



© Reinout van den Bergh



World Rights
Publishing House De Geus
Contact: Esther Bruls
P.O. Box 1878
4801 BW Breda
The Netherlands
Phone: (31) 76 522 8151
Fax: (31) 76 522 2599
Email: e.bruls@degeus.nl

DE GEUS www.degeus.nl

Kader Abdolah

The Cow

Original title: *De koe / Kélile en Demné*

Some stories are so wonderful that they become embraced by and assimilated into literary traditions of other cultures. It was in ca. 200 BCE that an ancient oral tradition of fables was first transcribed into Sanskrit by an Indian sage. Then, in the 6th century, Emperor Nushirvân's doctor, Borzuy, learned that the magical herb for which he had been searching in Hindustan was actually a metaphor for the 3,000-year-old masterpiece of wisdom literature in verse and prose, entitled the *Panchatantra* or *The Fables of Bidpai*, held in the Rây of India's treasury. In 570 CE these fables, which Borzuy had secretly committed to memory, were translated into Pahlavi and became known as *Kalila wa Dimna*. Over the centuries the stories have been translated into Arabic (750), back into Persian (1121) and into Greek (1080), Hebrew (1250) and Latin (1270). In the 17th century they would provide inspiration for such writers as La Fontaine.

Following the tradition of illustrious predecessors, Kader Abdolah, an Iranian exile living in The Netherlands, has now rewritten the fables for us in *The Cow* – a brilliant modern adaptation of one of the finest classics in world literature.

Kader Abdolah
The Cow

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.



About the book

Kalila and Dimna has been translated into 50 languages, but none has been so beautifully adapted as that by Kader Abdolah.

About 1,500 years ago, a Persian doctor read about an herb growing on a mountain in India that could cure all man's ills. He reported his discovery to the emperor, who dispatched him to acquire the herb. He travelled to India and spent years searching the mountain slopes in vain. After he had given up all hope and decided to return home without accomplishing his mission, a hermit revealed to him that the reference to 'a herb' should not be taken literally. It was not a plant but rather a miraculous book held in the Indian king's treasury. The doctor sought audience with the king, who granted him access to the book. He committed the text to memory before returning to Persia.

This legend relates the origin of *Kalila and Dimna*, the Persian collection of animal fables that ranks as one of the oldest and most important narratives in world literature. It is a book in which an age-old tradition of wisdom stories has been recorded in the form of short parables and anecdotes that have since spread around the world. Aside from the Persian doctor's role, the book probably owes its survival for posterity to Ibn

al-Muqaffa, the man of letters who in the 8th century translated the manuscript into Arabic.

Initially Muslims were sceptical about stories in which the principal roles were played by animals. Speaking animals belonged to the realm of superstition and magic that had been eradicated with the arrival of Islam. However, an exception was made for *Kalila and Dimna*, a book that was neither religiously subversive nor frivolous but rather presented parables in which amusement and admonition went hand in hand. Such tolerance should not be seen as opportunistic casuistry. Besides, *Kalila and Dimna* represents a literary archetype that answers a literary Muslim ethic – wise lessons embedded in enjoyable stories.

Today's reader would find the original text too obscure to appreciate, due to its combination of stylistic phraseology and rather lean narrative content. It was necessary to edit and adapt the text radically. The Persian-Dutch author Kader Abdolah was just the person to undertake such a weighty responsibility. He has created a modern version in Dutch, from a 19th-century Persian rendition, in which he did not hesitate to shorten and shake up the text drastically. The final result is therefore not so much a translation as a re-telling of the stories.

'Our most splendid prose. Only the marvel of the book itself has kept it from falling prey to disaster, war, book-burning and destruction during cultural upheaval.'
– *Kader Abdolah*

Kader Abdolah, *De koe*
ISBN 978 90 445 1062 1
Paperback, 224 pages

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, stories)
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*

1998 – Mundial Award
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*

Rights

Iperborea (Italy), Buybook (Bosnia-Herzegovina)

Rights for Kader Abdolah's novels have been sold to more than 25 countries.

The press about *The Cow*

'With his recognisably clear style, in which sometimes a little gem lies hidden, Abdolah effortlessly carries the reader along the most profound bits of wisdom, without allowing one's attention to slacken. His agility does not detract from the narrative but rather recovers its essence: a collection of tales for education and enjoyment, accessible to everyone.' – *Richard van Leeuwen* in *Trouw*

Kader Abdolah
The Cow

From the book

‘The Lion and the Cow’

One day Rāy Dabshenim, the Shah of India, said to the sage Brahman Bidpa: ‘Tell me a hekayat [story] about those two friends whose relationship turned to hatred because of a snitch and troublemaker.’

‘You mean the one about the lion and the cow,’ Brahman Bidpa replied. And he began to relate the following story.

Hekayat –

Once there was a wealthy merchant whose children were full-grown. However, those children were idle and did not trouble themselves about working. They lived off their father’s riches, squandering it all. The merchant thought to himself: ‘I must reprimand them so that they might become wise.’

He summoned them to his side, saying: ‘Children, there are three important things one should strive for during one’s lifetime. The first is wealth. The second is achieving a higher rank in society. The third is obliging God. However, one cannot succeed without the next four qualities: being honest when acquiring wealth; having enough common sense to retain what you’ve earned; being responsible towards your family and fellow man with an eye to the hereafter; and, finally, taking care of your good health as well as possible. If someone lacks one of these four qualities, then life will turn against him.’

The merchant’s children listen well and accepted his good advice.

The eldest son decided to engage in trade and chose to make a long journey. He took along two cows called Bandaba and Shatrabeh. However, somewhere along the way they landed in quicksand. Shatrabeh got stuck and could not free herself. With great effort people pulled her from the mud, but her energy was spent and she could go no farther. Therefore the merchant paid one of his servants to care for the cow until her strength returned. The servant stayed with the cow for several days but became bored. Leaving her behind, he returned to the merchant saying that the cow had died.

After a few days, Shatrabeh began to feel gradually better. Searching for food she came upon a wild meadow filled with tender grass and fragrant plants – a meadow that would make Paradise jealous and that Heaven would look upon with admiration. Suddenly an adage popped into Shatrabeh’s head: If you reach your final destination healthy and in one piece, then don’t go any farther. And if you come across a tender patch of green, then stay there.

Thus Shatrabeh remained in that delicious peaceful meadow and gorged on its inexhaustible supply of grass. Happy and drunk with delight, she began to moo so loudly that a lion living nearby, to whom all the animals in the area were obedient, heard her bellowing. He had never seen a cow, nor heard one moo, and grew frightened and trembled but did not want his subjects to know this. He lost his cheerfulness, remained in his den, and kept silent.

Two of his subjects, Kalila and Dimna, were very clever jackals. Dimna, who was proud and curious, said to Kalila: 'I've noticed that Lion, our king, has been fretting about something lately. What could be wrong, why doesn't he leave his den, why has he stopped hunting?' 'What's that to you?' Kalila replied. 'Why the curiosity? We are safe in his service and have a good life with enough to eat. It's not up to us to interfere with His Highness's affairs or to comment or ask questions. No one takes heed of us. Let's keep it that way, otherwise what happened to the monkey might happen to you.'

Translated by Dee Wessels
Last updated 7-Oct-09