koran') (2008, a story and a translation)

Dit mooie land ('This beautiful Country') (2009, columns)

Prizes and awards

- 1993 – Gouden Ezelsoor Award for *De adelaars*
1995 – Charlotte Köhler Stipend for *De meisjes en de partizanen*
1997 – ASN-ADO Media Prize for *Mirza*, his column in *de Volkskrant*, a major Dutch daily newspaper
1998 – Mundial Award for contributions in the field of international cooperation, peace and safety
2000 – Dutch Royal decoration
2001 – E. du Perron Prize for his complete works
2004 – French Cultural Knighthood
2006 – *Het huis van de moskee*, nominated for the NS Publieksprijs 2006 (runner-up)
2007 – *Het huis van de moskee*, nominated for the All-time Favourite Dutch Book of Fiction (runner-up)
2008 – French decoration Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres
2008 – *The Messenger & The Koran*, nominated for the NS Publieksprijs 2008
2009 – Il Premio Grinzane Cavour 2009 for *La casa della moschea*



About the books

A sequel to *The House of the Mosque*, honoured in 2007 as the second best Dutch novel ever

The Koran and the life of Mohammad are intertwined. So that the reader may truly comprehend its essence, Kader Abdolah did not only translate the Koran's 114 suras, but also described the life of Mohammad in his own incomparable way. This resulted in two books that form a unique literary entity.

‘One night, not long after *The House of the Mosque* was completed, I awoke in a state of shock. A voice told me that I should immerse myself in the Koran. I am now rereading the Koran and I keep notes on the effect it has on me. The translation is a description of a journey that I am taking with the reader. I see the Koran as a historic account that, apart from its religious context, imparts a superb illustration of the world Mohammad lived in. He fought against corruption in his time. The existing Koran translations are not suitable for everyone. I want to make the Koran accessible. That book is an olive bough with different fruit-bearing branches. You cannot understand the Koran if you do not understand Mohammad. Mohammad had bound himself to

Allah with a thread. I have cut that little thread and have written an account of Mohammad's life alongside the Koran translation.' - *Kader Abdolah*

Kader Abdolah, *De boodschapper* and *De Koran*

ISBN 978 90 445 0913 7

Hardback, *De boodschapper*, 288 p.

Hardback, *De Koran*, 320 p.

Rights

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Rights for Kader Abdolah's novels have been sold to more than 20 countries.

Radio Book

Listen to the radio book 'Forgotten Songs' written by Kader Abdolah.

This series of short stories by Dutch and Flemish writers in English translation is an initiative of Flemish-Dutch Huis de Buren in Brussels, in association with the Flemish radio broadcaster Klara and Radio Netherlands Worldwide. There are both Dutch and English versions available.

Kader Abdolah's contribution to RNW's Radio Books is extra special. 'Forgotten Songs' is a series of Persian poems and songs which he describes as an integral part of any Iranian's existence. With this radio book Abdolah wanted to show not only the beauty of the Persian language but also to keep alive Iran's rich cultural heritage for the millions of immigrants who've left their homeland.

"In the last 20 years, millions of immigrants have left everything behind and there's no turning back. They've fallen like apples from the boughs of their own culture. The winds of time rage on, making it impossible for them to return to the tree. So what do they do? The first generation clings to its songs, especially its lullabies, and makes an effort to pass them on. They solemnly hum them to their children. They also smuggle the unique poems of the masters, disguised as lullabies, into their children's sleep. It's as if their very lives depended on them, as if these melodies were the bread of life."

<http://www.radionetherlands.nl/radiobooks/080123rb>

Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

Quotes from Dutch VIP's and the press

‘These two books arrive at a time when, in our society, we are aware of both a growing secular awareness and a new spiritual awareness. Kader Abdolah has presented us with a beautiful gift.’ – *Ruud Lubbers*, ex-First Minister

‘Kader Abdolah has come up with important work, valuable for its raising and maintaining of the social dialogue at the necessary level concerning the presence of Islam in the Netherlands.’ – *Dries van Agt*, ex- First Minister

‘With his narration and translation, he has produced a magnum opus. A masterpiece that... is nothing less than an enrichment of Dutch literature.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘The result is surprising. In a time when we are bombarded with a fierce Koran that calls for the murder of believers and the beating of women, Abdolah’s translation shows that you should not read the Koran as a statute book, but as poetry.’ – *Wereldomroep*

‘This is how the Koran should be read. Abdolah’s ambitions are not so much social, political or religious in nature as purely literary. His translation expresses a kind of relationship with Islam that you find with, for example, Jan Wolkers or Maarten ’t Hart towards Protestant Christianity.’ – *NRC Handelsblad*

‘These books show how Abdolah used his earlier works mainly to sharpen his pen and to perfect his style. Everything he did bore the stamp of mastery. A writer with a big plan – wonderful to experience. And you don’t often get the chance to buy a first edition of the Koran.’ – *De Twentsche Courant Tubantia*

‘With *The Messenger*, Kader Abdolah has written a biographical novel about Mohammed, while producing a new translation and thorough edit of the Koran. Top that!’ – *Het Parool*

‘With his new title, *The Messenger and the Koran*, Kader Abdolah, writer of *The House of the Mosque*, has put the Holy Book in a readable, Dutch polder-model, form, with Mohammed as a human being.’ – *De Pers*

‘A fine project.’ – *nrc.next*

The press about *Het huis van de moskee* /The House of the Mosque

‘The expressive power of his lyrical style and the combination of a now idyllic, now fairytale, now horrifying atmosphere, makes *The House of the Mosque* no less than Abdolah’s masterpiece.’ – *Trouw*

‘His new book, written in Abdolah’s familiar, beautifully subtle, almost primitive style, is an ode to the permanence and magic of the written word, with its power to influence fate.’ – *Brabants Dagblad*

‘He manages, with beautiful images, to articulate the incomprehensible.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘Abdolah succeeds in revealing the Iranian tragedy with delicacy, now culminating in the penetrating family epic of *The House of the Mosque*.’ – *NRC Handelsblad*

‘Extreme beauty and harsh inhumanity, freedom and repression, joy and fury, go hand in hand.’ – *Telegraaf*

‘It is a melancholy picture that Abdolah sketches of a loving, sociable existence in the pre-radicalised Iran. He does this in the clear, effervescent language that we expect from him. (...) This gives us, particularly at the start of the novel, a number of beautiful, magical scenes with roots in the culture that produced the Thousand-and-One Nights. Abdolah is at his best when showing people living in harmony, contentment and stolen passion’ – *Leeuwarder Courant*

‘It is a special novel because of its theme and the standpoint that the writer presents to us. *The House of the Mosque* is a perfect Christmas present. It is full of understanding and as conciliatory as the main character, Age Djan, about whom it is said: ‘You’ll stay until they’ve all gone, and until they all come.’ – *Boekblad*

‘Abdolah knows the laws of fiction all too well – both those of Dutch and of Persian literature.’ – *De Standaard*

‘Abdolah’s book, part autobiographical, is an important appeal to a shared humanity.’ – *Zin*

‘*The House of the Mosque* is Kader Abdolah’s magnum opus.’ – *De Tijd*

‘*The House of the Mosque* is Kader Abdolah’s magnum opus (...) in which Abdolah first paints in poetry and poignant images the old Persia, before describing the decline of the culture and the terror of the Iranian revolution.’ – *Artsenkrant*

‘The Netherlands should congratulate itself on having such a talent within its borders.’ – *Metro*

‘*The House of the Mosque* outlines in an equally expressive and penetrating manner the story of his native land from the end of the sixties.’ – *PZC*

‘This is the story of a family in Persia. Veiled women fall in love and seduce imams; sons argue with their fathers, grandmothers depart for eternity to Mecca. Throughout the experiences, global history evolves, including the occupation of the American embassy in Teheran. We are familiar with Western reporting on this, but it is very interesting to hear the other side of the story. A wonderful book. I read it in one sitting.’ – *Catherine*

Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

International Press about *The House of the mosque*

‘Entre reportage journalistique et enquête ethnographique, *La maison de la mosquée* est le réquisitoire le plus implacable qu’on puisse lire sur la descente aux enfers d’un Iran aveuglé par le fanatisme.’ – *Lire*

‘Les différents protagonistes de ce récit captivant sont tous décrits avec une grande finesse. (...) Abdolah réussit là un texte très émouvant, d’abord nostalgique et tendre, plein d’humour, et peu à peu tragique, qui peut être lu autant pour ses qualités littéraires que pour son aspect documentaire, puisqu’il nous permet de vivre, de l’intérieur, la prise de pouvoir par les ayatollahs. (...) Avec cette ambitieuse fresque historique, il confirme son talent. Il montre aussi, de fait, l’importance que prennent ces écrivains venus d’ailleurs dans la littérature européenne, et leur rôle essentiel pour notre ouverture au monde et notre compréhension d’autres cultures.’ – *Hebdo*

‘Abdolah gibt sich indes ganz der Kunst hin, den Leser mitzunehmen in die Fremde, die Seine Heimat ist; er macht uns, wenngleich mit einer angenehmen Prise Humor, auf sanft-poetische Weise vertraut mit Traditionen und Gebräuche, mit gesellschatlichen Regeln und Strukturen und natürlich dem Islam, met der Faszination einer ganzen Kultur.’ – *LiteraturNachrichten*

‘Liest sich wie ein modernes Märchen aus Tausendundeine Nacht.’ – *Berliner Zeitung*

Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

Fragments from *The Messenger*

Chapter 4 – The Life of Mohammad

When I, Sa'eed, was transcribing the suras, I realised, 'You cannot comprehend the Koran if you do not comprehend Mohammad.'

Personally, I discovered a new Mohammad while working on the Book.

At first I saw him as a dreamer, a bon vivant, a ladies' man, and a leader taking unbelievably great risks. Only when I committed his revelations to paper did I see him as a person, an inquisitive person. Before then, I had always considered him as a father, a boss, a warlord, a prophet. Mohammad the person was my discovery and I wanted to show this to everyone.

I realised that as time went by, others would add lots of things to his life, perhaps also discard a lot. Therefore I told myself, 'Sa'eed! Commit Mohammad to paper.'

So once more I packed my bag, mounted my horse and left, this time to collect fragments of Mohammad's life.

For his years as a youth, I had to return to the Mecca of the past, to the place where he was born. I shall depict the traditions and circumstances of the Mecca he was raised in. In particular I shall speak of the Kaaba, where the idols were kept. Mohammad's life was in fact earmarked by a dream – he wanted to destroy the idols and purify the Kaaba, give it to Allah as His house. When speaking about Mohammad, I must therefore begin with the Kaaba and the idols.

Chapter 5 – Mecca

Mecca was a mercantile centre. 365 idols were kept in the Kaaba. The idols were statues made of stone and wood, adorned with cloth, gold, and colours. A few large effigies sat in the Kaaba square.

The Persian Empire was our neighbour to the east. The Persians had already been monotheist for thousands of years – they had one god, called Ahura Mazda.

Zarathushtra was their prophet, and they had a Book named the Avesta.

The Byzantine Empire was our neighbour to the west. The Byzantines were monotheist – they had one god, and a prophet called Isa or Jesus. They also had a Book, the Endjil or Bible.

We did not have one god, we had hundreds of idols. The population of Mecca was comprised of many tribes, and each tribe had an idol. These idols were kept in that cube-shaped structure, the Kaaba.

No one really knows who built the Kaaba, it is an ancient structure and it has always served as a house of prayer. We know that one day the ancient prophet Ibrahim placed a large, black, mystifying stone in one of the Kaaba walls. We believe this stone had fallen from the heavens and that Ishmail, the son of Ibrahim the prophet, had found it. Then Ibrahim used the divine stone as a cornerstone of the Kaaba. We call it al-Hajar-ul-Aswad, 'The black stone'.

About the history of the Kaaba we know little else.

Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

We that live in the desert were lagging behind civilized peoples that had one god and one Book. This is why Mohammad wanted to do away with the idols and give the Kaaba to one god. A god that lived in the seventh level of heaven. Mohammad's god called Allah, meaning, He is One.

Each Friday the Kaaba square was bustling – people came and sacrificed to their idols. Mohammad never showed himself there, but I secretly visited the Kaaba one night and peered inside from behind its thick, black curtain. It was dusky, a warm emanation of scents overwhelmed me. Candles were burning in the candleholders and their lights shimmered in the gold and silver. The idols seemed large and menacing in the light and the shadows. The people stooped and laid their offerings at the feet of the images. This was forbidden territory for a child, but I cautiously made my way past the curtain and into the Kaaba. In the dark I crept along the idols and I felt their silver garments and their golden swords. An old man caught me. He grabbed me by my ear and sent me packing.

Fragment from *The Koran*

The Pen

'Noon waalqalami wama yasturoona.'

The original sura begins with these words.

The text opens with the letter N (nun), and a solemn pledge is made to the pen. It is one of the most beautiful suras in the Koran, because Allah swears by the pen and by the ink. The letter N (nun) does not have any clear meaning, but it makes the vow a mysterious one. Allah swears by the pen and immediately He swears by what is written by the pen.

This is how He heartens Mohammad.

This vow is seen as the crown of the Koran. It demonstrates an open-minded Allah who swears by 'whatever the messenger writes'.

The Koran has 114 narratives also known as suras. 82 of these suras were revealed in Mecca. The other 32 in the city of Medina.

The narratives revealed in Mecca are tender, poetic, lyrical, rhythmic, and inquisitive. These are the suras Mohammad recounted at the onset of his mission, in a time when he was still without power and did not believe in violence.

However, when he flies to Medina, his language changes completely. It is there that he achieves power and picks up the sword, and his words obtain harsh overtones.

In the name of Allah.

He is good
He gives
He forgives

Kader Abdolah
The Messenger and The Koran

1.

Nun (N)

By the pen and what it writes.

And by the grace of your Creator, no Mohammad, you are not mad.

You are showing dignified behaviour.

A great reward awaits you for all eternity.

Soon you shall see and soon they shall see who is mad.

2.

Mohammad! Pay no heed to this liar, this pathetic, despicable invocator of oaths.

He slanders, he is a backbiter.

He keeps people off the right path.

He is a sinner.

He is violent.

He is a bastard.

3.

When Our revelations are delivered, he says, 'Tales from the past!'

He does this only because he is wealthy and has sons.

But soon We shall mark his face with a sword.

4.

Indeed! We shall test the infidels just like We tested the two sons of this fruiterer.

They had decided to pick their garden's fruit early in the morning so that the poor would not witness them. And they did this without reservation. They did not say, '*Insha'Allah*, God willing.'

We therefore allowed their garden to be struck by fate while they were still asleep.

Thus their garden was transformed into a pile of ashes.

They awoke in the morning and said to each other, 'We must go to the garden at once to pick the fruit.' They did not know what had happened.

As they left in secret, they whispered to each other, 'We shall not allow any needy people into our garden.'

5.

Shocked upon seeing the garden, they exclaimed, 'Oh! We are erring spirits!'

And one said to the other, 'We have been robbed. Did I not tell you we should have said, "*Insha'Allah*"?'

They heaped reproaches upon each other and said, 'Alas for us! We have truly transgressed.'

Thereupon they turned to God and said, 'Praise be Allah! We were unjust. Perhaps You shall bequeath us a better garden than this one.'

6.

This is how We punish the infidels in this life. And after death, the punishment will be worse yet. But gardens of delight shall await the pious.

No, We shall not treat believers and infidels alike.

Mohammad said to them, 'What happened to you, why are you doing these things?
Maybe you do not have a book in which you can read it all?'
Leave the infidels to Us.
We shall destroy them without a sound.
For the time being, We shall give them room to do what they want.
For Our plan is firm.

7.

So, Mohammad, be patient. And await the judgement of your Creator and do not be like the man in the belly of the fish who impatiently, angrily, and desperately cried out to his God.
You do realise that if God had not helped him, he would have ended up humiliated in a barren place.
Mohammad! When the infidels behold you delivering Our signs, they want to throw knives with their eyes. They say, 'He is mad!'
But you are not mad, Mohammad. And the Koran is a warning for the people.

Translation June Derlachter
Translation quotes Anne Hoey
Last updated 8-Oct-09