

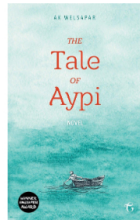
'The Tale of Aypi' by Ak Welsapar

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'The Tale of Aypi' by Ak Welsapar, translated by WM Coulson (Glagoslav Publications, 168 pages, £18)

On the surface, "The Tale of Aypi" seems to be a traditional novel dealing with well-worn themes: A small coastal village community faces displacement from its ancestral home as the state eyes land for development. One brave fisherman decides to confront the authorities and fight for his native shore, with tragic consequences.



In fact, the novel is more surprising and complex than it appears at first glance. Its author Ak Welsapar is a proscribed writer in his native Turkmenistan and lives in exile in Sweden after years of persecution at home. Set on the coast of the Caspian Sea during the Soviet era, "The Tale of Aypi" combines a distinctive location with universally recognizable themes. Billed as the first novel appearing in English to emerge from Turkmenistan, it won an English PEN award in 2014. At just 160 pages it is a beautifully constructed minor masterpiece.

Our protagonist Araz has vowed to resist the relocation decision. While other villagers wring their hands, he continues to fish in the Caspian, defying a ban imposed by the authorities. The issue is one of honor for Araz, who complains that "everyone else's weakness" got the village into this state in the first place. As he rails to his wife Ay-Bebek: "I'll stay here, and I won't go anywhere even if they kill me. This is where my umbilical cord was cut; my true birthplace! ... How could I let myself be forced out from here? My father, and my father's father too, lie mixed with that sand, and his grandfather as well – all seven generations of my ancestors!"

Complaining that "the fire has been taken out of folks' eyes," Araz implores the villagers to "organize themselves" before it is too late. "Hardship doesn't break a person – only cowardice does. Hardship makes a man's body tougher and clothes his heart with armor," he says. The novel therefore at first seems like an almost charmingly old-fashioned social tale, with an idealized hero standing against wrongdoing and injustice.

It is in fact more sophisticated. The arrogant and almost foolhardy Araz is certainly no simplistically brave hero, and Welsapar is clear-eyed about the stifling introversion of provincial life. The novel is under no illusions about the "pure" traditional ways of the village. Locals recognize a myth about the founding of their village, where hundreds of years ago a beautiful local girl Aypi was drowned in the sea after accepting a stunning ruby necklace from a group of outsiders, "strange men from unknown lands." The revenge-hungry ghost of Aypi haunts the village throughout the novel, appalled at its stubborn backwardness. At one point a village elder observes that "maybe Aypi was the spark for it all. In the old days they said the troubles all began after she told our secrets to those others." The legend of Aypi also gives Welsapar the foundation for many of the feminist themes weaved throughout the book.

At times the translation lets the novel down. WM Coulson has attempted to render dialogue in a kind of quaint regional English. At one point, for example, Aypi implores one of the villagers to "Answer for yourself, cur!" At another, one says "Geez, don't worry your head about these things." Such examples are off-putting and jar with the novel's lyrical mood.

But elsewhere the descriptions strike a fine pitch, as when we read about a storm battering the village coast: "To the east and the west, where the battle between earth and sea was most pitched, grey cliffs drew back in trepidation as the sea mounted an offensive against them. The sea threw itself forward to escape from the scorching sun, head-butted the coast like a ram, and then retreated once more to recover strength from the replenishing depths until it could hit back even harder."

"The Tale of Aypi" has an almost Shakespearean sense of tragedy. We witness two immovable forces crashing against each other with a brutal inevitability. Welsapar shows us fates colliding and great clashes between village and city, tradition and modernity, old and young. He handles these classic conflicts with deftness and originality. The themes of "The Tale of Aypi" are universal but the world it describes is highly specific.

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