

Books

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Ahmet Ümit



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Elke Dixon

A historical investigation

Maria Eliades, Ahmet Ümit and Elke Dixon spill out history lessons

The prolific Ahmet Ümit is known for his history-infused crime novels. Seventeen novels - which include his popular crime novels - a children's book, poetry and a short history book make up his 22-year career. English readers can't catch up with his latest, "İstanbul Hatırası" (Istanbul Recollections), until the fall, but "Patasana" and "The Dervish Gate," two novels set in the middle of Turkey dealing with the Hittites and Rumi, are out now. Elke Dixon, a resident of Istanbul for twenty years, a close friend of Ümit's and recently published translator with "The Dervish Gate," brings up the finer points of his work.

Ahmet, how did your literary journey begin?

Ahmet Ümit: It was a coincidence. I had never thought about writing. In 1982, Turkey had a military coup and I was in the anti-Fascist group against it. I put up political posters which said, "Down with the Dictatorship! Long Live Democracy!" One of my friends was arrested while putting up a poster. The organization I was with wanted a report of how it happened. While writing the

report, I began writing a story. This story was printed in the Peace and Socialism magazine and published in 40 languages in Prague. Then it [occurred to me] to become a writer.

Why detective fiction?

A.U.: My life is like a detective story. I was 14 years old when I became a political revolutionary activist. I did this for 15 years, until I was 29. It was very exciting, very dangerous and very beautiful. Because I was living such a life, I started writing detective novels. Actually, I usually get very bored with everything else, but I get pleasure from writing. The murder stories of Dostoevsky and Shakespeare influenced me a lot - 'Macbeth,' 'Richard III,' 'Hamlet,' 'The Brothers Karamazov' and 'Crime and Punishment.' 'Crime and Punishment' offers a really good way of understanding people.

Quite true. That's the whole point of "Crime and Punishment." Dostoevsky is incredible in the way that he pulls it out.

Elke Dixon: You can understand people psychologically through crime.

Elke, what was it like to work on the translation? Did you work

together?

E.D.: I'd go to him for help. For example, I [would] want to know if I could take more liberties in changing something so it would be better for the western reader. We worked together that way.

Do you remember any specific changes?

E.D.: I can give you a very specific example. Because there are words that only exist in the Turkish language and they don't translate well in English, and explaining them doesn't work because they have to fit in the sentence, you can't just throw out five relative clauses in a row. It just doesn't work that way. So, what I did was, I took the special words and tried to incorporate a little bit extra to fit in the text. We talked about including footnotes, but he didn't want footnotes because they're distracting. You're reading a novel. It's not non-fiction. We didn't want to use a glossary, either. There's the story about how Konya got its name, which doesn't work, because the novel's only in English.

A.U.: Kon-ya, from *konmak*, which in Turkish means, "to perch." But you can't say in English, "Perch-ya."

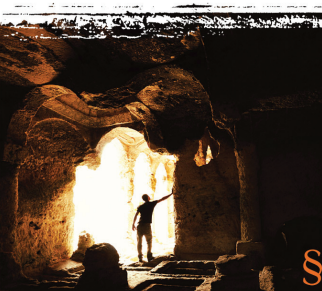
E.D.: So I had to say, 'The answer to this is 'Konya,' which means, 'Perch here.' I actually added that little bit so people could understand that story, rather than taking it out.

What are you working on now?

A.U.: I'm writing a book about Fatih Sultan Mehmet. That's the lesson in this book. In this land, there's a problem with history. The Turks came here 1,000 years ago, but the land has a history that is 200,000 years old. Generally, the government believes that history began 1,000 years ago. They do not count the history of people who were not Muslim. In my novels, I'm trying to show how these people influenced the history and what their position was. I'm trying to emphasize how the Hittites, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Armenians, Greeks and all the different groups affected it. Turkey needs this: an independent view of people, regardless of their race or religion. That's the basis of my books. The detective part of the story is a catalyst for explaining the untold part of the stories.

E.D.: People read it and they learn. Probably they haven't intentionally been taught because the government doesn't bring it into the schools. It's eye-opening, somehow.

AHMET
ÜMIT
Patasana



Esra, a Hittite archaeologist, and the protagonist of Ahmet Ümit's "Patasana," becomes involved in a series of murders mimicking events that occurred 60 years earlier in the local town she and her team are digging in. While the dialogue of this crime novel is, at times, questionably realistic, it is this sense of realism that permeates the lives of the team members and the discussions about politics and foreigners that sustain reader interest. Most compelling are the translated tablets of the book's namesake, the scribe "Patasana," whose first-person narrative of his own rise and fall mirrors the fate of his kingdom of domicile.