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FICTION

19

BOOKS

*for fans
of dark
humor*

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TWENTY TWENTY | *autumn*

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BOOKS

*for fans
of dark
humor*

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photo
Máté Bach 8, 12, 16, 20,
32, 36, 40, 44, 48
© Claude Truong-Ngoc /
Wikimedia Commons 24
Frank Ivette 28
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translation
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ISBN 978-615-00-9109-9

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SET FREE *into* FREEDOM

Where lies the border between fiction and autobiography, between autobiography and novel? Géza Bereményi raises these and many other questions in his latest book, which, with noble simplicity, he simply dubs a life novel. And indeed, we find ourselves reading the novel of a life, a narrative by one of the most important Hungarian writers, screenwriters, directors, and songwriters, an author who

The Hungarian Copperfield

conjures Dickens and makes the twists and turns of our lives seem laughable if also painful and the characters of our dramas both pitiful and loveable. *The Hungarian Copperfield* is also a drifter. He recounts his childhood, which was hell because of his appalling foster father, and all set against the backdrop of the upheavals of Hungarian history in the 20th century, a history which is nonetheless full of wonderful moments and endearing figures. One at times feels as if one were gazing on still images from a Bertolucci film, though this film was shot in Hungary and was directed by Bereményi. One recognizes from Bereményi's 1988 film *Eldorádó* the character of the grandfather, who is willful but also shrewd and something of an idol and who therefore stands in strong contrast to the foster father. Alongside him is the money-hungry actual father, the world's most superstitious and yet rational grandmother, the girlish mother, and strange characters from the past who are torn this way and that by the storms of history and the subjectivity of memory. The book goes farther than the film, leading us beyond the protagonist's childhood and into his adulthood, his transformation into a writer, though the perspectives of the child and the adult intertwine, in part because in order to recount the childhood traumas, the narrative voice at times acquires an infantile character and at times an intellectualized, explanatory tone. The fundamental tone of the narrative, however, is that of storytelling, but spiced with innovative technical twists to autobiographical writing which continuously rewrite the very process of transformation.

author
Géza Bereményi

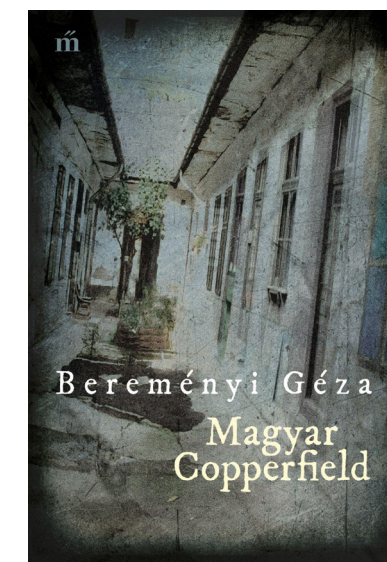
title
The Hungarian Copperfield

publisher
Magvető

year of publication
2020

number of pages
635

rights contact
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GÉZA BEREMÉNYI

Géza Bereményi was born in Budapest in 1946. He has been awarded the Kossuth Prize, the Attila József Prize, and the Béla Balázs Prize. In addition to his work as a writer, he composes song lyrics and screenplays. He has also worked as a playwright for the theater and as the director of several films. In 2012–2017, he served as the director general of the Thália Theater, and since 2017, he has worked as a theater consultant.



On Wednesday, April 12, 1961, I’m just getting off the tram at the corner of Teleki Square after school. I have a key to my grandparents’ place too. I walk past the row of stalls to the ground-floor building. Not much traffic at the market, hardly a single buyer at the stalls. I walk through the open gate into the courtyard where I spent a good part of my childhood. Not a soul there, every door shut, as if everyone were trying to hide from the world. Maybe that’s when they have lunch. I take out the key and am just opening the kitchen door when someone shouts my name, and like in a dream, Zsigmond Nagy pops up. He’s got a fur cap on his head, and he’s waving his arm through the air as if it were a scythe. He lumbers towards

me, limping, asks still from afar whether I have heard the big news, that the Russians have launched the first man into space, the first man “of all mankind.” And perhaps because he’s just so excited and perhaps just because he used the word “mankind,” I tell him – catching even myself off guard – that no, no, I haven’t heard the news, but who cares anyway, cause it’s just another big lie, a bluff, come on Zsiga, let’s be for real, and now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go get some lunch. But he won’t let up. He yanks my arm and tells me the guy is called Gagarin, and he’s a major, the first man in space, and even the Americans have admitted it. Given the general indifference which permeated the courtyard and, indeed, the neighborhood, I was probably the only person he had found with whom he could share his trepidation. What had I heard in the city? Nothing, I tell him. But still, is this good for us? For Hungary? What, I ask. That the Russians now have the advantage, technology-wise, over the Americans. Because of Gagarin. Cause they shot him into space, the first person of all mankind. So what, I say. Who cares about humanity? Humanity doesn’t care about humanity, Zsigmond. (...) So I’m walking through the market on Teleki Square, must be a little after 1 o’clock by now. I’m heading for my mother’s parents’ stand. I have to say goodbye to them. Thank them for lunch, and then I can go home with my bag, not far, one tram stop on foot to Népszínház Street, where I live with mom and dad. I’ll do my homework for tomorrow there, in the empty apartment. I say hello to the people working at the stands

as I pass by. April 22, a day I will never forget. The spring sun has just begun to shine, and the way it shone, the shadow at Sándor Bereményi’s stand, my mom’s father’s stand, is longer. Half-blinded, all I can see from afar is that there’s someone half standing, half sitting on a bulging sack in the stand next to a familiar figure who is wearing my grandfather’s hat. He has his hands in the pockets of his jacket and he’s looking up, talking to my granddad. Róza, my grandmother, is nowhere to be seen. My granddad recognizes me and starts walking towards me to greet me. No customers to bother with. No one really at all. The other guy stays where he is, leaning on the sack, looking towards me. Sitting and standing at the same time. Granddad stops in front of me and looks me up and down. “Hi grandpa,” I say. “Thank you very much for lunch. I’m going home now. I’ll be back again tomorrow.” He grabs my arm, though. “Guess what! Guess who we have here!” he says. He’s looking at me intently, and I know from the tone of his voice that I should be on my toes. I look at the man half sitting, half standing in the stall, his hands still in his pockets. I’m still in the spring sunshine, and the far side of the counter is in the shade. I can’t see much, just that he’s about forty and good-looking. “My father?” I ask. I know him only from a picture, one picture, a group picture at that. Perhaps I had guessed that he was my father because my grandfather’s voice had been so unusual when he had said “guess who we have here,” and he had been clutching my arm the whole time, my grandfather, so this man’s father-in-law, or former father-in-law, because he had divorced my

mother or my mother had divorced him, I don’t know because I hadn’t cared back then and I didn’t care now. “My father?” I ask. Sándor guides me by my arm into the stall. The man stands up. He walks over to me. Sándor and I look him in the eye. His eyes are big and brown and beautiful. Sándor gives my arm a squeeze to remind me to keep my wits about me. “My son,” the man says, embracing me, though his one-time father-in-law does not let go of my arm. He was watching out for me. To be sure I didn’t get taken for a sucker. Not that he had anything to fear. I was even more objective about the whole thing than he was at the time. Indeed, I would have preferred to have been left out of the whole scene so that I wouldn’t have to remember it. The winter sacks were lined up nice and neat in fours in Sándor’s stall, and this young man stands up from the sack in the first row on the far right, walks over to me, embraces me, and says, “my son.” Says my son, embraces me, his coat buttoned all the way up, and you can smell aftershave, though it’s past noon. So he shaved and got ready before he left and came here, not to see me, I think, cause how would he have known I would be here. And why would he bother to drop in on his former father-in-law fourteen years later if not to ask about his son, i.e. me. But nine years ago, he gave written authorization for me to use dad’s family name, not his, so he lost the right to ask about me. So why had he come? And why now?



99

KAZAKH
MONSTERS
AND OTHER
STRANGERS

What do sixty-six Ubirs and thirty-three Mhackay coffins have to do with the story of Norbi and Nelli, not to mention the midlife crisis of Sándor Talmai, if indeed in the case of such an apathetic character one can even speak of such a thing? Ádám Berta is so flamboyantly playful in the construction of his characters and his indifference to the tradition of linear storytelling and a unified perspective that one may well have the impression of reading a mix of Tarantino and Pynchon. At the beginning of the tale, we find ourselves in Taldykorgan, a city in Kazakhstan, where we are immersed in startling landscapes, the similarly captivating world of Kazak food, and the even more entrancing world of

The Snake's Head

Kazak beliefs and superstitions. Figures who have been hired to neutralize these dangerous, unusual creatures soon bring us to Hungary, more precisely to Sándor Talmai, whose father Aladár is an infamous mafioso. On its surface, the story bears an absurdity which is even more palpable in the overall structure of the novel. The chapters seem to have been thrown together in a manner that defies all logic. We switch suddenly from one point of view to another, and we are led down divergent paths only then to have to reconstruct Sándor's story, whose marriage we see fall to pieces. Sándor, who seems to teeter on the edge of emotional collapse, is quite incapable of shaping his own fate. He seems adrift, but only to the extent to which one insists on taking life seriously. In this novel or collection of stories (Berta blurs the boundaries of the genres by blurring boundaries within the text), every grotesque situation seems familiar. The absurdity of life, bizarre human things beneath the surface, and mysterious dreams mix with magic. The novel is rich with an array of stylistic shifts as we hear echoes of mafia films, romantic vampire stories, soap operas, and even existentialist philosophy. The novel thus invites us into a very unusual universe.

author
Ádám Berta

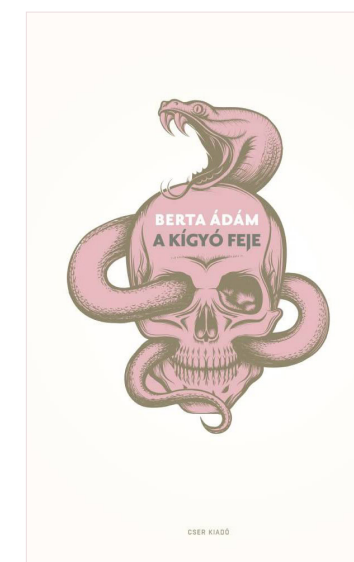
title
The Snake's Head

publisher
Cser

year of publication
2020

number of pages
304

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ÁDÁM BERTA

Ádám Berta was born in Szeged in 1974. After graduating from university, he defended his dissertation in Szeged. In addition to writing fiction, he works as a freelance critic, editor, translator, and literary organizer. He has published several novels and volumes of short stories.



On his first day at the TV station, he sat garbed in an expensive suit underneath an air-conditioning machine turned on high. He had worn expensive clothes before, but never had he gotten four perfectly identical suits at once. As if his superiors had sought to emphasize, with the completely mechanical nature of the external purchase, that tastes and preferences played no role here. The man who worked for the supplier arrived in a delivery van, brought the clothes in the sizes specified, and fit them on site, in the corner of the living room, and his stepmother watched the whole time, didn't say a word, just let her gaze linger on her big son, and then a check for more than double Sanyi's monthly salary landed on his fa-

ther's desk a month later. Never any mention of other brands or other cuts. Sanyi was given a leading position at the TV company right from the start. The four suits were expensive considering that, after withholdings, his salary, which was just the starting salary of course, was exactly seven times what an elementary school teacher made. But they'll last, his stepmother said that evening at the dinner table. And they continued eating in silence. The matter had been taken care of. On the morning of his first day on the job, Sanyi was sitting quietly at his desk and thinking about what it must have been like, way back when, on his father's first day at the company. His father had started at the bottom. Though he was past retirement age, as a member of the board of directors, he still came in every day. His desk was in the building across the way. He drove the same make of Lexus as Sanyi, just one year older. Sanyi's stepmother had never worked. Her death was very much like her life. Smooth and simple. Where does one acquire such a remarkable sense of propriety, Sanyi caught himself wondering once, five or six months after the funeral, though he had loved his stepmother after a fashion. Had she died earlier, he probably never would have moved out, he had thought to himself. But he had moved out, and he was not going back now. After the funeral, he had caught a glance of his father in the cigar room of a fancy restaurant. He could see his face and profile reflected in the window of a glass cabinet. The lighting was odd, and he had been able to discern the tiniest details. The figure had cast a blueish tint off the shimmering glass. His stepmother had been an only child, as had his father. When he was roughly ten, Sanyi had often thought about what it would be like to have a sibling. Not

a sister, that never once occurred to him, and not a younger brother either. The older brother that he imagined looked so much like him that people could hardly tell them apart. He was neither taller nor brawnier. (The little black hairs on his upper lip may have been a touch thicker.) But he was much more self-assured. It would have been a pleasure to share the whole pile of crepes with him, at least twenty of which Sanyi stuffed down all on his own, as he had no older brother, and they would have gone to judo practice together, where his brother would have been the best in the group. When they strolled down the hallway on the first day of classes in the new school, they would walk in unison. Sanyi would wipe his brow with a weary gesture while his brother drank from the tap. They would have been the Talmay brothers. There would have been six months between them. Sanyi did not realize, at the time, that that was biologically absurd, the six months difference in age. Today, sitting at his desk with his mouth hanging half open, he chuckled mutely at the silliness of his childhood vision. There were meetings every day, at least one. They usually began at 2:00, and if everything was going smoothly, they didn't last more than fifteen minutes at most. The editorial board or the leaders of the advertising or the finance division would gather in the conference room one floor down, and the head of department would summarize the essential details of whatever was going on at the time, and they would dole out the upcoming tasks and argue over who would represent the station at the various events and functions. On the way to the elevator, Sanyi would sometimes see an unfamiliar coworker. A woman in that vaguely indeterminable and inviolable age between 25 and 32 wearing a flawlessly fitted coat and skirt or a bright summer dress. Straight, shoulder-length hair, a

smile or a distinctive face, a vivacious look, arching eyebrows or a pug nose, skin made baby soft with high-end cosmetics, slender, graceful fingers. And a fragrance that took Sanyi's breath away. He never said a word of greeting to them. For the rest of the afternoon, his thoughts would stray to their comely shapes, and for five or ten seconds, he would fantasize about them. He didn't masturbate. He would conjure the vision of one of them smiling, bending forward, though they never bent forward in the hallway, and the hair would tumble down, the hips would swell, and the geometry of the skirt, the high-heel shoes, and the calves under the stockings would change. And then the images would fade. He would reflect for a moment: did he really have so many different female coworkers? How was it possible that he still came across people completely unfamiliar to him between the kitchen and the water cooler? Or was his mind playing tricks on him, and when he saw a woman for the third of fourth time, he no longer recognized her because every trace of their previous encounters had been erased from his memory? He felt the two things were not at all the same, when a memory blurred and when a memory was wiped clean from one's mind. He was still pondering this thought a few days later when he was at the cleaners. First, he dropped off his clothes. Then, he headed for the bookshop in the mall. He found a book on memory by an American neurologist. He bought it and read it start to finish in a week. He didn't find any explanation of the difference between the two, between memories blurring and memories being completely erased. And then he forgot about the whole thing.



HOW *to* REVENGE

on your

WIFE'S LOVER

In András Cserna-Szabó's novel *Extra Dry*, which is unquestionably one of the most amusing novels to be published this year, the world goes mad, or at least the characters of the novel do. Cserna-Szabó offers a coming-of-middle-age tale which is entirely convincing and wildly entertaining and which will undoubtedly strike a chord among 40-something readers. The title refers to dry champagne, the ever-present accoutrement of marriages in crisis, embarrassing affairs, snapshots and selfies, and girls-night-out parties. The novel is

*Extra
Dry*

built around a marriage that is falling apart. It is told first from the perspective of the husband, a dull clerk who has been cuckolded several times, but soon we are offered an array of perspectives on the events. The individual chapters are intriguingly intertwined, and as they introduce us to a diverse cast of characters (a wife who is hungry for sex and a new life, a father-in-law who is communicating with the dead, envious girlfriends, prostitutes, etc.), we gradually come to realize that the real motivating force behind most of their cravings and decisions is simply narcissism. We also see how the characters' visions of themselves and one another are shaped by stereotypes. The fast-paced language of the narrative and the avalanche of events lead us to the moment of catharsis, though as we pause along the way, we notice that life often tosses new players into the game and takes us down unexpected detours. Were we to focus on the events from only one perspective, we would be compelled to admit that we are all mad, and indeed anything can befall us, in part because we are capable of anything. Each individual chapter is punctuated by an insight offered by one of the children from the marriage in shambles, insights that are both razor-sharp and yet, because of the childish language in which they are phrased, also humorous. These observations add to the absurd overtones, and in the end, one has the sense that revenge probably tastes more like extra dry champagne than it does like some sweet liquor...

author
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title
Extra Dry

publisher
Helikon

year of publication
2020

number of pages
340

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ANDRÁS CSERNA-SZABÓ

András Cserna-Szabó was born in Szentes in 1974. After finishing his university studies, he soon began publishing short stories, articles, and writings on gastronomy. Over the course of the past decade, he has published several novels and short-story collections. In 2008, he received the Miklós Mészöly Award and in 2010 the Attila József Prize. His works have been published in German, English, and Romanian translations.



Erika's wearing a light, red jacket that hangs over her hips. Her red hair is fluttering as she skips up the steps from the underpass on her shapely legs. Her boobs bounce up and down like two nicely inflated balls. The other five women are consumed with envy. Not fair that she's so hot. She should have started putting on the pounds a long time ago, Kati thinks. She's knocked out two kids too. How come her tits don't sag? Mine look like two little sacks of milk that burst. How come she doesn't have circles around her eyes from getting up a thousand times in the night. Her kids don't whine and cry? Kati's a mother of three who works full time. She's put on a good 40 pounds over the course of the past decade. Her eyes are always weary,

she has varicose veins on her legs, and let's not even talk about the cellulite. And her husband's always cheating on her with whatever woman he happens to have as a secretary at the time, and she puts up with it, doesn't say a word, just pretends not to know.

Bea thinks it's plain rude for Erika to be so hot. I'm the lead here, the bride, the main attraction. The least she could have done was not to have come looking so fucking good. Not today. Put on something other than that fucking red jacket. Bea's only two years older than Erika, but she's already covered with wrinkles. The divorce four years ago left her looking old. Then new love came a year and a half ago. Egon's brought her peace and happiness, and he had the guts to take them all on, her and her two kids. But the wrinkles don't go away, no matter how many new creams she tries.

Magdus figures that sure, Erika's fucking hot, and sure, her red jacket's fucking hot, and yes, she has great legs, but still, that doesn't cut it, cause her boobs are small. At least compared to hers. Ask Magdus. Men don't give a crap about whether a woman is beautiful or ugly, smart or dumb, whether her legs are skinny or fat, whether she's wearing a red jacket or any jacket. Only one thing counts: big tits. No, huge tits. Men want big breasts. The rest is irrelevant. It's a scientific fact. Every man longs for his mom's soft boobs. They want to snuggle up between two nice, plump knockers and feel the warmth of unconditional

love, the miracle they experienced as newborns, the wonder that they have sought in vain ever since. At 30, Magdus had gone under the knife and, in exchange for a small fortune, had had a plastic surgeon transform her breasts, which had not been exactly small in the first place, into eye-popping hooters. She had been quite satisfied with the results, and it never once occurred to her to marry or have kids. No, she enjoyed her daily conquests, which she attributed exclusively to her enormous bustline.

As far as Kriszta's concerned, Erika's lovely, but what difference does it make if she doesn't believe in god? Cause you can tell from the way she acts that she doesn't believe in anything except her own looks, and the things of this world are fleeting. When did she get so hot anyway? Kriszta had seen her a year ago, and she had looked just like the rest of them, a worn-out mom. What had happened in the meantime? She's probably fooling around left and right. She loves neither God nor her fellow man. For Kriszta, family is the most important thing, and family means God. She has five children and a deeply religious husband. No idea how they make ends meet, cause they're either at church or praying at home. Kriszta has neglected her appearance. She's thin and pale, and her hair is graying. She professes to be happy, and she feels sorry for those whom the Lord has not blessed with a loving, God-fearing family.

Eszter's thinking about how she has neither husband nor child nor anyone apart from her

dog. And her dog is at her mother's place for the time being, until everything's sorted out. So right, Karcsi. He's rich, ok, and good-looking, ok, and a few years younger than she is, also not bad. Flat stomach and fat wallet. But let's be honest, Karcsi loves the hookers. He's a mobster. Yes, he takes her to Dubai or the Seychelles once a year, but they don't have a thing in common. They can't even go to the movies together cause there isn't a single film they would both want to see. They went to the multiplex together last time, but not to the same movie. Eszter watched Downton Abbey, Karcsi caught the latest Terminator film. And the sex is getting dull too. Not like it used to be. Nothing spontaneous, just the usual grind. Same two positions week after week. And the hardest thing of all: probably too late to have a kid. She had come around to it kind of late. Somehow love had never been the important thing, just how much money a man had. Could he pay for the surgery, the touch-ups and the summer trips? Did he have an expensive car, nice clothes, a nice place? And there was always another guy with better clothes and more money. I'll be fifty soon, and my face is full of botox. Every morning this terrifying woman is looking back at me in the mirror. Doesn't even look like me. Though I used to be a lot hotter than Erika, that slut, and not that long ago. Little knob-polishing tramp.



HOLY COMMUNISM FOREVER YOUR SERVANT

In February 1988, Tamás Piricske and Pál Téli, two agents working for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, are assigned the task of keeping Albert Heller's dwelling under surveillance from the window of the apartment across the way, which is referred to by the codename "Banana Grove." Heller is suspected of having committed criminal acts against the regime, and his apartment is thought to be the site of subversive activities. Between 1956 and 1990, apartments all over Budapest were used by the state security services to keep the population under observation, and these surveillance activities were a standard

Banana Grove

part of the everyday work of secret agents. Béla Fehér's new book *Banana Grove* offers glimpses into life in one of these apartments. The two agents dutifully follow orders, taking photographs of suspected elements of the opposition and filing the necessary reports. However, as they are living in isolation, they do not learn of the fall of the socialist regime. They keep Albert Heller's apartment under observation long after Heller himself has moved out and new tenants have moved in. Quite coincidentally, documentary filmmaker Kata Várkonyi learns that even thirteen years after the regime has fallen, Banana Grove is still being used to keep the apartment across the way under observation. She decides to make a film about the whole thing, so she starts looking for anyone and everyone who once took part in the meetings at Heller's place. The story jumps around in time as it tells the tale of the residents in the building. Offering a story rich with twists and turns and sprinkled with humor, Béla Fehér conjures the world of socialism in its last days and the period in the wake of the change of regimes.

author
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title
Banana Grove

publisher
Kortárs

year of publication
2020

number of pages
220

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BÉLA FEHÉR

Béla Fehér was born in Debrecen in 1949. He is an essayist and prose writer who has also written as a journalist. He has won many awards, including the Joseph Pulitzer Commemorative Prize and the Sándor Márai Prize. He lives in Keszthely.

“The day of the move, February 16, 1988, was a jumble of extraordinary events. In the late afternoon hours, the guests began opening the door for one another at Albert Heller’s place. Managed to get shots of eight men and three women and then, later, an older man arrived who had a beard and walked with a cane. They were waiting for him. The unfamiliar individuals ambled around the apartment seemingly aimlessly, chatting and forming ever shifting groups, nothing suspicious, no sign of anything subversive or anti-regime, but then as evening fell, they sat down on the ground in a circle like a bunch of kindergarten kids and all looked the same way, listening with rapt attention. Someone was holding a talk to the right of the

window, out of reach of the binoculars. Had to have been the bearded man, he was the only one who couldn’t be spotted. Using the Roxrebel lens, they managed to get high-quality close-ups of everyone there. The directorate would be able to make a nice group picture. Piricske and Téli agreed that it was a home seminar, one the opposition’s favorite pastimes. After Piricske had turned her shift over to Pál Téli, she wrote everything she had seen down in the log while it was all still fresh. Then, instead of going on break, she stood behind the curtain and used the Soviet BPC military binoculars to help keep the place under surveillance. Until 21:20.

Sometime around midnight, Téli’s head drooped to one side. He had fallen asleep in the standard-issue service chair behind the Roxrebel photographic binoculars. He had been knocked out by hunger, not fatigue. Piricske had also crashed by then. She was lying on the pull-out couch with her eyes open. She had her hands folded behind her neck, and she was staring at the slivers of lights from the street dancing on the ceiling. After a while, she dozed off too. She woke up 40 minutes later to the sound of Pál snuffling and snorting in his sleep. She ran to the window. Albert Heller’s apartment was flooded with light, and the people were bustling around. The seminar must have just come to an end. There were bottles on the table, and the guests were drinking wine (one-liter bottles of cheap Riesling, as the Roxrebel clearly showed). They were exchanging books and newspapers and getting caught up in spirited conversations. Piricske pushed Pál from the chair, sat down, and started snapping shots. Click, click, click. When they woke up in the morning, they were breathing in each other’s face. No one was keeping watch on Heller’s place anymore. A few minutes before 10:00, the courier arrived. Two knocks, a pause, too knocks again, pause, three knocks, then one hard smack with his palm.

“Who’s there?” Piricske asked.

“Medical services!” came the reply.

It was Lajos Birizdó, an old acquaintance, one of Major Porzsolt’s righthand men, cause Porzsolt had at least five of them. They hadn’t yet written the daily report, which was supposed to be based on the log. They hadn’t even started writing it, but no worries, Pál Téli leapt up and took a seat at the typewriter, and Piricske asked Birizdó to bring them something to eat in the meantime. After all, they couldn’t

exactly leave the apartment, which domestic counterintelligence used for covert investigations, but they still had to eat. Counterintelligence work doesn’t really do much to counter hunger pains, if you’ll forgive the dumb joke. Birizdó brought them three fat sausages from the butcher’s place on a little paper tray. He pulled a tube of mustard and four slices of bread out of his pocket. There was enough for him to have a few bites too. He washed it down with a half liter of water from the vase.

“You’ve got a good life here!” he said as he slipped the daily report and the roll of film from the Roxrebel into his bag. “America times three! Sucks too, though, cause you can’t bring a woman up, so be sure to lend each other a hand!” he added, grinning.

In the afternoon, the phone rang, the closed line. It was Major Porzsolt. He spoke in a remarkably calm voice. He informed them that the photographs had been analyzed. No question about it, the most subversive elements of the opposition had been gathering in Heller’s apartment. Most of them had already caught the attention of counter-intelligence operations. They were clearly planning something, which was hardly surprising, as they were always planning something, but according to intelligence, the situation was escalating more rapidly than ever before. The opposition was growing increasingly cunning and increasingly dangerous with every passing day, and it was ready to strike and subvert the regime. And they weren’t a bunch of bungling children. They knew perfectly well that they were being watched. They had their ears to the ground, and alas, one had to admit that they were making very effective use of the tactical skills they had acquired as oppositional elements working underground. And what does that mean, comrades? That mere vigilance is worth precious little. Indeed, mere vigilance is worth fuck all. We have to stay a few steps ahead of them. The major informed them that the seminar had been held by Dömös Pohlányi, a familiar member of the opposition, the leader of the infamous Piroska Rigó Circle. He was more than seventy years old, and he’d survived two heart operations and one stroke. He had one foot in the grave. Couldn’t just bust his head in, and he still wanted to bring down the system. He was a devious little fiend, and he had a cyclostyle that he used somewhere, possibly in the apartment of the observed, Albert Heller. In other words, it was time to act.



CONFESSIONS
FROM A LIFE
FRAYED
by TIME *and*
TIDE

Not many people have their recollections of their lives transformed into literature. György Ferdinandy’s prose has always pushed the borders of the genre of autobiography. One cannot avoid the impression that even in his earliest works, retrospection was an essential element of his narrative style, which presents the events of his life as seen from the outside while also ushering us into a deeply personal tale. We find a man who is a chronicler of the history of the twentieth century, but who crafts this chronicle from a complex perspective. He leaves his

*Unusual
Happiness*

hometown, and after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he travels the world and tries to begin life anew. *Unusual Happiness* offers a narrative of his childhood and the years he spent in South America, inviting the reader on an unusual journey which is both literal and figurative. The first sections of the book, which is divided into three cycles, are addressed to his children. They are confessions to descendants born and still unborn, and they are also rich with memories of these children, the loving and yet at times troubled confessions of a parent. The silence from which these short works of prose burst is unsettling, and as the stories progress, the complex elements which shape identity seem ever shriller. The varying worlds seem to mirror one another, and the search for happiness is more and more clearly linked not to places, but to people, moments, friends, and family. The texts, which resemble splinters, give form to images taken from the crucible of memory. An aborted child comes to life, an old classmate whose name we have forgotten returns, and we watch as one marriage frays and another begins. Ferdinandy does not avoid troubling topics. As a migrant struggling to create a home in a land that is not his homeland, he raises questions to which he never offers direct answers. Rather, by chronicling his own story, he offers an opportunity for nuanced interpretation and richer understanding.

author
György Ferdinandy

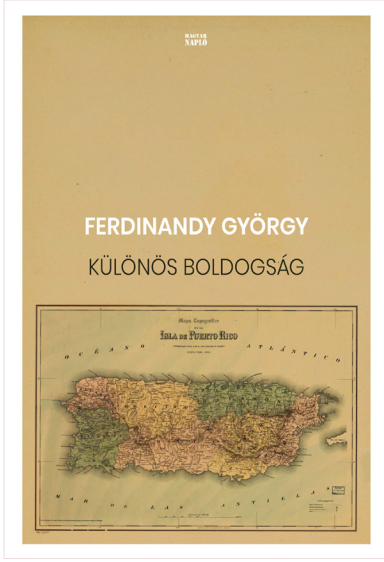
title
Unusual Happiness

publisher
Magyar Napló

year of publication
2019

number of pages
224

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GYÖRGY FERDINANDY

Poet György Ferdinandy was born in Budapest in 1935. He is a writer, literary historian, and university professor who has won many awards. After the defeat of the 1956 Revolution, he was given asylum in France. He moved back and forth between Puerto Rico and Miami beginning in the first decade of the new millennium, and he has lived in Budapest for many years now, but he returns to Miami every year.



Back then, the zoo was my paradise. Sometimes, I would spend every Sunday afternoon by the fences, staring wide-eyed. I knew the lion and the monkeys by name.

Later, I told my kids about them. When I think back, I realize that I far preferred to talk about the animals than I did about people. At the time, the yard and the street weren't as clearly separated from each other as they are now. The yard and the street, the city and the countryside. I used to tell a story—my favorite—about how I caught the Easter bunny red-handed hiding chocolate eggs and presents. When I was a kid, the wild rabbits still came into the yard, ransacked the vegetable garden, and ate all the fresh sprouts. But the Easter bunny had

had a sack on his back, and the sack had been full of painted eggs. There might even have been a bit of truth in the unusual story, cause I still clearly remember the spot where my rabbit jumped over the fence.

After the Easter egg story, the kids always insisted on hearing about grandpa's pheasants. My granddad had liked to hunt. His Flobert and his double-barrel flintlock were always hanging by the door at his place. Every year, at the beginning of November, my grandparents would wrap the lamps up in newspaper.

Once, I went out to the bathroom a little earlier than usual, and in the light of the early morning I saw the pheasant chicks squatting by the arbor. My grandfather carefully opened the window, stuck the rifle barrel out, and bang, bang, he shot the lamps from the branch. What a disgrace! I had to promise never to say a word about it. But my grandmother didn't make any such promises. She reproached me for some time for this little adventure.

I had another little story too. When I was in the institution, we caught the bats that were hanging from the ceiling in the attic. I kept the blind little critters in shoeboxes under my bed. We assigned numbers to them and made bets, and they shrieked with anger when we rubbed their noses together. But the kids didn't like this story. They were afraid of bats, cause Dracula and vampires were already quite the rage by then. And someone had told them that it wasn't nice to torture animals.

Back when I was a kid, no one bothered with that kind of stuff. We tore the wings off dragonflies, cut worms in half in kindergarten, and then glued their tails and heads together with sap.

Even if they never saw them, my kids grew up surrounded by the animals of the temper-

ate zone. They knew that a hedgehog burrows into the forest floor when winter comes, and they recognized edible snails, which we would promise to give milk and butter if they would come out of their little houses and drag their silver trails further. They learned that if they stuck a blade of grass into the middle of an anthill, they could suck the spicy formic acid off it.

Yup. I taught them all that. Animals were part of their lives too.

Cause in the tropics where we were living, it was just parasites. Fungi, viruses, invisible microorganisms. The natives had already eaten every animal worth eating. No pheasants or rabbits left in the forests and fields. Not even cats were spared. If you haven't studied anatomy, you can't tell the difference between a cat and a rabbit. Where thousands of people live within one square kilometer, no one bothers with such trivialities.

Here, the people have been getting their food from ships for centuries. Canned food brought from the mainland in huge shipping containers, and a good thing too, cause there's only about three weeks' worth of food on the island.

In school, when they learn about barnyard animals, the children draw pictures of fried chickens by the henhouse. The Three Sisters on the milk cartons clearly produce milk, and apples grow in boxes. And as I hardly need note, there are no zoos.

When the winds have carried away the birds, silence falls over the island. To cut a long story short, the kids learned everything they knew about animals from my stories. So they never learned patience. That caring for one another is not something you do from time to time, but rather a matter of life and death. An everyday task. They never learned devo-

tion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional trust. Everything that a child of old would have learned from even the most miserable watchdog.

Which is why I was all the more surprised when my daughter came to me, quite serious, with a question.

"Dad, you always had a dog, right?"

"As long as I could," I replied. "Why?"

My daughter is eight. She's in the second grade. She burst out crying. Clearly, she had been expecting a firm, even peremptory no. In the tropics, animals kept as pets spread intestinal parasites and skin diseases.

"Where is it?" I asked, for I had learned by then that there was always a very concrete explanation for a question like that.

Behind the parish, by the volleyball court, a stray bitch had whelped her litter, and the priest, who had recently arrived from the Old World, had passed out the pups.

As if an old children's story had come to life. I had never seen my daughter so happy.

"What will you call it?" I asked.

"Désiré!"

"Dezső?" I asked, a bit bewildered.

"Come on, dad," she replied in a motherly tone. "Désiré means eagerly waited for. Something you've been wanting for a long time."

We didn't even have the dog yet and it had already inspired my daughter to use such lovely words.

"Let's build a doghouse for it," I said, giving in.

It didn't occur to me that in the tropics, animals sleep outside.



SUICIDAL TENDENCIES *in a* PEACEFUL VILLAGE

Marcell Fábián, a detective in Sombor, is again investigating the strange crimes which take place in the small town. In Róbert Hász's seventh novel, entitled *Thirteen Days in the Life of Marcell Fábián*, our hero manages to catch a murderer, though he too is hit by a bullet in the process. He survives, but because of his wound, he has to take a break from the

Marcell Fábián and Dancing Death

office. In *Marcell Fábián and Dancing Death*, he continues his adventures. He is vacationing in Croatia, which seems idyllic, but even his short outing to the city of Rijeka is interrupted by work, and he ends up putting a dangerous anarchist behind bars. When he gets back to Zombor, the cases have piled up, his maid Julika has vanished, and there has been a string of suicides committed under the strangest of circumstances. These bizarre events compel Fábián to get back to work. In the case of the three suicides that form the main story, it turns out that each one had something to do with the individuals' private lives, but as Fábián soon learns, they all have one odd thing in common. Just before committing suicide, each of the victims had begun behaving strangely, dancing and singing as if delirious. The reader and Marcell Fábián slowly discover who is behind the suicides, and the attentive reader may realize the truth before the seasoned detective, for Hász has filled the narrative with clues, and a seemingly irrelevant word or phrase may be of crucial importance to the investigation. The tale offers glimpses of small-town life in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the everyday struggles of the people who lived in the more distant villages and homesteads.

author
Róbert Hász

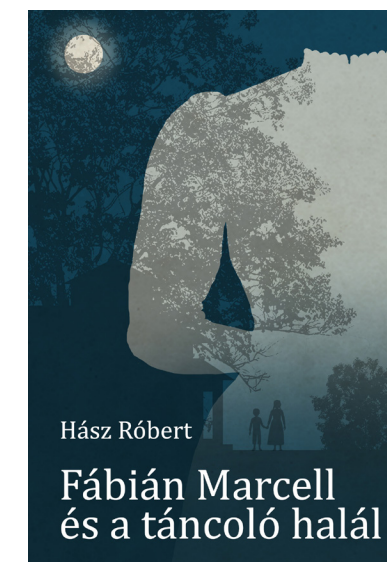
title
Marcell Fábián and Dancing Death

publisher
Kortárs

year of publication
2019

number of pages
332

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RÓBERT HÁSZ

Róbert Hász was born in 1964 in Doroslovo in northern Serbia. He attended school in Sombor, where the Marcell Fábíán novels are set. He has been awarded the Sándor Márai Prize and the Attila József Prize, and he serves as the editor-in-chief of Tiszatáj. In 1991, because of the civil war which broke out in Yugoslavia, he emigrated to Szeged, a city in southern Hungary, where he lives today.



He went into his office, hung his hat on the nail, and took a seat at his desk. It was nice to be back where he belonged. He stroked the edge of the desk with his hand. Not a speck of dust anywhere. Penholder where it belonged, the nibs resting in the small box next to the inkwell. Snow-white paper on the blotter. Blank notepads in his drawer. On the opposite desk, behind which Mr. Winter usually wheezed while he flipped through his newspaper, everything was similarly tidy, which was strange, almost alarming. Clearly it hadn't been Winter. Winter never bothered keeping things tidy. If he was looking for something, he had to sink up to his elbows in the clutter that had piled up on his table. Reports that were years

old, newspaper clippings, scattered cigarette butts, burnt matches, a dozen or so useless pocket watches, and a magnifying glass, cause that was how he amused himself, repairing broken pocket watches. Though Marcell couldn't remember him ever having gotten one to start ticking.

But now, his desk was tidy, annoyingly so. As was the filing shelf by the window. The folders were all lined up like soldiers standing at attention. Not carelessly tossed into a pile, one on top of the other, like usual. Marcell suspected that these unnatural changes had been portended and perpetrated by one and the same person. Cherchez la femme, as Milorád always said.

But he had only just started getting relaxed at his desk when someone came knocking on his door and then, without waiting for a response, Milołka stuck his head in.

"Mr. Fábíán, they're looking for you."

A man was waiting for him in the room outside. He was wearing a white apron that hung to his knees. He had an alarmed expression on his face, and he was nervously fidgeting with his cloth hat. There were drops of perspiration on his head, and he had clearly been in a hurry, for he was still breathing heavily. Marcell felt like he knew him from somewhere.

"Detective, please come quickly!"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Iván... Mr. Csavojác, he's gone crazy!"

"Iván? The butcher?"

Marcell now remembered where he knew this guy from. The butcher's place. He was the butcher's assistant.

"Yes. Please, hurry! He's going to end up hurting himself."

Marcell didn't ask any more questions. He just grabbed his hat and his cane, and as he rushed out, he told Milołka that if the others came in, to send them to the butcher's place. Then he and the assistant ran from the office into the hallway, the hallway into the courtyard, the courtyard into the street. The assistant was moving almost at a sprint, and it was all Marcell could do to keep up with him. Iván Csavojác's place was on Kossuth Street, between Schmitt's watchmaker's shop and the clothing store. Marcell walked past it every day on his way to work. He had walked past it just a half an hour ago, and he hadn't noticed anything unusual. As he now mentioned to the assistant.

"I had only just made it in," the assistant replied, without turning around. Marcell caught up with him, and together the two of them raced across the playground towards Kossuth Street.

"The place was open, but I didn't see him anywhere. Just heard his voice, these cries coming from the back, and then I found him in the courtyard. I've never seen anything like it! Come on!"

When they made it to the shop, a group of people had already gathered on the sidewalk outside.

"Did anyone go inside?" Marcelle asked. They all shook their heads.

"Csavojác has lost his mind! You don't hear him?" Schmitt asked, the watchmaker, his voice trembling with alarm. He was standing with the rest of them, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and blinkers on his forehead.

Marcell did hear him. He could hear the butcher's voice from the far side of the entrance. It sounded as if Csavojác were chanting something. A human voice, but incomprehensible

words and an ear-shattering tune. Marcell grabbed the assistant's arm.

"Come with me!"

The assistant followed him, not enthusiastically, but Marcell didn't let go of his arm. He yanked him up the steps and opened the door. As they stepped inside, he was struck by the distinctive smell. Raw meat, spices, onions, pepper, garlic. The place was empty, no one behind the counter, but the sound of Csavojác's voice was echoing off the walls.

"That way," the assistant said, pointing.

They went around the counter and down a short corridor which opened onto the courtyard. Csavojác was chanting without pause.

"He's out there."

They went out into the courtyard. It was cluttered with empty boxes, discarded chairs, even a ripped couch leaning against the wall on the far side. In the middle, in the little remaining empty space, stood Csavojác.

He was dancing or doing something which resembled dancing. He hopped from one foot to the other, twirling around all the while, and from time to time, he clapped his hands together and let out a yelp. Sometimes he lifted his gaze to the sky, sometimes he hung his head low, almost as if he were doing a folk dance, but not quite. People dance when they are happy. Joy and contentment radiate from them. But Csavojác's face was contorted with suffering. He was a strong man with a thick neck, broad shoulders, and arms as big as most men's thighs. Marcell had once seen him carrying half a hog on his shoulder when a delivery had come in, and Csavojác hadn't struggled in the slightest. Hadn't even been breathing hard. But now Iván Csavojác seemed on the verge of utter exhaustion.



*But for the
most wicked the*

DEVIL SENDS *the* KING *of* CROWS

Sándor Jászberényi's recent collection of short stories again ushers us into a world in which we stumble across details which are not always part of the brighter side of life. We are presented with tales of fates recounted from a number of perspectives, sometimes seemingly superficially and sometimes quite penetratingly, and it is hard not to feel a profound sense of relief that we do not share the lots of these characters. Yet we remain uneasy, as it is hardly possible not to be unsettled by the issues on which the narrative touches,

The Crow King – Western Stories

including the fates of refugees, the problems faced by villages which are increasingly destitute, and the tragedies of helpless figures who have been swept to the margins of society. These stories often seem to suggest that we have little hope of shaping our own fates. A character names Maros (who bears a strong resemblance to the author) appears repeatedly. He is a divorced journalist who travels to dangerous destinations in the Middle East and Africa to test the limits of his own thirst for challenges. One of his works of literature is going to be presented at an opening in the United States, and he cannot help but look on his pose as a writer with a strong sense of irony, as indeed he has always tended to look on his life. The reader will find first-person narratives which make the task of identifying the narrator even more puzzling, as well as stories in which tales of everyday lives from various corners of the world are told from the perspective of an indifferent narrator. The various themes and topics are served up so quickly that one sometimes has the feeling of reading the entire collection in a single breath, and the richly metaphorical and descriptive language is mixed with a style which at times is blunt and unvarnished. Jászberényi takes his reader on a journey from Kurdistan to Sudan and even the world of small Hungarian villages, a journey which is as enthralling as it is unsettling.

author
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title
The Crow King - Western Stories

publisher
Kalligram

year of publication
2020

number of pages
320

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SÁNDOR JÁSZBERÉNYI

Sándor Jászberényi was born in 1980 in Sopron. He is a poet, short story writer, and one of the Hungarian representatives of so-called Gonzo journalism. Since 2007, he has taken a strong interest in the Middle East and Africa and in political Islam. He won the Free Press Award in 2005, the Junior Prima Award in 2009, and the Libri Literary Prize in 2017.



It was a bright and sunny day in late April. The sky was blue, clear of clouds, with only contrails fading in the distance amid the blazing sunshine. Grandpa had been dead for eight years.

In the house, grandma was cooking lunch while listening to the radio. Hungarian folk songs were playing. She was humming along. The scent of potato and sausage paprikash lingered at the door.

Dad was kneeling next to the red Simson, holding a wrench. His hands were covered with grease, which smeared his forehead when he wiped off the sweat.

I was fourteen. I was standing in the sunshine, on the opposite side of the house.

I had dragged a dilapidated suitcase out of grandpa's shed. The latch was rusty. I tried the release button several times, but it didn't open. I went back to the shed, took a screwdriver from the toolbox, and tried to force open the suitcase.

It was heavy. I knew there was something inside. My imagination had been running wild ever since I first saw it. I was hoping for treasure.

Like most things there, the suitcase had belonged to grandpa. I didn't feel bad about going through his stuff. He had been dead for years. The most telling bit of information I had on him was this, as mother put it: "He has a broken heart." I was little when she first said that.

There is a medical expression that goes, "the heart breaks." This means that due to multiple heart attacks, the wall of a chamber of the heart breaks down. My mother explained this to me. After grandpa's death, I couldn't sleep for days. I lay awake in the dark, dreading that the same thing would happen to me. It stole my sleep. Everyone said I looked like my grandfather, so I was sure the same fate awaited me. Lying on my bed, I listened to my heartbeat and waited for my heart to break.

My mother had to calm me down, saying that just because I looked like grandpa, I wouldn't necessarily have to die the same way. "Grandpa didn't take care of himself,"

she said. "He smoked two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day. That's why this happened to him." She managed to comfort me. For my part, I hated cigarettes and I knew for sure that I wouldn't ever smoke.

I took the screwdriver, wedged it behind one of the suitcase's latch plates, and pulled. The plate strained and broke with a loud crack. I did the same with the other plate. I listened for a few seconds, checking whether someone had heard me, and then opened the suitcase.

A stack of yellowed sheets of paper lay in the box, bound with string. No gun, no bomb, no gold coins; nothing of the sort I had hoped for. Grandpa had been a war hero, at least that's what everybody had been telling me, so I had every hope of finding treasure.

Instead, I found handwritten letters with smudged, illegible words. I took the bundle out, disappointed. When I lifted it, the string snapped and the papers scattered.

From the middle, black and white photos fell on the concrete floor before me. I picked them up. Each of them showed grandpa as a young man. He was surrounded by family members I had heard about, all long dead. Great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, dead cousins and uncles.

There was only one photo I couldn't make sense of. It showed grandpa as an adult, wearing a winter coat. He was standing behind a woman with curly black hair and one of his arms was wrapped around her, his hand over her breast.

The woman was wearing a coat, too, and both of them were smiling at the camera.

I looked at the photo for a while. I just couldn't figure out why she was smiling when someone was touching her breast, and I understood even less why grandpa was smiling when he was touching a woman's breast. Only once had I touched a girl's breasts, back in third grade. Her name was Sári. During recess, she had showed me her chest and I had showed her mine, and then she let me touch her breasts. It was no laughing matter.

I stood up. I dusted off my pants. Unlike grandpa, my grandmother was very strict about everything. She always scolded me when I got my clothes dirty. I didn't want to be told off again. When I was done, I headed to the house with the photo in my hand. Grandma was standing next to the propane tank. She was rinsing the lunch plates in a yellow plastic basin. Even though the mourning period had been long over, she still wore black.

"Grandma," I shouted, stopping at the door.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Why is grandpa touching that woman's breast in the photo?" I asked, thrusting the photo under her nose. She turned pale. Her lips trembled.

"He is not touching her breast, my dear. He is covering the yellow star."



SMASHING WWII WAR TABOOS

In the Second World War, the Red Army dealt a devastating blow to the Hungarian army on the banks of the Don River. In this disastrous episode of the war, the Hungarian army had been given an impossible task. It was supposed to defend the eastern front against the Soviet army in the middle of a bitterly cold winter without proper supplies or weapons. In his new collection of short stories entitled *Men at Arms*, Tamás Kötter offers snapshots of the some of the most desperate moments on the frontline. His vivid portrayals capture the soldiers' painful struggles and offer detailed depictions of the machinery of war. The sixteen short stories narrate events on

Men in Arms

the Don River and, later, during the siege of Budapest. Some of the stories are told from a first-person singular perspective, thus offering a palpably personal vision of the experiences of war, while others are told by an omniscient third-person narrator, giving the reader a broader overview of the struggles of the Hungarian army. The characters in the stories include professional soldiers, war reporters, soldiers who were conscripted, and even partisans and civilians in the territories under occupation. Can a civilian compelled by the state to join the army come to peace with the thought of taking another man's life? How does the thirst for revenge press us to reconsider our ideas of morality? The reader will find a complex array of characters in Kötter's narratives, including the soldier eager for revenge, the patriot, the ambitious careerist, the pig-headed commander, and the former civilian desperate only to survive. The stories focus on human fates, and they never offer naïve glorifications of the noble man of war. *Men in Arms* can be read as a respectful tribute to the many men who lost their lives in the Second World War.

author
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title
Men in Arms

publisher
Kalligram

year of publication
2020

number of pages
232

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TAMÁS KÖTTER

Tamás Kötter was born in 1970 in Csorna. He lives in Budapest, where he works as an attorney. He has published works of literature in several journals. Men in Arms is his fifth book.



On the radio, they mentioned him by name, János Bozsoki, the ensign who shot up a dozen T-34's with his howitzer. The guy who got a Medal of Bravery from Regent Miklós Horthy. I've wanted to perform similar heroic acts ever since, but I now realize that fate has something else in store for me. And Horthy? Where is he now! I'm overwhelmed with bitterness, and finally I reply.

"To defend my homeland."

"And that is exactly what you did."

"It wasn't a battle."

"There's a war on, and we're soldiers."

"Soldiers, not murderers."

"Sometimes a soldier has to do things he'd rather not do. And you're a soldier, right?"

"Yes, I am," I say defiantly.

"Then next time, do what you have to do. Got it?"

"Got it." I don't look him in the eye.

We spend January fighting in Városmajor. By the time February has come, the enemy has pushed us back to the last line of defense. We're badly outnumbered.

We don't talk about the execution. We've got other problems to deal with. Hites is killed by a shot in the head. He dies instantly. Pálffy's blown to pieces by a mortar shell. No reinforcements, the Russians are already at Vérmező. The only ammunition we've got is what we can loot from them. Almost nothing to eat. We rely on the news to keep ourselves going: a reserve battalion coming to save us, Wunderwaffen, etc.

We gather in Roham Street. We've been put in the first wave. "Gille's first units are already in Budakeszi. Busting out will be child's play," an officer next to us says, trying to reassure his men.

Roughly a hundred are left of the battalion, of us. Many of them are preparing for death. They're discussing who will shoot whom if someone has been so badly wounded that he can't go on. No one wants to be taken prisoner. Everyone's heard the stories about what the Russians do to prisoners.

"No one's going to shoot anyone," I tell Zoli when he asks me to do him in if things start going badly. Even now, in this moment of ominous hopelessness, I can't accept death. I can only think of how much is still waiting for me in life. I haven't even been with a woman. I don't tell anyone, not even Zoli. I'm afraid he'll think I'm a coward.

"We're going to get out. And besides, reinforcements are only three kilometers away,"

I tell him, reminding him of the news that's been spreading and also trying to comfort and reassure myself.

"No one's coming," he says in a voice that's cold and objective.

"They'll use the Wunderwaffe," I say, again trying to shake him out of it. I need him, we'll need him if we're going to break out. Someone has to lead the detachment!

"There are no wonder weapons," he says. "If I get hit, you have to do it. I'm counting on you, and you can count on me."

He squeezes my arm so hard it hurts.

We don't have time to argue. The reconnaissance guys are back. The first wave can set out. The mass surges forward. Flares shed light as bright as the sun, and tracer shots cut straight glowing lines over the ground. We can hear crackles of gunfire and explosions ahead of us, beside us, behind us. Machinegun fire from the surrounding buildings decimates us. There's no time to think. We are running for our lives. One of the tanks leading our attack is hit. It bursts into flame, lighting up everything around it. A Russian battery somewhere up ahead is shooting into the crowd. We stumble forward, over the dead bodies. We have momentum, and our attack sweeps away the Russian front-line. The road towards Széll Kálmán Square is open, but at what price? Dead bodies everywhere! Three tanks suddenly appear in front of us and start firing on the crowd. We scatter. An antitank squad lurches forward. The rocket launchers hiss. They blow up the tanks. Cries of hurrah and the crowd pushes forward again, but soon more tanks appear, and the massacre begins again.

"Ervin," Zoli shouts, pointing down one of the side streets. We push our way through the swirling crowd, but we've only barely escaped

the death zone when we find ourselves facing another threat. Shots are being fired from the upper floors of the buildings. We take shelter in a doorway and return fire. A wounded SS officer stumbles into the doorway.

"I'm hit," he says. "Game over."

Before we can say a word, he shoots himself in the head. He falls to the ground like a piece of wood. I watch in shock as he stares at me with his dead eyes, and then a huge explosion fills the air.

I wake to the piercing shrieks of Katyushas. Blood is flowing from my nose and mouth, but otherwise, I'm ok. A dead Hungarian soldier is lying on the other side of the street, still clutching his gun. Zoli is sitting a few feet away from me with his legs spread and his back to the door. He has a piece of shrapnel sticking out of his stomach, and he's struggling to breathe. He gives a wave of his arm.

"Ervin," he stammers.

"I'm here!" I press a dressing to the wound, but it's immediately soaked with blood.

"I'll get help," I say, but the rattle of a Maxim machinegun brings me back to reality.

The Katyushas fall silent. They need two minutes to reload. In the relative quiet, a few stray words of Russian drift down from the balcony above the door. I freeze.

And then I see the pistol in his hand.

"Zoli, don't do it!" I say, almost in a whisper, as in the meantime I start backing up, away from the horror of it, until I trip on the corpse of the SS officer. He tries to raise the gun to his forehead, but his hand falters and falls.



SPY NETWORK

at a

HIGH SCHOOL DORM

Afternoon with My Father can be read as a coming-of-age novel and as so-called father fiction. With its bold answers, however, the novel also looks at important social and historical issues, if indeed we can read it as a novel at all. At the beginning, the work is characterized as “a novel – with gaps,” thus leading (or misleading) the reader in one possible interpretive direction.

Afternoon With My Father

Beginning with a dramatic *deus ex machina*, it puts us in a fictional space within its subtly woven fabric. We hear the story of the protagonist’s years in a dormitory and his relationship with his father, and we are told the saga of his separation from and farewell to his father. At times, the (adolescent) hero builds a surreal world, which lets him escape reality and invites the reader to expand the fictional world of the novel and bear witness to a certain kind of double memory. The boy’s story, fragmented linearly but fitting together into a complete recollection by the end, shows us how hard life at a dormitory can be. The secret elite club founded and run by the superintendent of the dorm “nicknamed” Columbo (what a telling name on the far side of the Iron Curtain, evoking Columbo, of course, the famous TV detective) mirrors the hierarchy of the socialist political system built on informants, but this can also be interpreted without the subtly portrayed historical context. The figure of the teacher, who is surrounded by cigarette smoke and the stench of alcohol and who sets the rules of everyday life for the students and does not hesitate to abuse his authority when he pleases, is portrayed brilliantly, as is the whole process of coming to terms with the beautiful and tumultuous period of adolescence. The strange fantasies and the series of mini-stories complement each other and thus create the tale of a fascinating “journey,” which on some level is the very image we make of and for ourselves.

author
Gerzson Nagy

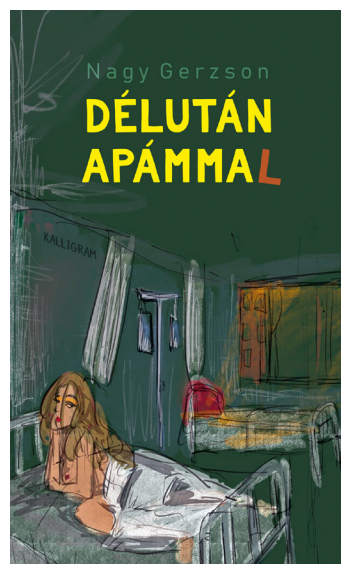
title
Afternoon With My Father

publisher
Kalligram

year of publication
2020

number of pages
208

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GERZSON NAGY

Gerzson Nagy was born in 1975. He studied at the University of Economics in Budapest and has since worked as an accountant and auditor. He began writing when he was a teenager, and his prose fiction has been published in several prominent literary journals. Afternoon With My Father is his first novel.



bought the Doxa in Vienna, my father begins, on Mariahilfer Strasse. It's summer. We're sitting on the terrace by the kitchen. My mother is washing dishes inside. You can clearly hear the sounds through the open window, the clatter of the plates, the gurgle of the water, the squish-squish of the sponge. I conclude, on the basis of the amount of noise, that she's agitated. My father falls silent, raises his wine glass to his lips, and empties it in one long sip. The chairman came into my office, he continues after a brief pause, not the one you know in the department store, next to the entrance at the back. The one in the central building of the co-op, on the second floor. That's where I was working at the time. He leaned against the doorway and folded

the lit end of his cigarette into his palm. The skin on his face was so oily it was shining. He sent me to Vienna, to a garment trade fair. He reminds me of your teacher at the boarding school. What was his name, he asks. Columbo, I reply. Right, Columbo. That's it. He has the same inscrutable, threatening look. The sun is glaring down on us. We're sitting half-naked in the wicker garden chairs. A swallow is circling the yard tirelessly. The Doxa, I say, wait a sec, I think I saw it in an old picture. I leap up and run into the house. I find two photographs in the middle drawer of the glass cabinet with the Doxa watch in them. My father looks at them, gives a wave of his hand, and smiles. It was some New Year's Eve party, after New Year's Eve. My pals and I handled the food. He's already drunk. He was drunk before lunch, and he keeps drinking, but in vain, he can't get any drunker. Usually, he likes to lie down somewhere cool when he's drunk, but something is making him restless. That's what you should write, he suddenly announces. The story of those two pictures. And how should I do that, I ask. He shrugs. That's your job, he says. You have to figure that one out. I pick up the two black and white pictures again and give them a long look. I cover the faces and examine the background. The seemingly irrelevant details. The cracks in the tiles. The electric water heater above the sideboard. The white letters painted on the front panel of the sideboard: FMSZ.96. Write down everything, my father says. Everything you see. (...) So let's say I write everything down, I reply. Every last detail, as you suggest, as if I were taking inventory. From the tip of the corkscrew sticking out of the upper pocket of the waitress coat to the Doxa watch with the leather strap on your left wrist. But in what order? Where do I begin,

and which way do I go? And what guarantee do I have, I continue, ever more self-confident, or would there even be any guarantee, if I were to take a precise inventory down to the last detail, that someone who has never seen the picture would be able to put all the pieces of the mosaic together to form the image? My father swats at the air as if he were trying to shoo away an annoying fly. The smugness vanishes from his face, and he looks at me as if, yet again, for the hundredth or thousandth time, he will have to give up on the idea that I might someday become a serious man, a man of importance. Rubbish, he grumbles. Why do you have to take a simple suggestion and make it so complicated? There's a tremor in his voice which lets me know that any further discussion is pointless. So I begin the inventory. Photo number one, from left to right: a lanky, good-looking man with curly hair. In his forties. Cheerful expression on his face, affable, reassuring. Looks sober. A dark suit under his coat, white shirt, black tie. A band at a slant by the knot. Metal spoon in his hand with a long handle. He's holding it over a platter piled high with chopped meat. The palm of a woman's open hand at roughly the same height as his head. My father. He's in the middle, his body facing the camera, but his head turned towards the woman standing behind him. His scanty hair combed across his bald pate. He's clearly drunk. His mouth is half open. His canine is shimmering. Perhaps it's a silver tooth. He's laughing merrily. He's forty. White shirt under his coat, the neck unbuttoned, the black tie loosened with an easy elegance, the sleeves of the shirt and the coat rolled up to his elbows. On his left wrist a Doxa watch with a leather strap. He's holding a sizeable breaded pork chop in his fingers, and he's getting ready to drop it in the sizzling fat. The two higher

buttons on his jacket are buttoned, the third is unbuttoned. Behind my father, half concealed, is an attractive woman in her thirties wearing a light shawl. Her thick hair is bursting out from underneath the shawl, her eyebrows are pulled up in an arch. Her flawless teeth shine, and there are semicircular lines on either side of her pug nose from laughter. She is looking directly into the camera. Posing. Clowning around. She is wearing a white, long-sleeve sweater and a laced waitress's apron over her skirt with a black leather purse in the pocket. She has a watch on her wrist, a ring on her ring-finger, and she seems to be touching my father's ear with her index finger and her thumb. On the right side of the picture, a little bit closer to the camera than the rest, stands a young woman. She is turned towards the others, but she is not looking at them. She has dark, curly hair, one wayward tress of which is hanging over her ear. The bridge of her nose is straight, and she has a big smile on her face. She is wearing an elegant white top made of some delicate material, and she also has a leather purse in the pocket of her laced apron. A thin necklace with a small medallion shaped like a crab is dangling over her breasts. In the background, there is a double door in the middle. The right wing is half open, the left one just a slit. Bright tiles, cracked in places, cover the dirty wall almost to the height of the door. Behind the woman on the right, an electric water heater with a round display is affixed to the wall. The enlarged shadow of the woman's profile is falling on it. No more than a minute or two can have passed between the two pictures, and possibly less.



WRITTEN
by PAINT-
BRUSH

In Orsolya Péntek's trilogy, we read the tale of twins, two girls. The structure of the narrative is exciting and the use of language often poetic. There are dramatic breaks in the chronology, and Péntek crafts her story from shifting perspectives, gradually drawing the reader into a deeply meditative reading experience. We find ourselves in Budapest, rural Hungary, Italy, Croatia, where one generation's heritage is shaped not only by blood ties to ancestors but also by the linguistic diversity of

Snowing in Rome

the region. In the first part of the trilogy, we are told the story of Eszter and Dorka's childhood from Eszter's perspective. Their grandmothers seek to shape their lives, and their mother suffers alongside her malcontent and increasingly depressed husband. The girls have trouble finding their place in the world. Dorka, whose skin is paper thin, is restrained and reserved, while the dark-skinned Eszter craves adventure. Eszter aspires to be a painter, and the first book, which is told from her perspective, is rich with detailed descriptions and lyrical prose. In the second book, however, the style shifts, and we are given the linguistically far more sober and precise perceptions of Dorka, who works as a translator. In the third book, the chronology is upended, and we are presented with the story of Eszter and Dorka's mother and her cousin, who resembles her so much the two might easily be mistaken for twins. This story offers insights into the anxieties of the different generations, the fates of the women of the family, and the reasons why so many of them failed in their struggles. Péntek's trilogy, which can be read as an artist novel, an analytical look at the fates of women against the backdrop of the history of the twentieth century, and an exciting linguistic and topographical map, is a profoundly Central European tale.

author
Orsolya Péntek

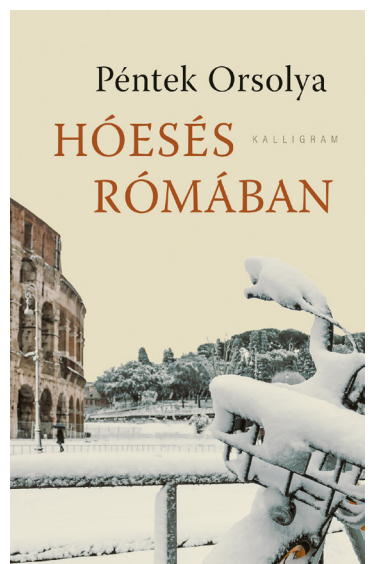
title
Snowing in Rome

publisher
Kalligram

year of publication
2020

number of pages
396

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ORSOLYA PÉNTÉK

Orsolya Péntek was born in Budapest in 1974. She is a writer, visual artist, and cultural journalist. In addition to writing and painting, she also has a strong interest in the history of photography and urban history, and she writes essays and articles on the careers of female artists.

“**S**he brushed her teeth at the sink in the kitchen. As the water flowed down her wrist and touched the sleeve of her pajamas, she shuddered from the cold. One drop made it all the way to her elbow, where it vanished. Couldn’t see it anymore.

Borka tried turning her hand upside down, towards the black and white kitchen floor, to see if the drop would flow back. The tin shone through the chips of paint on the top of the turquoise-green garbage can.

The doorbell rang, just a quick chirp at first, as if the person pressing the button were fearful, and then a good medium-length ring. She shuffled to the middle of the kitchen to see if she could hear anything, and she shuddered again,

but this time from fear, not the cold water on her sleeve.

Soldiers, she thought, and she took cover behind the big cupboard so that they wouldn’t see her if they broke down the door. But all she could hear was a woman gabbling hysterically, then sobbing, and then her father’s voice, which was smooth, even, but she knew him. The pauses between the sentences were too long. She could tell from the moments of silence that something was wrong. Very wrong. She dashed from behind the cupboard and threw open the kitchen door. She stepped out into the hall, where Lola was leaning against the closet and crying. Her shoulders were twitching, and she was staring as if entranced at the twitching shoulders, the jerking arm that seemed to be rippling in the dark green coat like a snake in front of the white closet door. She then looked at Júlia, who was leaning against the front door, crumpling and twisting her cap in her hand and also staring at the rippling shoulders, and then she suddenly glanced towards her and whispered, quietly, just to her, “my father.”

It was just before Christmas. It seemed impossible that they would gun Mihály down now, when it was all over anyway. They’ve caught him, Borka thought, but Júlia seemed to be shooing something away with her hand,

which was pointing toward the ground, and Borka thought that maybe she had gotten water on her sleeve while brushing her teeth too, and she finally understood that Mihály had vanished or left.

Júlia wasn’t crying. She looked bored.

Carlo ushered them into the kitchen, sat Lola down on the kitchen stool, poured her a glass of ice water from the tap on the wall into the white, chipped mug from which he drank milk in the morning. When her mother came into the kitchen squinting with her gown tucked into her slip, her father said that Michele had crossed the border.

Eliza clung to the edge of the sideboard.

“Alone?” she asked so quietly that the question could have gone unheard if it had been inappropriate.

It’s cowardly to ask questions in a loud voice. This woman is unbearable, Borka thought, watching Lola work herself into hysterics, crying and squealing, incomprehensible shreds of sentences flowing from her, along with tears and snot. Júlia was now standing by the tap, wrapping one leg over the other as if she were in a ballet class. She looked at her mother sternly, with no tears in her eyes, and then she and Borka exchanged glances again, and Borka vowed never to abandon her cousin.

Júlia later said she had been thinking that

now that her father had abandoned her, she was essentially an orphan, and until she left too, not necessarily to follow her father but to flee her mother, the kitchen would be the only place where she was at home.

Carlo, who had never once thought of leaving, never, suddenly said that then he would be Júlia’s father until he died, if his younger brother had abandoned his daughter here, his only daughter. And then he fell silent. He did not say what he would be to Lola.

“Someone should slap her,” Júlia whispered when they had hung back a few steps. The grownups were somewhere in the middle of the hall. The two of them had slowed down.

“He left because of her. Not because of the Russians,” she said.

“And you?” Borka asked. She had to ask. If she didn’t, it would be like lying.

Júlia shook her head. And then once more.

“Before he left, he asked me what I thought of it. If he were to leave for good. If things wouldn’t be better for everyone. I told him things would be better for him and just him.”

“So that you could hate him?” Borka whispered.



BAROQUE
CRIMES
CASTRATION
and BLINDING *in the*
NAME
of GOD

Tibor Pintér has donned the garb of a novelist, though his background is not in literature, but in music. As a university instructor, he is an expert in music aesthetics, and his favorite period is the Baroque. This is all very palpable in his first book, an exciting variation on the crime novel. One thread of the two storylines of the novel, which takes place in Koper, is set against the backdrop of the present.

The Madness of Harmony

Marco, a historian who teaches at the university and essentially drifts from one uneventful day to the next, finds an unusual object the strange letters on which catch his attention. They resemble a code waiting to be cracked. He begins an investigation which soon becomes an obsession. The little object leads him into the world of Baroque music, and he is increasingly preoccupied with the desire to learn more about the fates of castrato choir boys. The other thread of the novel leads us back into the past, and a more traditionally linear narrative tells us the tragic, intricately interwoven tale of Domenico, the music instructor who is seeking a boy with a perfect voice, and Matteo, the young talent whose singing leaves Domenico enraptured. Their story, which unfolds *allegro cantabile*, alternates with the tale of Marco's investigation, where from time to time we pause and are given an intriguing little tidbit of cultural history while in the meantime Marco's personality begins to emerge more and more clearly as, *gradatamente*, we approach the tragic finale. Pintér's novel examines the ways in which we now look on the strange and brutal tradition of the castrato, not to mention the almost mystical yearnings of artists for perfection, a yearning that prompted them at times to commit acts of appalling cruelty. The book is rich with the magic of music, both from the perspective of the chapter titles, with their musical terms, and its rhythmic structure, and it compels us to reconsider the ways in which we look at the traditions and the arts of our past.

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title
The Madness of Harmony

publisher
Prae

year of publication
2019

number of pages
213

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TIBOR PINTÉR

Tibor Pintér was born in 1970 in Budapest. He is a music historian, university professor, aesthete, and writer. His primary interest is the music of the Baroque period, a subject on which he regularly publishes. He is also active as a musician, and he plays keyboard instruments, first and foremost the organ. The Madness of Harmony is his first novel.



It was not what Matteo had imagined, singing. When he had sung back home, lying in the grass in the yard and staring at the sky, he had thought singing was like flying on the clouds, and the sounds would bring you ever closer to the light. Now he was confronted with the truth. That at 5:00 in the morning he had to go on foot from the cold dormitory to the little room which, at Maestro Domenico's request, the fathers had designated the music room. The room was far from every communal space, and it was very much like a prison cell. It had a small window which Matteo couldn't even open. This was how his every day began, and until 6:00 AM, he had to do voice exercises. He couldn't even enjoy Lodovico's company, because Lodovico was

singing in a different room. The only consolation, in these early morning hours, was that perhaps when evening came, in the choir master's residence next to the cathedral, the Maestro would be satisfied with his performance. He wanted more than anything else to sing, and he knew that without the Maestro, he would not be able to.

(...)

During choir practice in the afternoon, he sang with Lodovico. After night had fallen, they would sneak out of the dormitory and chat. Lodovico had a more mournful view of his fate than Matteo. He didn't like singing at all, neither in the chorus nor for the Maestro. He despised solfege, and had it been up to him, he would have gladly left the school. The Maestro had made him hate the place, and there was nothing he enjoyed about it. He fantasized about fleeing and finding work as a sailor on a ship headed for Venice. But alas, he did not want to flee alone. Matteo was his best friend, or rather his only friend. And Matteo felt the same way. Which was why he was always telling Lodovico to join him in the garden at night. But it never once occurred to him to flee, and Lodovico knew it, so he never once mentioned the idea to Matteo. So the two friends remained at each other's side. And as much as he loathed the singing exercises, Lodovico was very curious to know what his friend saw when he was singing. Because every solfeggio exercise conjured an image in Matteo, but not images of anything specific. Matteo told Lodovico that at certain points of a given solfeggio a resplendent light would begin to shimmer in front of him or he would feel as if he were swimming on an expansive blue sheen, like when you open your eyes after having plunged into the sea and see a vast blue spread out beneath you. These images were enthralling for Lodovico, and he could but stare at his friend in wonder, for he saw nothing when he sang other than himself, suffering in darkness. (...) This level of sensory impression was mere abstraction for him, and the idea of seeing objects in front of him seemed entirely strange to him. Matteo realized he could ask Lodovico to listen to him. He explained that he was learning a new exercise, and he was afraid that the Maestro might not like it. But where could he sing to Lodovico? Certainly not at night in the garden, and during the day, they were in school. There was not a single nook or cranny where they could slip away. He considered remaining in the cathedral after choir practice in the afternoon. No one would notice if two of the twelve mem-

bers of the choir remained behind. There was a small window for fresh air next to the second side altar off the left aisle. They could use it to sneak out into the street. Then they could sneak back into the school building. The plan was ready. They agreed that after practice, they would remain in the cathedral, and once everyone had come down from the gallery, they would not go out into the street, but rather would hide behind the side altar. The cathedral would be closed until the evening mass, and that would give them plenty of time to slip out the window. Practice came to an end. The Maestro closed the organ, and the singers trundled down the spiral staircase leading down from the gallery. The went through the main entrance out into the street, and the Maestro closed and locked the door behind him. While the other students ambled across the Piazza del Duomo towards the school, the Maestro noticed that Matteo and Lodovico were not among them. He rarely paid the other members of the choir much mind, but he always kept his eye on them. He walked around the cathedral but didn't see them anywhere. He rushed back to the main entrance and quietly opened the door. Treading cautiously and quietly, he slipped behind one of the pillars and looked around. Suddenly, he heard Matteo's soprano voice coming from somewhere behind the second side altar on the left aisle, where Benedetto Carpaccio's *The Glory of the Name of Jesus and Saints*, his favorite painting, was hanging. Matteo was singing a solfege exercise. The Maestro knew it well. He had written it years ago. Lorenzetti had often sung it. It was a simple exercise, but it gave the singer's voice a good work out. In the lower registers, it was just easier scales, but as it got higher, there were repeated trills rising and descending and finally delicate coloraturas in the upper register. As Matteo sang, he deviated more and more from the written version. He invented his own ornamentation, sometimes adding to the existing ones, sometimes taking away, sometimes changing the direction of the trills and giving the intricately interwoven coloraturas an entirely new form. When he came to the repeat, he had transformed the exercise so thoroughly that the Maestro hardly recognized his own composition. He could clearly tell that Matteo had not rewritten the exercise. Rather, he was improvising on the spot. The skeleton of the exercise remained intact, but it had been given a new body. What the Maestro heard went beyond anything he could have imagined. He did not even realize it, but he was staring with his mouth hanging open at the little adornment on one of the arched windows above the altar. But he saw nothing. He ears were no longer focused on the exercise, but rather were adrift in the sound of Matteo's song.



WHAT

is HOME?

PLACE? MEMORIES? LANGUAGE?

The protagonist of Andrea Tompa's novel *Homeland* is headed for a class reunion in her hometown, where she will have, as company, only memories of times past, as all her living relatives have died. Her story offers insights into the many meanings of the word "home," which is not simply a matter of time and place, but also of identity, culture, and language. Where is home, and what is a homeland? The class reunion

Homeland

provides the perfect backdrop for the reader to join the protagonist and embark on this journey, as she explores the stories of the lives of other characters in the novel. The novel follows two paths. As we venture down one, we learn of the beginning of the nameless protagonist's career and her decision to leave her homeland. The other tells of her return, decades later, when she is plagued with doubts. Both of these journeys are interesting, as each throws into question definitions of home and homeland. As confrontations with otherness become a matter of everyday life, the protagonist also struggles to create a home in more than one language. She finds herself confined in the limits of language, as each language offers her different ways of expressing herself, but at the same time, each seems foreign in its own way. Andrea Tompa plays with shifts in perspective, and the issues of travel, home, and life as an émigré become increasingly intertwined.

author
Andrea Tompa

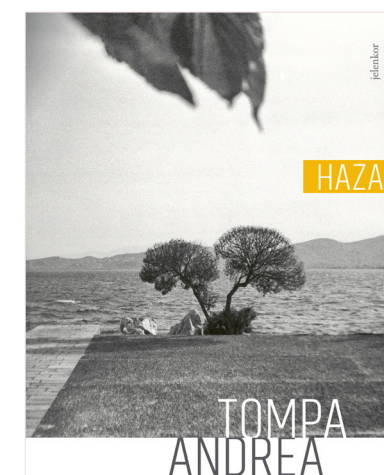
title
Homeland

publisher
Jelenkor

year of publication
2020

number of pages
472

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ANDREA TOMPA

Andrea Tompa was born in Cluj-Napoca in 1971. She graduated from the Faculty of Arts of Eötvös Loránd University with a degree in Russian. She is a writer and theater critic and editor-in-chief of the journal Színház. She has received numerous awards, including the Tibor Déry Prize, the Sándor Márai Prize and the Libri Literary Prize. She currently lives in Budapest.



Edina and her husband had bought a house on the far side of the forest. A big house with a view of the hills behind the city. Safety, strong walls, space, a semicircular living room with floor-to-ceiling windows. After her walks, she would drop in on them. She would fall captive to the good life, to good conversation, and she would return to the hotel only late in the night.

“Where are you rushing off to?” Edina would ask. “In a hurry to get back to a hotel?”

Someone who lived in a hotel could hardly have anywhere to dash off to. Could hardly have any life at all.

Edina had sought her out when she had read about how there was going to be a literary evening in the city. She had invited her to join her

for a walk. She’d offered to pick her up, and she had given her the address of the hotel. Taken aback but hiding her surprise, she had asked if she lived there. No living relatives in the city, she had replied. Only dead.

Edina had asked her about the house, the home she had sold. Must be hard, she had said, cautiously, as if she were beginning a conversation about a deadly disease. I don’t remember anymore, she had replied. They had nothing in the city now, not for years, ever since her mother up and left. Just the grave plot, two meters by two meters, because they were still paying the monthly fee for it. Not that they would be buried there.

She wasn’t prompted to go on the walk by the story she had been promised, Edina’s story. Rather, the forest on the edge of the city had an allure for her, the dry mushrooms, the middle-aged woman, who was still the same quiet, shy girl she had known from grade school, the life unknown. She had not come for the story that was behind her, but rather for the story that was in front of her, the story that might bear good tidings. She could not have known that she would not hear the good tidings today, on this walk.

So certainly, she would love to go for a walk. Would love to, she had said, though love, the heart is mute, the body goes, it is here, in the city, drifting, ready for something to happen. And Edina also wants to tell tale of happenings.

She had heard more than her share of stories. Someone begins a story, the dramatic tale of how their life has been turned upside down. It bursts forth like something of which no one has any need, least of all the person telling it. It gushes like a stream, and it can neither be told nor can it be heard. Both the story and the storyteller long at last to belong to someone. The story runs through the forest like the black dog who was just racing by with its unknown past and its unknown goals. Sometimes, the people who approach her begin by saying, “I knew your father.”

“I didn’t,” she could say in reply. “I have no idea who he was or what happened to him.”

In the familiar forest, where she had not set foot for at least three decades, the self-confident middle-aged woman with her strong bones says, “you wrote our story.” Now she wants to tell the story of her family. The

story of the grandparents and the parents. Of the little church.

Edina could not pick her up in front of the hotel, could not drive down the street where the hotel stood, because that itself was the story. The essence of the story. The little house of prayer was on that street. It had moved since then. Had outgrown itself. The church had gotten considerable support from the center, and the building which had once been used by the congregation had been demolished. And she had been unable to go down the street ever since. Not even by car. She would not go down it.

“Something beautiful,” Edina began, hesitating, and she began to falter as she strode, each step breaking like a wave hitting a cliff, her pace ever shorter, slower, more uncertain. “Something beautiful went bad. Our world fell apart.”

She had only written about the little church in one book, but from a completely different perspective, or in other words, it would not have been possible to have written critically about them, about the church and its members, and the critics had noted this and, showing their utter incomprehension, they had written about the bigots, the blinded, not about the people she had written about, the people who had saved her soul, for salvation had been more important to them than their daily bread. The book had been given to a film fund, and a recognized director was going to make a film out of it, but the small, elderly director, a woman, had objected. There book didn’t have a story. Small images at most, which could be useful, but no story, so it would be hard, she had said, as if she were evaluating a student’s essay after having examined it, disappointedly, at length. And if there is no story, then there are no good tidings. Every true story bears good tidings.

Edina is telling the story in her short vowels, which at other times are so irritating in her native tongue, but which now seem cozy. They have made it home, her husband has joined them, sometimes they switch languages, sometimes they mix them. They met as members of the congregation, which was above language and ethnicity, at least it was back then, Edina adds, bitterly. But the congregation later separated on ethnic lines. The story had a thousand branches and knots sprouting buds and snaking and breaking and crunching under their feet.



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“

*No gun,
no bomb,
no gold
coins.*

”

SÁNDOR JÁSZBERÉNYI