

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years- Context and discussion themes.

For the Melikian Center reading group at <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674>.

Thursday, 28 January, 2021 at 6 PM AZ Time: offered by Keith Brown and Jacob Lassin.

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years is a novel combining Soviet life on the Kazakh steppe, Central Asian folklore and mythology, and science fiction by Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008), a Kyrgyz writer who wrote in both Russian and Kyrgyz. Aitmatov's own father was arrested and executed in 1938 as an "enemy of the people" for the crime of "bourgeois nationalism." This novel, published in 1980, is his first and most widely known and translated. In addition to his writing, Aitmatov also had a diplomatic career serving as the Soviet ambassador to Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg during the final days of the Soviet Union and later as the Kyrgyz Republic's envoy to the Benelux countries, as well as France, NATO, and UNESCO. A towering figure of cultural importance in his home country, the Kyrgyz Republic declared 2008 the "year of Aitmatov."

One further influence of Aitmatov's novel can be seen in a beautiful animated short film which retells the story of the mankurt with a contemporary twist. The film *Mankurt* is on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/305926217>. We hosted the director, Ermina Takenova, for a Q&A during CLI in 2020: you can see the discussion, including her perspective on Aitmatov's story, at <https://vimeo.com/436040202>.

Some themes that stood out in the novel:

- The story of the mankurt and the possibility of forgetting one's past and roots and how this manifests in the various storylines.
- The prominence of isolation throughout the novel, such as in Boranly-Burannyi and the Sarozek and with the creation of *Operation Hoop* around the Earth.
- Environmental catastrophe and collapse and responses: the situation on Lesnaya Grud', the drying of the Aral Sea, the exploitation of the planet Ex.
- The importance of animals in the novel such as the Donenbai bird and Karanar, especially in their symbolism and relationships with the human characters.
- The interaction between folk customs and beliefs and the state.

Some questions to start our conversation:

- What is the purpose of the repetition of fragments noting that the trains go East and West? How does the insertion and repetition of these lines impact how you understood the distinct elements of the narrative and how they went together in your mind?
- How do you understand Yedigei's faith in the system and the bureaucracy at the end of the novel as we hear that he is off on some business in Letter Box (352)? How does this mesh with what we have seen in the rest of the novel?
- What did you think of Aitmatov's discussion of Stalin and Stalinism in the novel? What does a quote, such as the one below from Tansykbayev in his judgement of Kuttybayev, tell us about the nature of political fear and censorship?

"Once a thought is down on paper, it's no longer personal. That which is written with a pen cannot be cut out with an axe. Everyone will wish to express his own thoughts. That would be *rich!*" (186).