

# Tranchida



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die welt der bücher

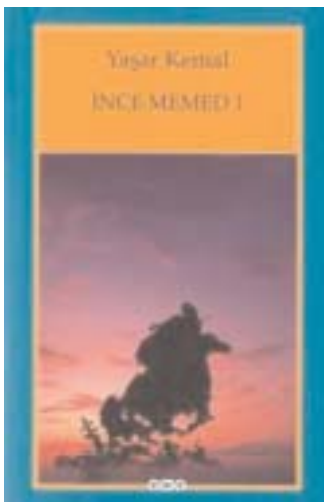
## To Read *Yasar Kemal* **Turkish Robin Hood**



Yashar Kemal © photo Ulla Montan



The First Turkish Cover (Ant)



The Last Turkish Cover (YKY)

**T**urkish literature, little of which has ever penetrated to the U.S., has always been derivative. For hundreds of years, Turkish poets imitated those of Persia; in the 19th and 20th centuries, the model has been France. This lively first novel skillfully blends both traditions with a strong individualistic note of its own and suggests that U.S. readers may have been missing something.

Beautifully translated by Edouard Roditi, the book tells the story of young Memed who grows up in a mud-walled village hut in a remote province of Anatolia. Recklessly brave and a deadly marksman, Memed battles his environment and a succession of superb villains. Chief among them: sly, goat-bearded Abdi Agha, who owns five villages and combines the brutality of Simon Legree with the buffoonery of Captain Hook. Readers will have to remind themselves from time to time that all this is happening in the 20th century.

As a child, Memed runs away from Abdi Agha but is dragged back to serfdom. As a young man, he elopes with the village belle on the eve of her marriage to Abdi's nephew. Tracked down in the forest, Memed loses his girl but kills the nephew and escapes to the crags and hidden valleys of the Taurus mountains, where he joins a band of outlaws and finally becomes a Turkish Robin Hood. After a dozen gunfights, in which bursts of

A beautiful novel in the old, glorious tradition of heroic storytelling.

— SCOTSMAN

Follows in that tradition of strong, simple novels about the life of the peasantry. It has that insider's feeling for man, the oppressed, labouring animal... you might find in Tolstoy, Hardy or Silone. The author never loses his freshness, an ability to pick on details as though seen for the first time.

— GUARDIAN

Yashar Kemal achieves the Russian quality—an intimacy of detail which makes his etching indelible, more selected, and therefore more obvious than life... The book is a small, sharp, moving epic of the Turkish soil.

— SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

A remarkable novel, reminiscent of Hardy in its power and scope.

— QUEEN

A masterpiece.

— ROBERT CARVER,  
NEW STATESMAN

Yashar Kemal is one of those writers who is content with the patch of earth allotted by birth. As in the case of Faulkner, Akhmatova, or even Joyce, all the events

Homeric rhetoric alternate with bursts of grenades and guns. Memed at last avenges himself by murdering his goat-bearded enemy, Abdi Agha. Then, like a proper hero, he rides off into the sunrise and is never seen again.

Fantastic though it seems, Author Yashar Kemal has lived much of his novel. Village-born, of Kurdish descent, Kemal was five years old when his father was murdered by an enemy while kneeling beside his son in the mosque. The experience left Kemal with a stammer, which he cured by chanting the traditional songs of Turkish troubadours. This folk poetry glows in his description of the bleak Anatolian land where, each spring, it seems as if «a green rain has fallen,» and by mid-summer, the high plateaus are blue with thistles «rippling like the sea.»

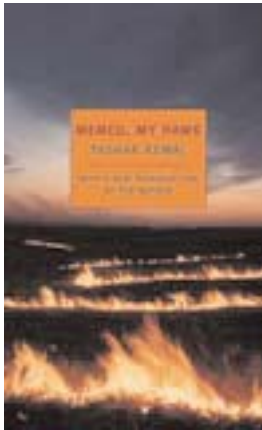
There is also the settled villagers' nostalgia for a happier nomadic past, and repeated echoes of Nasr-ed-Din, the great comic hero whose wit and clownish wisdom have enlivened Turkish bazaars for 700 years. For the most part the author's philosophy seems to reflect Memed's own mood, benign in the midst of violence: «What good men there are in the world!»

[in Time Magazine, Jun. 16, 1961]

**Yashar Kemal: MEMED, MY HAWK**

Translated Edouard Roditi

(392 pp.), New York Review of Books, 2005



US Cover (NYRB)

Peter Ustinov from *Memed, My Hawk*

described circle around the site of an early injury. These writers evoke landscapes containing people who, however lost they may be in their marginal existences, fix their gaze upon the center of the world and take up residence there. [Kemal is driven to] write against the age and to tell those stories that have not been elevated to the status of affairs of state because they deal with people who never sat on high, who did not dominate but rather were themselves dominated. — GÜNTER GRASS

Yashar Kemal is a thousand kilometres tall and can make a story of two stones tender and spellbinding. A master. — JOHN BERGER

## To Read *Yashar Kemal* **They Burn the Thistles**

The great Turkish writer Yashar Kemal's tales of conflict and adventure set in the Taurus Mountains of southeastern Turkey fuse ancient local traditions of oral storytelling with the social and psychological awareness of the nineteenth-century novel. Kemal's books are at once intimately involving and larger than life, heroic and humble. In the recurrent character of Memed, a peasant youth whose life of brigandage has both set him apart from his community and made him a symbol of freedom for it, Kemal has created one of the few truly mythic figures of modern fiction, reflecting a complex understanding of the human condition. What makes Memed so appealing is his fallibility. His acts of heroism are

as fumbling as they are dramatic, and he is drawn to inaction as well as action. We believe in him because we know that he shares our vulnerability.

The other quality of Kemal's work is his love of the natural world. He is not only a great novelist, he is a great nature writer. Scents and sounds, vistas of mountains and streams and fields, rise up from the pages of his books with primitive force.

In *They Burn the Thistles*, Memed is on the run. Hunted by his enemies, wounded, at wit's end, he has lost faith in himself and has retreated to ponder the vanity of human action. Only a chance encounter with an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful stallion, itself a hunted creature, serves to restore his confidence and determination. Once again Memed sets out to fulfill his mysterious and perilous destiny.

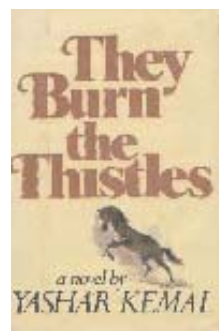
Turkey's greatest novelist, Yashar Kemal is an unsurpassed storyteller who brings to life a world of staggering violence and

hallucinatory beauty. Kemal's books delve deeply into the entrenched social and historical conflicts that scar the Middle East. At the same time scents and sounds, vistas of mountain and stream and field, rise up from the pages of his books with primitive force.

Memed --introduced in Kemal's legendary first novel, *Memed, My Hawk*, and a recurrent character in many of his books-- is one of the few truly mythic figures of modern fiction, a desperado and sometime defender of the oppressed who is condemned to wander in the blood-soaked gray zone between justice and the law. In *They Burn the Thistles*, one of the finest of Kemal's novels, Memed is on the run. Hunted by his enemies, wounded, at wit's end, he has lost faith in himself and has retreated to ponder the vanity of human wishes. Only a chance encounter with an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful stallion, itself a hunted creature, serves to restore his determination and rouse him to action.

**Yashar Kemal:**  
**THEY BURN THE THISTLES**

Translated by Margaret E. Platon  
(412 pp.), New York Review of Books, 2006



The sequence of events in the novel could not be more exciting...

It is like a myth, but the mythic quality is given concreteness in the distinct personalities of the villagers...This novel is a worthy successor to *Memed, My Hawk*... and I doubt that anyone who reads *They Burn the Thistles* will hesitate in... concluding that Yashar Kemal is an important literary figure.

— PAUL THEROUX, *NEW YORK TIMES*



To Read

## CENTRAL QUESTION

## Why Bother Fighting Injustice?

a review of “*They Burn the Thistles*”

by Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow

**T**urkish writer Yashar Kemal is best known for *Memed, My Hawk* (1955), the first of four novels starring the title’s good-hearted brigand. *They Burn the Thistles* concludes this quartet. Originally published in 1969 and situated in the early twentieth century, the novel feels much older than either period. The tone is anachronistically free of self-consciousness and irony; the setting, too, is untouched by the “bourgeois class” that Kemal, perennially rumored to be a Nobel Prize candidate, finds “rotten.” Peasants plow and herd, individualism is minimal—some quotes are attributed to entire villages—and loyalty never wavers. Not that we’ve landed in some prelapsarian idyll. When our hero first appears in *Memed, My Hawk*, he is a traumatized adolescent, running through fields of thistles to escape Abdi Agha, the landlord who terrorizes his tenant farmers. Later, after attempting to kill his enemy, Memed flees the village and joins a band of outlaws in the mountains. Like a more revolutionary Robin Hood, he dreams of offing cruel landowners and liberating the peasants. The people, in turn, develop an unbreakable loyalty to the legendary rebel. Unbeknownst to most of his admirers, he remains a “puny boy” who cries in his sleep. (Kemal has a refreshing, modern sense of humor about his hero.) Still, the popular awe is not misplaced. When visited by righteous anger, Memed subtly transforms, and the “needlepoint of light” in his eye dispels all doubts. Bullets seem to avoid him, while his own aim is mysteriously unerring.

As *They Burn the Thistles* opens, Memed is on the lam, having at last succeeded in assassinating

Abdi Agha. His mission supplies the story’s adventure, but the subplots, animated by mighty passions, are more poignant and indelible. Kemal describes emotions in simple, direct language. The lovely Seyran, falling for Memed, «was aware that within her something had stirred... that she was being agitated by mixed feelings which resembled pity, love, motherliness and friendship.» Adem, a landlord’s lackey, receives orders to track down a magnificent stallion, but the creature appears to possess supernatural powers, vanishing at will. Adem longs for his wife, but, befuddled by his own tenacity, can’t give up his pursuit. «Is this horse my father, my limbs, my eyes?» he shouts.

Kemal’s characters are unable to check their emotions, which seem to assail them from external sources. These passions may lead to ecstasy or ruin, but either way there’s pathos in the characters’ vulnerability to them. Even indecision, far from a namby-pamby state, consists of comically wild swings between opposite certainties. It’s a world of excessive life, and the vitality is not limited to human fervor. Kemal also turns his sensuous attention to nature—sometimes pages go by without reference to a person, as he inventories the snakes and beetles and barberry shrubs.

Born in 1922 to a Kurdish family, Kemal has spent time in prison

for his activism, and his leftist politics informs his work. To his credit, *Thistles* reads more like a juicy folktale than a treatise about the exploitation of labor. Finally, though, the message is unavoidable, even didactic: despite the Sisyphean frustrations of fighting injustice, «We struggle.» The richness of Kemal’s storytelling has earned him the right to preach a little—indeed, one of his strengths is his guilelessness. It’s the same reason he gets away with explicit reports of his characters’ feelings. What would come off as too bald in a lesser writer often seems here like radical honesty.

[in *The Believer Magazine*,  
Dec. 2006 / Jan. 2007]

**Yashar Kemal** (b. 1922) was born into a Kurdish family in a village in southern Anatolia and saw his father brutally murdered at the age of five, which left him with a severe stutter for years to come. He received his basic education in village schools before working as a farmer, factory worker, public letter-writer, and journalist. *Memed, My Hawk*, his first novel, was published in 1955 and won the Varlik Prize for best novel of the year. Kemal’s numerous other books include *The Wind from the Plain trilogy*, *Salman the Solitary*, *Seagull*, and four books recounting the exploits of Memed, including *Memed, My Hawk* and *They Burn the Thistles*. Yashar Kemal lives in Istanbul.

**Number of times the author went to prison:** four;  
**Year:** *They Burn the Thistles* was published in Turkey: 1969;  
**Number of languages his books have been translated into:** forty;  
**Representative passage:**  
«They looked and looked at him, and said to themselves, “Is this Slim Memed? Can this small, miserable, bent, helpless child be Slim Memed?”»