



About the author:

VLADIMIR MEDVEDEV was born in the Zabaikal region of Siberia but was brought up in Tajikistan, where he has spent most of his life. He has worked as a fitter, a newspaper correspondent, a photo reporter, a teacher in a village school, a laborer in a geological research group, and a literary editor. Medvedev is the author of numerous essays, novellas, and short stories published in literary magazines and a collection of short horror stories, *Hunting with Kukuj* (Limbus Press, St Petersburg, 2007). Medvedev's recognition as a prose writer came with his novel *Zahhak* (ArsisBooks, Moscow, 2017) that was shortlisted for The Yasnaya Polyana Award and The Russian Booker Prize 2017. The novel was translated into eight languages, including English, French and German.

Selected Bibliography

2017 — **Zahhak**, *novel*

2007 — **Hunting with Kukuj**, *short stories*

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ArsisBooks

Novel, 2017
460 pp

Translation rights sold

World English Old Street Publishing
Polish Sonia Draga
German Aufbau
French Noir sur blanc
Albanian Ombra
Macedonian Bata Press
Romanian Pandora
Arabic AS Publishers

Zahhak

Simultaneously an intense period drama, a page-turning thriller, and a brilliant poetic parable on the contagious nature of evil, *Zahhak* has resonated powerfully with a vast readership in Russia and indisputably became the brightest literary event in the year of its publication.

Zahhak is set during the most turbulent and violent period in Tajikistan's post-Soviet history — a civil war unleashed in the early 1990s. After the murder of her Tajik husband, a Russian widow and her teenage twins, Andrei and Zarina, need to run for their lives to Talhak, a tiny mountain village on the border with Afghanistan, where her husband's relatives and his former (or second) family live. Each day in the village turns into a struggle for survival thanks to food shortages, an exhausting and unfamiliar job, jealousy and undisguised hostility from the Tajik widow, a different language, and villagers' strange beliefs and traditions. All these mundane hardships, though, seem like small troubles when a local field commander with a gang of criminals calling themselves a military unit settle in the village. Zuhursho likes to appear in public in a military disguise with a huge snake on his shoulders — an homage to *Zahhak*, an evil snake-armed tyrant from Ferdowsi's epic poem, *The Shahnameh*. Just like his mythological role model, Zuhursho rules through methodically exercised terror and violence. He plans to plant opium poppies in the local fields, benefitting from the village's proximity to existing drug trafficking routes. Each villager is literally put face to face with the evil nature of power and forced to make uneasy and often impossible choices that could cost them their lives. The Russian family is drawn into the epicenter of terror when Zuhursho decides to make the Russian girl, Zarina, his wife.

Zahhak is told as a polyphonic tale: seven voices with original melodies meld into a dramatic symphony in the novel's climax. Sixteen-year-old Andrei learns to adapt to a swiftly shifting and sinister reality, desperate as he fails to help his mother and twin sister. Zarina, Andrei's twin, unwittingly triggers a chain of

tragic events and inevitably falls as their most miserable victim. The third voice belongs to their uncle Jorub, a local vet, whose views based on the respect of centuries-old traditions and understanding of natural laws collide with the evil chaos brought by Zuhursho and his accomplices. A village boy Karim, nicknamed Pumpkin, who's ridiculed by his fellow villagers and the bandits alike, falls in love with Zarina and cherishes the dream of marrying the girl. Generally a comic figure, Karim will play a tragic role in the novel's outcome, as he kills Zuhursho in revenge for his beloved. The fifth narrator is Oleg, a journalist from Moscow who spent his childhood in Tajikistan and has now returned to the country to interview the country's infamous leader, a "thief in law" named Bobo Sangak. Oleg gets stuck in Talhak and has to witness the atrocities of the local tyrant, with the vain hope of escaping and publishing the evidence. Then there's the enigmatic figure of Davron — an Afghan War veteran suffering from severe post-traumatic psychological issues. Arriving in Talhak as Zuhursho's military hand, Davron openly despises the village's chief, but adheres strictly to the promise he's made and receives orders as well as his own secret system of beliefs and fears. Last but not least is a local Sufi sheikh who was a doctor of philosophy at Moscow State University in the recent past but had to abandon his promising academic career, young wife, and busy lifestyle in the capital in order to inherit the position of village sheikh and Sufi teacher from his father.

With exceptional brilliance, Medvedev forms his characters from flesh and blood, leaving the reader with no choice but to gulp down each new chapter in the desperate hope that the characters will survive the war's meaningless meat grinder.

Selected quotes

Zahhak is definitely one of the most important books of the year, and one of the best novels written in Russian in recent years... It is extremely difficult to live with this novel about the civil war in Tajikistan: each page, if not each line, makes one want to desert. Medvedev doesn't overuse physiological details and blood is shed in strict doses, but the novel's emotional tension and terror literally force readers out of the text. However — and the reader must accept this before beginning the book — the reader is highly unlikely to escape the novel's grip. <...> A poignant, gripping, disturbing, extremely terrifying — and at the same time indispensable — read.

meduza.io

Zahhak is the rare novel that contains everything in proper proportions: rich story, colorful texture, original characters' voices, good language, a smart mixture of the recent past with fiction, and even an allusion to the Iranian epos which gives the novel its somewhat

mysterious title. The novel tells of a historical period when borders between epochs, cultures, languages, good, and evil were swept away by the same avalanche, and when people were turned into strangers but had to stick together to survive. In short, this novel tells the story of any civil war that could occur in any place and at any time.

Gorky.media

Zahhak's diverse characters are cruel, naive, funny, dealing with violence and the emergence of de facto loyalties over the ruins of the Soviet state, while the never forgotten old feudal wars come to surface.

Le Courrier (France)

It was supposed to be an entertaining book. Yet how, against the background of the beginning of the civil war in Tajikistan the 90s? Vladimir Medvedev succeeded.

Der Tag (Germany)