Ali and Nino, published in 1937, is arguably the seminal literary work of Eurasia. A sweeping novel of romance and adventure, Ali and Nino tells the tale of Ali, a Muslim school boy from a proud and aristocratic Azeri family who falls in love with Nino, a beautiful Christian girl with distinct European sensibilities. In order to be together they must overcome personal scandal, family blood feuds, and World War I. In the end, they must choose between loyalty to their cultural beliefs and heritage, and ardent devotion to each other.

That said, historians and critics who did know about these subjects uniformly disregarded Nussimbaum as a credible source, and often accused Nussimbaum of outright plagiarism. Nussimbaum was a personal acquaintance of the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidze, author of Snake’s Skin, from which it is evident whole passages were “borrowed” for Ali and Nino.

As the two authors knew each other; it is unknown whether Nussimbaum had permission to borrow these passages or not, but given the considerable lengths to disguise the material, it is more likely these passages were plagiarized.

In fact, there are only two remaining arguments upholding Nussimbaum as the primary author of Ali and Nino. Not only were large passages plagiarized from his friend, but also significant errors in the text are the same mistakes Nussimbaum had made in earlier works.

Surely mistakes alone are not enough to give Nussimbaum full credit for the work. And if Nussimbaum wasn’t the author, who was? Many believe that Azerbaijani writer and statesman Yusif Vazirov Chamanzaminli is the actual author of Ali and Nino. Born in Shusha, a town located in de facto Azeri-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, Vazirov wrote under the pen name Chamanzaminli, as well as 15 other known pseudonyms throughout his lifetime.

Researchers point to Vazirov’s life experience, diaries, articles, and other published works as evidence that he is the primary author of Ali and Nino. According to Vazirov’s diaries, Nino is a prototype of a young girl Vazirov met while attending high school in Baku.

Vazirov’s true authorship of the manuscript could never be officially confirmed, however. He died of malnutrition and disease in a Stalin prison camp in 1943. Historians have concluded that Ali and Nino is most likely the result of not one but several writers. Vazirov seems to be the core author; although clearly the book was given the once-over by Nussimbaum who inserted passages from Rabakidze. But the story of Ali and Nino’s publication doesn’t end there…
When it came to translating and reprinting *Ali and Nino* in 1971, the rights to the book legally belonged to Leela Ehrenfels, the daughter of Rolf von Ehrenfels, whose second wife, Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels von Bodmershof was clearly listed in the Third Reich’s equivalent of “Books in Print” as the author of *Ali and Nino*.

The family of Baroness Ehrenfels, able to produce multiple legal papers and publishing contracts confirming the Baroness’ pen name as “Kurban Said” only agreed to reprint the book if they could write the afterword for the new publication in which they claim that *Ali and Nino* was the result of an “intense friendship” between Lev Nussimbaum and Baroness Ehrenfels.

Despite his Jewish heritage, Nussimbaum had for many years enjoyed the protection of Nazi Germany’s Propaganda Ministry due to his popularity and high profile attacks on the evils of Stalin’s empire. But in 1935 when the Nuremburg race laws ended his publishing career in Germany, Nussimbaum headed to Vienna where it seemed all of Europe’s literary exiles were convening in cafes.

It was in Vienna, two years later, that *Ali and Nino*’s book contract was signed. But if Nussimbaum was the one publishing the manuscript, how did Baroness Ehrenfels’ name get on the contract?

In 1930s Europe, it was quite common for Jewish authors to use non-Jewish covers when publishing their manuscripts to ensure receipt of royalties through trusted Aryan friends. It is possible, then, that Nussimbaum’s Aryan cover for publishing *Ali and Nino* was his suspected lover, Baroness Ehrenfels.

It was around this time that Nussimbaum came up with a plan to become the official biographer of Italy’s fascist dictator, Mussolini – an audacious ambition for a Jewish writer in 1930s Axis Europe, and one quickly put to rest after an informant denounced him as a Jew.

Still, the project had afforded him a high level network of friends and officials who assisted him in evading the secret police when Germany invaded Austria in 1938. After an adventure that led him from Austria, through North Africa, and finally to Italy, Nussimbaum escaped arrest by posing as an American.

In this guise he lectured all over Europe and the United States. In an odd twist of fate, his host in the US, George Sylvester Viereck, was in fact a secret Nazi agent working in America, thus Nussimbaum’s lectures were unwittingly funded by the Third Reich’s Propaganda Ministry.

Nussimbaum settled in Positano, Italy, where he continued to interact with Baroness Ehrenfels, addressing his letters “To Mrs. Kurban Said.” It seems this was the predominant way he continued to receive royalties from his work.

It was in Positano that Nussimbaum contracted Raynaud’s disease – a disease that affects the vascular system eventually leading to gangrene. Baroness Ehrenfels visited him during this time, always as Mrs. Kurban Said.

Eventually it became necessary to amputate parts of Nussimbaum’s left foot, the beginning of a series of medical procedures that eventually culminated in his death in 1942 – thus starting the myth that Nussimbaum committed suicide by stabbing himself in the foot.

Throughout her life, Baroness Ehrenfels continued to receive royalties for *Ali and Nino*, openly acknowledged the name Kurban Said, and it is her descendants who own the rights of the book today.

So what does it all mean?

The complex and often bizarre tale behind this little book’s authorship is one of the best representatives of and advocates for the philosophical and geographical grey area we now call “Eurasia.” A relatively modern term, some academics dislike the word’s ambiguity, preferring the more rigid and traditional structure of Europe vs. Asia.

Still, recent scholarship tends to appreciate the term because it acknowledges a cultural gradient between the two continents. It recognizes a shared history with both Europe and Asia, and acknowledges the strong influence from the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian worlds.

To put it another way, how else would you define a novel about star-crossed Muslim and Christian lovers, written by an Azeri communist dissident, supplemented with plagiarized passages from a Georgian literary expat, stolen by a Ukrainian Jew with a Nazi mistress? If nothing else, the book is Eurasian.

Sources and Information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurban_Said
http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_a/ali_and_nino1.asp
http://tomreiss.info/

RECOMMENDED READING

This article is just a mere summary of the true story behind the publishing of Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino*. For a more in-depth and fantastic read, I suggest an article by Tom Reiss called “The Man from the East,” published in *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1999. The author later expanded the article into the *New York Times* Best Selling book *The Orientalist*, published in 2005.
Overview
A short novel, Ali and Nino makes for a fun and engaging read for high school students. If you are a teacher looking to branch out beyond the world of Western literature, this book is an excellent introduction to Eurasian culture and history.

The romance of the novel is easily comparable to Romeo and Juliette, yet the style in which it is narrated is reminiscent of Sheherazade’s tale in “One Thousand and One Nights.” The transcultural themes of family, culture, and duty are relatable while still being distinctly foreign and exotic. Students will benefit from the Muslim and Christian life-style comparison, able to see the similarities and differences from a new angle. They will also catch a glimpse of how cultural tradition and family creates a wide array in the practice of each religion, thereby dispelling stereotypes and generalities.

Chapter 1
Why do you think that the author describes the class composition and the general geography in the first 2 paragraphs? Which culture (East or West) does Ali claim to prefer? Why?
How does Nino convince Ali that western culture is superior? Is Ali a hypocrite in that he prefers that his girlfriend not have to wear a veil?
Explain Ali’s comparison between hanging rugs and books. Why does Ali say that books were “invented by barbarians, to create the impression that they are civilized.” (p.17)
Where is Ali’s uncle from and why does he visit Baku? Today, what percentage of the Iranian population is made up of ethnic Azeris? Is this significant? Why or why not?

Chapter 2
Are eating utensils a sign of civilization? Why or why not?
What disturbed Ali’s uncle so much when he traveled to Russia?
What is the meaning of the saying by Hassan Kuli Khan, “He who thinks of tomorrow can never be brave.”? (p.25). Can you think of similar sayings?

RESEARCH PROJECT:
Research the background of the “Maiden’s Tower” in Baku. How does Ali’s history compare with the “official” version? What is the official version? What does this tale tell about the local culture?
Chapter 3
At the beginning of Chapter 3, how does Ali characterize two key differences between the Islamic and Christian faiths? How does Ali value his family’s honor above his exam grade? Does the advice Ali receive from his father (after the exam) accurately portray the Islamic mindset? (p.31-32) Why or why not? Why does the author again include the precept to not think about tomorrow? How does the woman’s veil signify the difference between Eastern and Western cultures with regard to females? Is the Islamic argument convincing? Why or why not?

Chapter 4
Given the tale of Semal Aga, have the incredible natural resources in the region been a curse or a blessing for the local people? What is the meaning of Ali’s comment, “But fate takes no bribes.” (p. 36)? Is this an Islamic/Eastern attitude? Is the song at the party reflective of Eastern attitudes toward marriage? Why?

CLASSROOM EXERCISE
Show clips of the following examples of traditional dance in the Caucasus (examples below). Lead a class discussion on how the traditional dances differ across cultures. What are examples of other cultures where male dancers display weapons?

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=georgian+folk+dance&search=Search
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=410gnTAKIVY
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Icy7Yjrdlg
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugaBtAM1Jtw

Chapter 5
The region known as Nagorno-Karabakh has a long and complex history. From this chapter, can you tell which people first inhabited this region? Why would some pilgrims to the site of St. Sary Beg make the journey on their knees? Is there any relation between ascetic practices and the fervor of one’s faith? How is the poetry contest similar to what one might see on “American Idol”?

RESEARCH PROJECT:
Research the background of the current conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. What were the factors that led to the current stalemate? Which countries are involved? If you were Ruler of All the World, how would you resolve this issue?

Chapter 6
Who was Zarathustra (Zoroaster) and what were the tenets of his beliefs? Do you agree with Dadiani’s description of the difference between “wood men and desert men”? Is there a link between fanaticism and desert/harsh environments? Describe at least two instances from this chapter where Ali demonstrates flexibility when it comes to his Islamic faith.

The Zoroastrian Atashgah fire-temple at Suralkhani, near Baku, Azerbaijan.