

NEW  
HUNGARIAN  
FICTION

21

BOOKS

TWENTY TWENTY-ONE

*Breaking  
Cycles of  
Trauma*

Petőfi  
Cultural  
Agency



127

BOOKS

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Cycles of  
Trauma*

*editor-in-chief*

Dániel Levente Pál

*editors*

Enikő Sándor  
Viktória Stift

*selected by*

Sándor Jászberényi

*graphic designer*

Dániel Németh L.

*photo*

Máté Bach 6, 46, 50  
Szonja Toepler 10  
Tamás Purger 18  
Márton Merész 22  
Szabolcs Bacskó 26  
Zsuzsanna Komjáthy 30  
László Beliczay 34  
Bea Bulla 38  
Róbert Hegedűs 42

*translation*

Thomas Cooper

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*A*  
**NEW LIFE**  
*On The* **BURRIED**  
**PAST**

Edit escapes to England and then goes on to the USA in the 1930s. She has left behind a Europe, a Hungary already reeling towards war, where she had wanted to study medicine but, along with her fellow sufferers, she has been robbed of any chance to do so. The New World meant for her not only the hope of a new life but life itself. A place to realize her dreams.

*From  
 a Distance*

Roni first visits the States in the 1980s. She has come not as a tourist, but is on leave to conduct research at an institute laboratory, which she will continue to do every summer for many years to come. She is also pursuing her dreams – the scholarly dreams she had little opportunity of achieving in socialist Hungary.

One hot, sultry summer day, Roni finds herself in Edit's shady garden. She is unaware that this will mark the beginning of a life-long friendship. It was first a professional relationship, but they then became more and more attached. Edit tells Roni her own story and her family's story – a painfully typical one of an orthodox Jewish family in Hungary gradually assimilating only to face the horrors of Nazification and persecution. Amazed, Roni discovers a mostly vanished world she could never have encountered otherwise. Sharing an intellectual honesty and sensitivity, the two women develop an understanding not even their final parting can undo.

Veronika Ádám's first novel is a delicate and arresting depiction of the unique relationship between these two talented and undaunted women spanning divides in geography, generation, politics, and religion. Her mosaic-like chronicle evokes full-rounded characters against the backdrop of the Holocaust, Jewish resistance to persecution, the intellectual scene before and after the political changes in Hungary, and middle-class America. Her account is made authentic by her emotional engagement and precision as a scientist.

Born in 1949 in Nagykanizsa, Veronika Ádám is a Széchenyi Prize-winning medical doctor, biochemist, university professor, and a full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She was Vice-Rector for Scientific Affairs at Semmelweis University for ten years and a visiting researcher at King's College London and the Center for Neurochemistry in New York.

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## VERONIKA ÁDÁM

*Veronika Ádám was born in 1949 in Nagykanizsa. She is a Széchenyi Prize-winning doctor, biochemist, university professor, and full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She was Vice-Chancellor of Science at Semmelweis University for ten years, working as a visiting researcher at King's College in London and the Center for Neurochemistry in New York.*



They talked about American politics all evening long. Would the Democrats win the upcoming election? They were fed up with the Republicans, but a sitting president usually won a second term in the White House. And what's he doing anyway, the guy running as an independent? Doesn't happen often in America. And not like he has much of a chance, however rich he may be. Sanyi kept hammering the same point: you can't leave so many people without health insurance. It's an embarrassment to the country. Vencel enjoyed listening. In the States he read *The New York Times* too, he was very informed, after a while, he started joining Sanyi in his disquisitions. Roni only concerned herself with politics back home. Here, it bored her. She

would have preferred to talk about Harvard, about the clinic, Sanyi's fate, or she could have told them about how things had changed in Hungary, but Sanyi wasn't really interested in anything else, just the US elections. He was very self-assured, and he had firm opinions on everything. He didn't ask, he told. And only in English. It seemed odd to Roni. All four of them had been born in Hungary, had gone to school in Hungary, and with the exception of Edit, had finished university in Hungary, and now here they were, the four of them sitting around a table and chatting, but not in their mother tongue. Edit had warned her not to bother trying to speak Hungarian. *Alright, but still, it's strange.* After dinner, in the bedroom, Vencel had defended Sanyi. He'd probably gotten so out of practice speaking Hungarian that he no longer felt comfortable in the language. His vocabulary had probably gotten smaller, and he probably didn't want to have to hunt for the right word. He felt more confident using the language that he spoke day in, day out, true, with a strong Hungarian accent, but still eloquently. Roni just sighed.

The next day, however, she seethed. She and Sanyi were the only ones at home. Edit had gone shopping. She had asked her if she had wanted to come, but Roni hadn't wanted to go. She had an article to finish, but Vencel and Vencel Jr. had joined Edit. Vencel liked to shop, back at home most of all, and at the market most of all, where the old women always called him "young man," or at least according to him. It was an unusually hot day. Roni worked for a while, but then she figured a dip in the pool would feel good, and when she went outside, she saw Sanyi standing in one of the corners of the pool in his white cap. Roni lowered herself into the water, swam a few laps, and then relaxed at the edge of the pool. She was thinking about how, were it not for the pool,

the oppressive heat outside would be utterly unbearable.

"No grasshoppers parched by the burning sun here," she thought, as the opening lines of one of the classics of Hungarian literature drifted through her mind. "Everything's steamed by the suffocating humidity."

"Think of how good it is for your skin," Edit had said just before they had left. "It keeps it moist and fresh. Makes you even lovelier!"

Roni and Sanyi stood in the pool in silence. Nothing but the sound of the train rattling along beside the Hudson. Then Roni, forgetting the rule for a moment, said something in Hungarian.

"Bemegyek, rettenetes ez a hőség."

"I beg your pardon?" Sanyi said, looking up.

"I'm sorry," Roni said. And then she repeated herself, this time in English. "I'm going in. The heat is terrible."

Later, she was furious at herself. She was seething with rage when she got back inside.

"What did I have to apologize for? I didn't have to say a thing. Idiot! Apologize to someone who had to memorize Petőfi poems in school, who took exams on internal medicine in Hungarian, who made his confessions of love in Hungarian, at least until he turned 24? Apologize for having let a few words slip from my mouth in his mother tongue? For saying it's bloody hot?"

She felt humiliated, and she was so upset about how stupidly she had behaved that she couldn't pull herself together and get back to work. She didn't have a single chance to tell Edit about what had happened, neither that day nor the next, because they were never alone, not even for a minute. Edit was completely focused on the dinner. She had invited the Földes couple too, and she wanted to put on a good show. Vencel didn't find the story terribly alarming. He just smiled and told her to calm down, be polite, and not bother saying anything about it, even if it would help her get over the whole thing.

So nothing was said of it Saturday or Sunday, nor could anything have been said. Földes and his wife very much enjoyed Sanyi's company, so much so that this time Feri spared Roni the questions about literature. He was very interested in Sanyi's views on the American election, however. They spent the better part of the night enumerating the president's flaws. When the evening came to an end, and Roni and Vencel walked them out to their car, Feri made a comment about how intelligent Sanyi was and how admired in medical circles in the US.

The next day, after Sanyi had gone back to Boston, Roni was finally able to tell Edit what had happened, and she made no secret of how shocked she had been to see Sanyi behave as if he had not understood a word of what she had said, and to see that he was unwilling to say a single word in the language that he had learned from his mother and father.

"Alright, alright, he doesn't want to be a Hungarian. I'm sure he's got his reasons, but it's a language. Why hate a language?"

"You don't have to be so sensitive! Some of them never get over having had to leave Hungary. Some never stop being angry about it. Sanyi's one of them, I think. He might have left anyway, even if he hadn't felt compelled to leave, but still, it's not the same thing to leave a country because you want to set out and try your luck and to leave because you feel your life is in danger. Sure, it ended up being a very good decision for him. In Hungary, he would have had almost no chance of ever enjoying the kind of professional success he's attained, assuming he had even survived. They know him the world over. The medical students read his book, they coddle him and cosset him everywhere he goes. But when he left Hungary, he wanted to settle all accounts and just be done with it all. With me too. He's not Hungarian anymore, and, if this is any comfort, he's not Jewish either."



# PAINS of OUR MOTHERS

The men are missing from *Szív Street*. Whether they have become alcoholics, abandoned their families, or passed away, little of them has been present for generations apart from some traces here and there, the smell of aftershave or a faded image in the haze of memory. For generations, the family has consisted only of women. Women with frozen hearts, as Anna, the protagonist, puts it. Women who inherit untold tragedies and traumas and then repeat them, passing the molds on to the next generation. Anna wants to understand these molds, which have shaped her life. She begins to search, in the stories of the women of her family, for the tragedy which for generations has shaped them. In 1945, the Hungarian Arrow Cross executed Róza

## *Szív Street*

Hirsch, Anna's great-great-grandmother, by shooting her in the back of the neck, and they killed her husband too, who was bedridden in the hospital. They poured gasoline on the bodies and lit them on fire. Members of the family who survived the horrors inflicted by the Nazis and the Arrow Cross scattered to all corners of the globe. Anna's grandmother Bella was the only one who remained in Hungary. She does not speak about the events. Rather, she has had herself baptized, has severed the roots to her Jewish past, and has deliberately forgotten everything. The deafening silence permeates the hearts of the members of the family, and as a consequence of this, the men begin to disappear. There are no exceptions. If everything seems fine, the man dies in an accident. If he doesn't die, he ends up in jail or he drinks so much that he makes life hell for himself and everyone around him. *Szív Street*, which means "heart street," is both a real place and a metaphorical space. It is a street in Budapest where the heroes of the novel find lodging after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and it is also the soul of the women of the family, in which something was shattered generations ago, something which has been passed on. Ágnes Gurubi's novel, which tells a tale spanning several generations, is set in Hungary, but the questions on which it touches are hardly specific to Hungary, and it offers a stirring story for readers the world over. It examines the consequences of the willingness or compulsion of earlier generations in a family to remain silent about the past and the ways in which tragedies which have been repressed are passed on, making the lives of members of the next generations unbearable. It is a cathartic read for anyone who lost a family member in the Second World War and who has perhaps only a vague sense of how this loss shaped her or his own life.

*author*  
Ágnes Gurubi

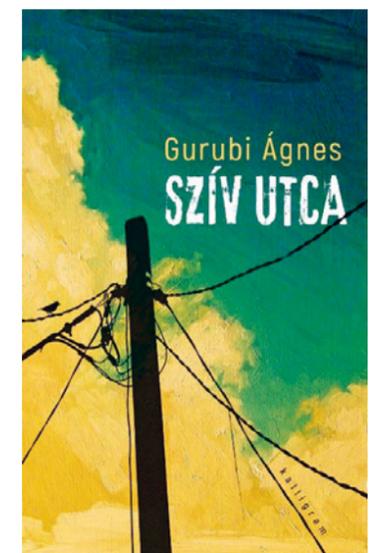
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Ágnes Gurubi  
agnesgurubi@gmail.com





## ÁGNES GURUBI

*Ágnes Gurubi was born in 1977 in Budapest. She has worked as a reporter, a journalist specializing in culture, and an editor. She and her daughter were in a serious car accident in 2017, after which she began writing her own personal stories and examining her own family's history. Her first novel was a resounding success and put her at the forefront of contemporary Hungarian literature.*



My ancestors were wandering souls. Flight was in their blood. Persecution was a familiar feeling, a household feeling. My great-great-grandmother was born in 1881 in Avas-Felsőfalu. At the end of the 1800s, the village, which today is part of Romania, was home to 274 Jewish inhabitants. My great-great-grandfather was born in Avasújfalu, about seventy kilometers away, where the first Jews had come in the 1750s. In 1893, a Yeshiva was opened, and the village had its own rabbi as of 1845. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population, which for the most part lived in villages, worked in commerce, distilling and selling brandy, renting mills, distilleries, and land, or practiced various other trades, working as tailors, tanners, butchers.

In 1896, my great-grandparents packed their modest share of earthly wealth onto a wain and set out, leaving Transylvania and settling in the city of Makó.

The birth of children and the move to a new town notwithstanding, the marriage was not a success. My great-great-grandmother's fiery temperament and my great-great-grandfather's resolve and commitment to the study of the Torah did not prove an auspicious union. They were unable to lay down roots. The religious prescripts proved too little as a foundation for the sacred institution of the family, and they divorced before my great-grandmother was born. In Judaism, under scriptural law, a husband and wife are released from the bonds of marriage if the husband presents his wife with a certificate of divorce. This document, which is called a get after its Aramaic name, serves as evidence of divorce and is itself the instrument with which the divorce is brought into effect. The Jewish legal system also requires divorce under civil law, though without a get, the couple remains married under Jewish law, even if they live separately and have innumerable documents certifying their divorce under civil law.

Róza Hirsch arrived in Budapest in January 1905 with only a single suitcase. In her bag, underneath her clothes and her one pair of shoes, lay her birth certificate and the token of her freedom, the divorce certificate. The family never heard another word of Áron Adler again. Róza had voted for a fresh start, and as she was a clever, determined, hard-working woman who learned quickly, she soon found work. She decided that she would bring her children and her mother, who she had left in Makó, to Budapest as soon as possible. She got a job as a seamstress in a tailor's shop in Baross Street. The shop was owned by Móric Rosenthal, who had been widowed at a young age, and before long, Róza and Móric were connected by more than just work and religious belief. They were married, and the first thing my great-great-grandmother did was to have her children come to the capital to live with them. By the time my great-grandmother started school at the Orthodox Elementary School on Kertész Street, she already had two half-sisters, twins, Ella and Sarolta. The twins were followed by a third son, and with the birth of Mózes, the family was complete. My great-great-grandmother's wish had come true: a big family, many children, a reliable husband, a peaceful life.

When the family lit the candles every Friday evening and sat down at the table, which was always beautifully set, my great-great-grandmother looked around contentedly: with her six children and her husband at her side, she felt no ill could befall them.

When the first Jewish law was passed, Róza was 57 years old. Her second husband had passed away ten years earlier. She had been living with her third husband, Rabbi Salamon Strausz, for eight years. In the autumn of 1944, with the help of the Red Cross, Róza and her husband got a referral to the Dániel Biró Hospital on Városmajor Street. In the hope of escaping, not realizing that with this move, they were signing their own death sentences. Little did they know, when they turned off the ring street onto Városmajor Street, that this would be the last trip they would take together. Róza had gone through a divorce as a young woman, had lost one husband, had given birth to and raised three sons and three daughters, and had six granddaughters from my great-grandmother, my grandmother among them.

Róza stumbled and stood back up, collapsed and then started anew. She was a true survivor. Enduring, tenacious, tough.

She believed in God, and she believed in life.

The Russian soldiers had reached New Saint James' Hospital on December 24, 1944. They had taken the building at the cost of considerable bloodshed, and since then, the lines had not moved. The war was in its last days. On January 8, Dénes Rady, the newly appointed deputy director, sent 17 elderly Jewish patients to the Dániel Biró Hospital, where the patients not only suffered from hunger and cold, but didn't even have water. A Red Cross flag fluttered in the icy winter wind.

On Saturday, January 13, Arrow Cross men presented themselves at the reception and demanded from Dániel Biró a list of the Jewish patients. The next day, at the command of András Kun, the men from the Arrow Cross house at Városmajor Street 37 broke in. To name names, Bokor, Megadja, Bittner, Vida, Kasza, Szabó, Tokaji, Tuboly, Bakonyvölgyi, Dobróczy, Csaba, Hortobágyi, Rédlí, and Czigány. They instructed the people in the hospital to show their identification papers. Tuboly's son did the patients. The sixteen-year-old boy went from room to room asking for the Jewish patients' papers. Patients who had papers were sent or taken to the cellar. The others remained in the wards or the waiting room. In the early morning hours, the staff and the patients who could walk were taken ten at a time to the smaller courtyard and shot. It went quickly, as if they were murdering without much thought, but the gestures were practiced, routine. Sometimes, the next batch had to stand on victims from the earlier group who had only been wounded and were still alive. Róza Hirsch was among the first who was shot from behind, in the nape of her neck. Her husband was executed in his hospital bed, like the other bedridden patients.



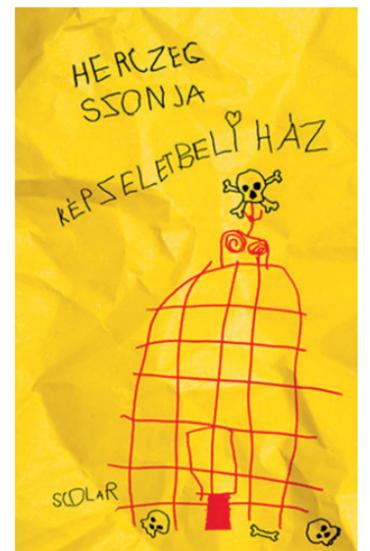
Szonja Herczeg's *Imaginary Neighbors*, a collection of 49 little novellas, is set in one of the tenement buildings in the bustling eighth district of Budapest. The stories of the tenants of the building unfold in jumbled mix of narratives. The various tales are all tied together by the central figure of the book, Etelka, a woman who has recently moved to the capital. Since her husband's death, Etelka has been living on her own. She is usually bustling about somewhere in the courtyard of the building, watering flowers or just tidying up. She loves to cook and

## *Imaginary Neighbors*

bake, and she always makes more than she needs so that she'll have something to offer the others who live in the building. Etelka's neighbors, however, have very different attitudes towards her. To some, she is an endearing old woman, while others find her behavior suspicious, and some of the people in the building are simply irritated at her for constantly pestering them. The stories are told from an array of perspectives, sometimes the point of view of a tenant in the building and sometimes the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The volume contains an array of genres, including the traditional narrative, police reports, interviews, and even a funeral oration. Each story focuses on different characters, and the collection touches on problems familiar the world over, such as anxiety disorders, loneliness, and alienation in the big city. Alongside descriptions which seem perfectly realistic, the reader will also find tales which contain elements of the absurd, for instance a story in which the National Matchmaker, a matchmaking service which functions as part of the welfare state, helps people find possible mates, people can file complaints with the Phobia Affairs Office if they have phobias concerning a particular individual (and if 100,000 or more complaints are filed concerning a specific person, the undesirable person is evicted), and the urgency of someone's need for medical care is established on the basis of that person's posts. The tension increases as one moves from story to story. Several tenants in the building make references to the arrival of the police and the ambulance, and gradually one comes to grasp just what old Etelka's dark secret might be.

WATCH  
OUT *for*  
**TOXIC**  
**KINDNESS**

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rights@scolar.hu





## SZONJA HERCZEG

*Szonja Herczeg was born in 1984 in Budapest. She grew up in Venezuela. After moving back to Hungary, she began writing as a journalist and short story writer. Imaginary Neighbors is her second volume of short stories.*



Tivadar was anxious. Very anxious. He hadn't left his apartment for days after having been fired from his last job. He hadn't been terribly surprised. To get fired, that is. He knew he was a useless piece of shit. His two friends, and god knows why he still had any friends at all, said it was time, now that he was nearing 40, to seek professional help.

"And how do I do that if I can't even bring myself to leave my apartment?" Tivadar, or Tivesz to them, had asked, to which his friend Katalin had replied with Dr. Kaltenbeker's number.

Dr. Kaltenbeker did house calls. 25,000 forints for a 45-minute session, delivery included, as he put it. Tivadar should consider himself

lucky. Kaltenbeker only worked in the seventh and eighth districts, so with his place at 3/C, Tivadar was among the fortunate few.

The day on which Dr. Kaltenbeker paid his first house call on Tivadar got off to a shitty start. Etelka had knocked on everyone's door in the building offering some kind of pastry, but she'd left out Tivadar. And why would she bring him anything anyway? She had no idea who he was, no one ever came to his place, he never left, he was little more than a shadow on the dirty wall.

Tivadar went over the history of his sickness in his head, start to finish, so that he'd be able to recount everything to Dr. Kaltenbeker. He took a piece of paper out of the drawer, grabbed a pen, and started scribbling entries onto the white sheet.

His father and his mother. That's where it had started. As Google has informed us, the fact that his father beat his mother left him with a predisposition (he was pretty sure that's the right word, and he jotted it down) for fits of anxiety. The fact that his father had made fun of his name, which his mother had chosen, was just frosting on the cake.

Women. Yes. His first experience of anxiety. Réka from fourth grade. When he had wanted to ask her if maybe she wanted to get together sometime, but then, before he had been able to utter a word, he had thrown up all over himself. "Typical symptom of anxiety," Tivadar wrote, and he underlined the words.

And he hadn't fared any better later. His only serious girlfriend had cheated on him. When he had learned of the affair, he had let her take her leave of him, asking only what he had done wrong. To which the love of his life had merely snickered and said that he was not even man enough to give her a good smack.

This had left Tivadar, who was already muddled in the head, even more befuddled. He could not understand why, if his mother had been grateful to him for having tried to protect her from his father, the love of his life would have expected him to hit her. So he had decided never to try his hand with women again.

Just 30 minutes left and then Kaltenbeker will be here.

"How many times could he, as someone without a job, afford to fork over twenty-thousand-and-something forint for this specialist?" he wondered. He had to set aside something from his inheritance for his mother so that she would have a bit of a cushion when she got out of prison, and he also had to tend to his father's grave, though that wouldn't cost much, and he only rarely checked up on it. If he was cautious with the math, he had enough money to pay for three sessions to get himself back on the right track.

Someone knocked at the door.

Kaltenbeker arrived garbed in a knitted vest, though it was 40 degrees. Tivadar was suddenly ashamed of his Hawaii shorts.

"Please, come in," he said, greeting his distinguished guest and inviting him into his modest dwelling.

"My dear Tivadar, could I trouble you for a glass of water?" the doctor said, and Tivadar noticed that the doctor's shirt was soaking with sweat under the little vest.

They sat down face to face, each holding a glass of water. Dr. Kaltenbeker took out a pen, a little notepad, and a big bag of tissue papers, which he cautiously pushed towards Tivadar.

"Let's begin. Why did you come to me for help, Tivadar?"

"Well, the situation is that my situation is really untenable," Tivadar said. "I can't bring myself to leave my apartment. I'm anxious all the time."

"Uh huh," Kaltenbeker said, diligently taking notes. He then asked Tivadar to continue, and he didn't have to ask twice. Words started pouring from the patient's mouth. His mother, his father, his bungled attempts with women, his awful bosses, the hot, stuffy tram.

"Let's stop right there," Dr. Kaltenbeker interrupted. "In my assessment, you will need therapy. In my practice, that means at least ten sessions. No sense getting started if we're not going to do at least ten."

Tivadar did some quick calculations in his head.

"It's important that we keep to a schedule," the doctor continued. "If you are going to cancel a session, which in your case does not seem terribly likely since you will not set foot outside your apartment, so if you are going to cancel a session, then you must do so at least 48 hours in advance. Otherwise, you must pay for the session. Do you find these terms acceptable?"

"Of course," Tivadar replied, for he could not say no, though he had not the slightest idea where he was going to find the cash to pay for this costly expert.

"Alright, you may now continue where you left off, but first, please tell me what you are feeling," Kaltenbeker said, and he pushed the tissue papers a bit closer to Tivadar.

"At the moment, I'm telling you about my situation. That's what I am feeling," Tivadar said nervously.

"Be sincere. Always be sincere with me. Trust me, it's worth it," Kaltenbeker said with a smile.



# BETWEEN HALLUCINATION and REALITY

*Gypsy Moses* is a stream-of-consciousness narrative that consists of only five sentences. The protagonist is a drug-addict criminal who is both mentally disturbed and a visionary, a barroom philosopher, and a mythical figure. He is the Moses of our time, whose task it would be to lead his people out of bondage. However, the Moses of Zsolt Kácsor's novel is not a Jew, but a Hungarian Gypsy. The issues affecting the Roma communities of Central Europe have rarely been touched on in contemporary Hungarian literature, and ethnic groups which are continuously displaced by their nomadic way

## *Gypsy Moses*

of life are stigmatized. Innumerable stereotypes concerning prostitution, crime, and illiteracy are associated with Roma in Hungary, and in Central Europe, the Roma minority continuously faces racism and exclusion. If someone cannot find a decent job or an apartment to rent because of his skin color, he is obviously living in a state of captivity, and one could even go so far as to claim that everyone belonging to his ethnicity is a prisoner. By suggesting a parallel with the Egyptian captivity of the Jews, Kácsor's story implies that it is only a matter of time until the prophet of the Roma people appears. The lord reveals himself to our protagonist and commands him to lead his people back to their homeland, India. In its structure, the narrative follows the five books of Moses, but the world of Roma tales and beliefs also appears in the novel. The reader learns of the Roma people's fundamental yearning for freedom, their sense of anarchy, and their image of man and virtue, which is permeated by an unmistakably Kafkaesque humor. The language of the novel is densely woven and rich with poetry. The revelatory voice of the Bible is combined with the slang of Budapest and the countryside, the mysticism of the Kabbalah and dreary obscenity, and one inevitably has the sense that one is reading an epic, the as yet unwritten epic of the Roma. The tale is at the same time a parody of the many political and religious proclamations of our time. Today, as one hears more and more news of the fight against systemic racism in the United States, Kácsor's novel is particularly relevant, as the Roma of Europe face the same forms of exclusion and discrimination as people of color in the United States. The difference is that no one kneels in protest in support of the Roma when the national anthems are sung.

*author*  
Zsolt Kácsor

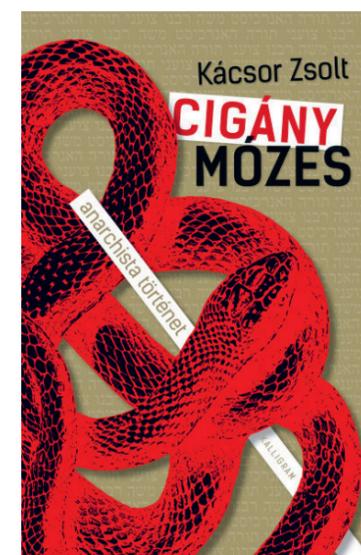
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*rights contact*  
Zsolt Kácsor  
kacsorzolt@gmail.com





## ZSOLT KÁCSOR

*Zsolt Kácsor was born in 1972 in Eger. He has emerged as one of the most prominent journalists and writers in Hungary in no small part because of the remarkable sensitivity he shows to social issues. He has regularly been publishing articles and writings in some of the most prominent forums on issues in public life for a good three decades. He has also published five novels.*



The arrival of the Gypsy Moses caused something of a stir, the natives of the camp stared dumbfounded at the newcomer, because they couldn't fit him into any of the little categories in their heads and they didn't get what was so unusual about him, and they certainly couldn't figure it out for themselves, the Gypsy Moses informed them that while they were puny and thin and weak and emaciated, he, in contrast, was tall and shredded and strong and well-nourished, a knife dangling from his arm, and four old wizards trundling in his wake, the first was named Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov, the second Gaston Glock, the third Samuel Colt, and the fourth was Yevgeny Fyodorovich Dragunov, and with a pack of dogs

baying in the distance, the prince marched into Horthy Park,

to take a seat on his throne, which for the moment he couldn't find, as there were no chairs or tables in the barracks, only bunks, buckets, spoons, dirty clothes, and clotheslines, and a lot of bored people sitting on the ground waiting for lunch, they were puny and thin and weak and emaciated, and when this tall and shredded and strong and well-nourished Gypsy appeared among them, the well-informed immediately thought he must be a snitch who wanted to find out where the Gypsies of the island were growing pot, which was the only source of income for the clan leaders, so joints were the conventional currency which could be used to buy anything and everything both inside and out, the guards brought the stuff from the outside in exchange for weed, and now look,

they've dumped some prick on us again, someone said in the barrack of one of the clan leaders, Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second, by name, in the eastern corner of the barrack, where Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second sat and puffed away all day long and provided wise council for those who sought his aid,

according to which you stomach your stomach pains, take snake weed against snake bites, spider lily against spider bites, dog fennel against dog bites, and frogs' legs for a frog in your throat, and otherwise you do whatever the fuck you want,

just don't screw me over Gypsies, was in general what Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second said, and everyone believed him, because Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second had the body of a boss, a big, broad-shouldered type who demanded respect, with his long nose like an eagle's beak, propped up by a raven-black

moustache, a broad hat resting on his head, and thus he sat on the throne in his barrack, in the eastern corner of his barrack, where

now the Gypsy Moses stood before him, silent, waiting, for the Gypsies in the camp had told him that he had to report to the boss, so he had reported, and he had waited ever so patiently in front of the Kaiser while Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second had scratched his plump, hairy belly, but not because it itched, but rather to show off the three signet rings on his right hand as clear symbols of his power, and then he spoke to the prince, saying

so tell me, Gypsy, but prince Moses said not a word, for he did not know what to say, alas, he had never seen golden signet rings, and they were holding him captive with their sparkle, he was wondering just what kinds of weapons these unusual yellow metals were, for they did not resemble anything with which you could stab or cut or shoot, so he stared at Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second's fingers as they scratched Kálmán Lakatos the Second's belly, and his mind was racing, at which the Kaiser suddenly laughed and asked so what's up, Gypsy, cat got your tongue, and as this was a simple question to which he had an easy answer, so the prince nodded,

yes, this morning, cut it bad, just not the cat, he said, an answer which met with more laughter, then tough luck for you, bud, Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second roared, and as if that weren't enough, then you got soaked, and then he asked who it was who had cut out his tongue, if not the cat, which he shouldn't have, because then prince Moses took Áron out from among the snakeskins, his Kershaw tactical knife, and pointed it at the Kaiser, it was him, he said quite sincerely, cause it was true, both

with regards to his tongue and the perp, Áron, at which Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second also grabbed a knife, which was a mistake, indeed, which was a bigger mistake, cause a moment later, Áron gave a stab and put a hole right in the boss's palm, and Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second let out a roar, but a second later he fell silent, for he found himself on the ground with this fearfully imposing stranger kneeling on his back and whispering into his ear that if you ever dare point a knife at me I'm going to drink your blood, every last drop of it, and just to show how very resolved he was, he twisted Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second's right arm behind his back and started to slurp at the blood dripping from his palm,

ah, what an entrée, my prince, Yevgeny Fyodorovich said in the background, and the other three magicians applauded, and Samuel Colt let out a cry, gentlemen, if you please, let's drink a toast, and he looked at prince Moses, who nodded, I'm quite thirty, he said, and when he looked with a smile on his face at Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second, the blood in the Kaiser's veins froze, alas, Gypsy, you're finished, he whispered to himself as if bidding farewell, but no real harm had come to him, except that from the moment the Gypsy Moses had drunk of his blood, Kálmán Csóri Lakatos the Second

had ceased to be Kaiser, and so he had to ceded the most comfortable bunk in his boss barrack to Moses, and he had to say goodbye to the three signet rings too, because Moses had taken quite a liking to them, and he had to say goodbye to his primary source of income as well, the weed, because Moses became the head of the cannabis trade, prince of the Gypsies, as he was called in the camp...



*In a* **WORLD**  
*of* **SWINE**  
**NES...**

The protagonist of István Kerékgyártó's novel *My Beloved Owner, or the Early Years of a Budding Leader*, a tale set in a fictional country somewhere in Central Eastern Europe, is the son of an alcoholic assistant livestock breeder who rises from poverty to the very top of the corrupt world in which he lives. Luko Voditi grows up in the town of Zablateni, where the only jobs are on the

*My Beloved Owner,  
or the Early Years  
of a Budding Leader*

kolchoz. Luko's father regularly beats him and the other members of their family, until Arthur Nobil, the acting head of the division and the only person Luko's father fears, threatens to fire him (and more) if he doesn't stop. This ushers in a change in Luko's fortunes. He becomes something of a protégé to Arthur, and Arthur begins to smooth the way for him. He sends Luko to a good grammar school and sets new goals for him, carving the boy into an ambitious go-getter. Though he has always followed idealized models of what it means to be a man, Luko forms a close, loving bond with a piglet to whom he gives the name Tarete. He takes good care of Tarete, and shares his most jealously guarded secrets with the little swine. As Christmas approaches, however, Tarete is slaughtered, and Luko is forced to take part in the killing against his will. This experience and his earlier frustrations leave an indelible impression on his attitudes towards people. Under the socialist regime, Luko always manages to find the people who are worth knowing, including a boxing coach, a military officer, a prospering lawyer, shrewd politicians, and various women. Luko deftly shapes his life according to a distinctive, distorted notion of ethics, and he always knows exactly what the next step will be in the quest to reach his goals, much as he also knows who he may have to dupe or blackmail or crush (including sometimes people who have taken him under their wing). The novel is captivating in part because Luko's story is told from the perspective of Tarete. Tarete looks on his master's underhanded deeds with a biased sense of compassion. He never passes judgment, but rather strives to understand Luko's decisions, while calling into question, through his account, just what it means to be a swine.

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István Kerékgyártó

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*rights contact*  
István Kerékgyártó  
kerekyarist@gmail.com





## ISTVÁN KERÉKGYÁRTÓ

*István Kerékgyártó was born in Cluj on Augst 27, 1953. He began his career as an attorney and, in 1999, started writing prose and works for the theater. My Beloved Owner, or the Early Years of a Budding Leader is his tenth novel.*



“Make it quick, Luko. You’ve been dragging me here every day,” the captain said as he sat down at their table in the corner. “That waitress chick must think we’re gay, and that’s why we’re always whispering here in the dark.”

“Procrastination is a risky thing, Mekan. There’s no prize for second place in politics. And we want to win.”

“I don’t want to get into politics...”

“You don’t, but I do, Mekan! And you’re going to help me, because it’s in your interests. So the question is simple. Do you have access to the recruitment files and the dossiers with the associated reports?”

“Of course I do. As captain, I’m the chief investigator at the secret service. The real ques-

tion is do I feel like bothering with the files,” he said with a derisive grin.

At that moment, my owner remembered the first time they met, when Wurm had started off all cheerful and warm and then had suddenly become a snarling brute and had leaned towards him and screamed into his face, calling him a little prick and a piece of shit and threatening to tell the chair of the department about how he had been recruited, and my owner had almost crapped in his pants, and then, instead of telling him to back off, he had cowered and cringed and groveled in front of him. The troubling scene had haunted his dreams for years, and he had punched Wurm in the face a thousand times in his mind. Now, it was payback time.

He lifted his gaze, and with his face twisted in a grimace, he slammed his hand down on the marble tabletop. He then stood up, leaned forward, grabbed the lapels of the captain’s canvas jacket, and spoke in a voice quiet, since they were in a café after all, but still hoarse with the tones of a scream.

“Are you fucking playing with me, Wurm, you mother fucker? Whether you feel like bothering with the files? You think that’s the question? Are you fucking kidding? Do you not get what’s going on here, you little prick? That now, as a member of the Council of Thirty, I’ll kick you out of secret service so fast that you’ll trip over your own dick! And I’ll see to it that you don’t get a job anywhere, not you or your cunt wife, the little secret service typist! I’ll tell the press that Wurm, that wretched maggot, beat me every day in prison. Got it, Wurm?”

He let go of Wurm’s lapels and pushed him back in his chair.

That was one of the happiest moments of my owner’s life, that and the few minutes which followed, as he watched Wurm squirm.

He could tell that Wurm had understood the message perfectly well. Wurm’s face made that very clear. The whites of his eyes had thickened, since he had turned his gaze towards the sky, and his lips were twitching as if he were about to burst out crying. The blood had flowed from his head and his skin was pale. My owner said not a word. He just looked at Wurm as if at a man reborn, a man whose face was gradually beginning to regain its color, whose eyes were scanning this world again.

The captain lifted his gaze to my owner’s face and spoke.

“Why the big outburst, Luko? Let’s be efficient, old friend, shall we? So, what is it, then, that you would like me to do?”

“Mekan, my dear friend,” my owner said, patting Wurm on the back, “I always knew that you were a clever man, but I see you are even cleverer than I thought!”

“A shot of borovi ka?” the captain asked.

“You’ve finally come to your senses and chosen a decent drink,” Luko chuckled. “Young lady, two shots of borovi ka. And please, toss this peppermint tea in the sink and get this gentleman an espresso.”

He smiled at Wurm.

“But from now on, you’re paying.”

“Look Mekan,” my owner said once they had downed the shots, “timing is everything. I was an athlete, you know. Went up against the best.”

“I know. Don’t forget, I know every detail of your life.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I wouldn’t dare threaten you. I’m just saying I know the details. You were a boxer.”

“Yes, I was boxer. And I realized that timing is everything in the ring. I watch my opponent, and he watches me from behind his gloves. We both know we’re each going to try to land

a blow, and when I see his right hand twitch, I catch him off guard with a left hook. Timing. Sometimes just a tenth of a second, but I hit first. I even read somewhere that it’s the same for musicians. That if all the other instruments are already playing, timing is everything, coming in right on time. Mekan, while the others are just starting to prep for the fight, we’ll shatter their plans with a preemptive blow. You see?”

“I think so. But what’s the point of all this?”

“That starting tomorrow, you are going to get yourself into the secret police archives and you are going to see if you can find anything on the following 29 individuals. Whether as informants or the people they were snitching on. Cause that might be useful too. What were their weaknesses, their bad habits, their flaws, their secret passions? Who dropped in on hookers, who was gay, who had debts and how much? Cause that kind of info will be worth gold later.”

“And the timing, Luko? What difference does timing make in all this?”

“A few months from now, when the members of the Council of Thirty, me included, will be ministers, party leaders, high-ranking officeholders, they’re going to get busy destroying all the documents concerning them. Soon the files will start being stolen, then shredded and burned. But we’re going to beat them to it! But Wurm, if you make any copies of the stuff on me, trust me, I’ll find out, cause rest assured, soon enough, I’ll have a few more of my people among you, and I’ll have you flayed and get a furrier to make a nice little throw-rug out of your hide, and I’ll spread it out in my garage and drive over it twice a day.”

Wurm nodded, and my owner suddenly realized that for him, the change of regimes had finally come. He had traded places with his case officer, and he had gone from being the informant held hostage to the hostage taker.



# TOAST *to a* new DEATH

Dávid Kertész is unabashedly young, and he very clearly takes little interest in the European literary traditions out of which he grew. It would be difficult to name a Hungarian writer whose work has left its mark on Kertész's prose, and indeed the closest influence one might find would perhaps be somewhere on the British Isles. This rootlessness, as it were, is not troubling for the reader, and it is certainly of no concern for Kertész. He wants to tell stories, horror stories, unsettling stories, unfamiliar stories, stories which one does

## *The Vampire from Keresztúr*

not really find in the fine arts prose traditions of Central Europe. And yet, though his first volume bears more affinities with the penny dreadfuls of the English tradition, the dark raw materials of his stories are nonetheless taken from the soils of Central Europe, its tragic past and mythical figures and the local legends, which are retold here with a stringent humor which at times echoes with tones of mockery. It is bloodcurdlingly dark fiction at its best, according to the finest recipes. The novel, which is broken up into three chapters ("I Swear, It Happened," "Doesn't Happen to Us," and "I Think It's Going to Happen"), plays both with time and narrative, with past and present. There are no heroes, only perpetrators, no morals, just the assumption that good exists – though this assumption is sustained primarily by the reader. With this satchel, we journey through the past, the present, and the future. We venture into the gulag, we drink senselessly and make love senselessly until eventually we come to the end of the world, but I forewarn you, good reader, that here too we shall find no solace. Kertész's first volume of short stories offers a lean, masterfully crafted minimalist prose. If we were to insist on finding works from the canon of world literature with which Kertész's books bears some affinities, it might be reasonable to mention the writings of Philip K. Dick or Chuck Palahniuk, though certainly Bram Stoker's classic *Dracula* also comes to mind. However, we find in Kertész neither miracles nor catharsis, for everything is told with a bored sense of monotony, and even being a vampire is just another identity.

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Dávid Kertész  
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*rights contact*  
Attila Sipos  
sipos.attila@kmtg.hu





## DÁVID KERTÉSZ

*was born in 1993 in Ukraine, in the Hungarian-speaking town of Tiszaásvány. He is a member of the Hungarian PEN club, and in addition to his work as a writer, he is also an editor and a permanent author for the literary-cultural supplement of the Frontier Garrison Writers' Academy, in which, in addition to his fiction, his interviews and reviews also appear. In 2018, he won the Debut Award for prose of the periodical Irodalmi Jelen.*



The whiskey was bootleg, the music was off key, and the cigars were from somewhere in the Far East. I loved the place. Evening had fallen. The wind was howling outside, the piano clamoring inside. I was knocking back my third glass, trying to get drunk as quickly as possible in the hopes that I might sleep a little better than usual.

Must have been about midnight when the door swung open and everyone turned to catch a glimpse of the newcomer. The piano fell silent, and everyone just stared at the entrance. The pianist broke the silence by closing the lid to the keyboard on his fingers.

The newcomer strolled over next to me, stopped at the bar, and spoke.

“A shot of whiskey for me, and one for my new friend here.”

The barkeep poured two shots of whiskey and we knocked them back.

“I like a free drink as much as the next guy,” I said, “but do you mind if I ask to what do I owe this kind show of generosity, my dear...”

He was an odd man, this stranger. His face was sunken, his skin gray and dry, I couldn't even see his eyes in the shadow cast by his broad-rimmed hat.

“Hangman,” he said, tipping his hat. “John Hangman.”

“Onself,” I replied. “Mike Onself. So, to what do I owe this extra round?”

The stranger smiled. His rotting teeth looked improbably long. His gums seemed to have retreated almost all the way to the roof of his mouth, and his eyes had an unusual glint, though perhaps it was nothing more than the weak flicker of the candlelight.

“First we drink,” he said, “then we go outside and you die.”

He pulled his jacket to one side and put his hand on his revolver. It wasn't the first time someone had picked a quarrel with me in a bar. I'm not the quickest draw in the west, and I'm not the best shot either, but I'd always managed to pull through. I either talked myself out of it or cheated and, in the most extreme cases, shot. I wasn't too terribly frightened this time either.

“Mr. Hangman, you're not the first person who has wanted to put a hole in my head, but you are the first to invite me to join you for a drink before getting down to business. Do we

perhaps know each other? Did I seduce your daughter or your wife or your sister or brother?”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“Then what?”

He pulled his colorless lips into a smile again and took off his hat. His hair was completely gray, he was balding in spots, his forehead had scars on it, but it was his eyes that really revealed just who I was dealing with. The two dried little balls sunk deep into his skull made it very clear that he was among the ranks of the undead.

“I will gladly tell you who I am, if that is your last wish.”

I nodded and leaned back in my chair, wrapping my fingers around the handle of my revolver. I knew that you cannot kill the undead, but it felt good to know that I had a weapon too.

“I'm listening.”

“Two years ago,” he said, “I was enjoying a drink in this very tavern. I didn't have any money to pay for the last round, so I grabbed another guy's drink and shot him. They caught me just a few yards from the place and dragged me off to the gallows. But the guy I had shot put a curse on me, and now I come back whenever there is a full moon. I pick somebody out and ask him to join me for a drink. Once we've had a few shots, we go outside and I finish him off. I pay for the drinks, a kind of gesture to the man sentenced to die. Cause whoever I pick, he dies, but at least he should have a decent evening. Pretty nice of me, huh?”

“Very generous, indeed. But then if you don't mind, I'll have another drink. If it's my last round, that is.”

“As many rounds as you like.”

He smiled. I asked for another whiskey and we clinked our glasses together and knocked them back. I ordered another and again we clinked glasses. Cause my name ain't Mike Oneself if I can't drink a fish out of the sea, or an undead ghoul out of the Rusty Horseshoe. So we kept drinking, and eventually the whiskey ran out. Then the gin. The other customers in the place started putting bets on us, and soon the tequila had run out too. When I asked for a shot of vodka, Hangman put his hand on my arm.

“Enough,” he said. “You and me, outside, now.”

I got up and the two of us stumbled out the door into the street. We were standing face to face, maybe three yards apart. We grabbed our pistols and tried to take aim. We were both seeing at least quadruple by then, but the time to settle accounts had come. The first shots rang out. Not a single bullet hit the mark. We stumbled a few steps closer to each other. When the second round of shots was fired, I could almost feel the barrel of the pistol near my forehead, but then a few rays of sunshine peaked over the horizon in the east, and at the sound of the rooster's crow, John Hangman began to smolder and smoke, and suddenly, he turned to ash. Everyone came rushing out of the tavern, and they picked me up on their shoulders and cheered. They all wanted to treat me to a drink. It was the first time in my life, I think, that I have ever thought to myself, you know what, one more round, probably not a good idea.



Are We **ALL**  
**PRISONERS** of Our  
**OWN** **BODIES!**

With the publication of his autobiographical novel *Incognito* in 2010, Tibor Noé Kiss caused quite a sensation in the world of Hungarian literature. He showed remarkable bravery by bringing the question of transsexuality into contemporary Hungarian literature, and he also boldly stepped onto the cultural stage as the first transgender Hungarian writer. His books have always been met with resounding critical success, and in their structure and poetic uses of language, they have always gone beyond the social questions of gender identity. His writings offer a stirring show of elementary insight, and he is sensitive to the most subtle tremors of the human soul. The plot of *Lands Unknown* centers around an accident which comes to play a decisive role in the fates of several of the characters.

*Lands  
 Unknown*

Dorka, the protagonist of the novel, ends up in a waking coma because of the accident. She is a prisoner in her own body, from which she is unable to escape. We see into the minds of Dorka's father and the two young people connected to his family by the events, and through this, we learn their stories and the ways in which they were affected by the accident. All the while, however, the characters do not really speak, and thus they cannot build ties to one another. The failure to communicate and the ethereal loneliness of modern man permeate every page of the book. The characters know less than the reader, as they learn only small details of the story that ties them together, and they are therefore unable to make good decisions. And yet one senses throughout the story their fervent desire to connect with one another, to break free of the trap into which they have fallen, and to change the events, a desire which seems, alas, utterly hopeless. One could even hazard the notion that the lands unknown are the emotional worlds of the other, and that life thus stumbles onward towards tragedy. And indeed, this is what happens in the denouement, in which Kiss borrows from Dostoevsky, and the past appears as the only thing that one can see clearly, though it still hardly helps solve the problems of the present. The story is told with a masterfully crafted rhythm, and the scenes, which at times seem to shift with the drama of the genre of film, show the similarities among the characters. Though they come from strikingly different social backgrounds and seem to have different mentalities and value systems, they all find themselves very alone in this world, surrounded by the continuous clamor of artificial noises, and all craving the impossible: to know the lands and landscapes of one another's souls.

*author*  
 Tibor Noé Kiss

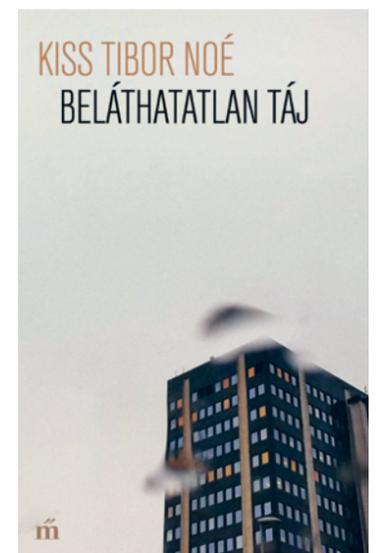
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 orzoy.agnes@lira.hu





## TIBOR NOÉ KISS

*Tibor Noé Kiss was born in 1976 in Budapest. He studied sociology and journalism, but he was also contracted as a football player for one of the largest football clubs in Hungary. He works as a journalist, editor, and organizer of literary programs. He currently lives in Pécs.*



choke down the sugar-free Cobra. I don't want to know what's in it. It's weak swill, but it gets me revved up. I got hardly slept a wink last night, I'm half in a coma. I roll myself a cig. The path behind the tire place is narrow, a concrete wall on one side, barbed wire on top, piles of trash on the other side. I kinda like the smell of rubber. A few years ago, Anulu found a plastic bag here full of whimpering puppies. They hadn't even opened their eyes yet. We tried to feed them, but you couldn't. Sheriff bashed their heads in, and then we buried them all in the yard. There are a lot of shards of glass on the ground, and they get stuck in the soles of my shoes. All that protect the environment stuff should start here, in these woods. As I

bend down, the Cobra comes back up, and I almost barf. The woods are quiet, at most there's the rumble of the highway, but we can't hear that anymore. I continue down the path, getting ready for the next challenge. Have to make it from the tire place to the highway before dawn. And I can't take anything with me, just my cell. It's easy enough till you reach the barracks, but then it's a kilometer and a half through the woods to the overpass. A van with a matt finish. Now that's creepy. Though there's nothing there, just trees and some hookers who wandered too far. They take them in, then ciao, everyone goes their own way. I'm not in the mood to explore. Just want to note a few places that I'll be able to find in the dark. They say that carrier pigeons find their way based on memory. Or maybe they use the earth's magnetic field, what do I know. My sister and I watched that show on TV where the scientists argue about that kind of crap. Not that I give a shit about the earth's magnetic field, or carrier pigeons for that matter, though at least they don't make any racket in the morning. My sister's crazy about birds. She's the one who told me about how pigeons coo. Coo, what the hell kind of word is that anyway? My sister loves stupid words like that. I've reached the big blacktop in front of the barracks in the meantime. There's a black van parked under the trees. Its back door is open. Nobody to be seen. Just like in an action movie. If it really were a movie, I'd take out my gun and sneak up on the van, but I'm not really sure what to do next. They might be watching me from somewhere, like in one of those candid camera shows. Someone might jump out of the car in a bear costume. Or maybe it's packed full of dead bodies. That would be totally not cool. I take another minute or two to ponder my choices and then head towards the back of the van, whatever will be will be. I walk around the open door and look inside. It's dark inside, just a few vertical streaks of light. I blink a couple of times to see if my eyes will get used to the dark. Not a sound. Not even the birds. Can hear my heart pounding though. Totally creepy. Slowly, the whole picture comes into focus. The streaks of light are bars. It's a cage, a fucking huge cage. Suddenly, something moves inside it, as if it realized that I was looking at it. A big body, the color of sand. I can hear it panting softly. I hope it's a dog, not a lion. And not a person. Better get the fuck out of here.

\*

I feel like a woman again. I can't quite put the feeling in words, but I feel like a woman. I want to put on the geisha gown that I bought at the thrift shop a few months ago. Dorina liked it first, but it was too narrow for her in the shoulders, but it looked good on me. Dorina clapped when she saw me in it. She said I looked maddeningly good. They call them kimonos. Mine is gold with fiery red flowers. I look at myself in the mirror, my waist never looked so slender, though I haven't lost any weight, and these days I'm not even trying. I think I feel like a woman because he's a man and he wants me. I could tell from his voice, his breathing, his scent. What he wrote, that doesn't matter so much, cause men always want to find some way to bowl you over. What matters is his voice and his heartbeat, cause when we're really paying attention to each other, we can hear each other's heartbeat too.

I knew he would find me, and I knew he would write. I knew as soon as he started walking towards his car. He stopped in front of the bar for a sec and turned around, and I just pretended to be looking at my cell-phone but of course I was watching him, and all the while the disco songs that I love were playing in the bar. I love the kimono too, but it would be a bit too much for today. I slip it off, and I'm standing in front of the mirror in nothing but a pair of stockings. I don't know when the last time was that I put on nylon stockings. Mom always wore stockings and clip-ons. And she powdered her face like a proper lady, she said. A proper lady. I want to be a proper lady too. When I think of her, and of her voice, I feel like I could be a proper lady, and all on my own.

I put on my favorite blouse, the one with penguins on it. I like tops with birds on them, cause birds symbolize freedom for me, even birds that can't fly, like penguins. Penguins live in families, and the parents raise their young together. My waist isn't quite as slender in the blouse, and I notice the scars from the cuts on my forearms. I was pretty much still a child back then, but I don't want to bother trying to explain, no one believes what I say anyway. A lot of people are alarmed by the scars, though around here everyone does it, and no one's died yet. I take off the blouse and put on a thick, knitted dress. It's very serious. The sleeve is tight on my forearm. It doesn't slip. It covers the scars. I don't want to think about them today. I don't want to think about anything bad.



*And If*  
**JOHN THE**  
**BAPTIST** *Had*  
**THE** *Been*  
**MESSIAH?**

Robert Milbacher's novel offers a story of redemption in which Saint John the Baptist is the real chosen one. We are, all the while, in a small village somewhere in Hungary, set against backdrops familiar from Milbacher's other writings. The regular

## *Angelic Greetings*

practice of religious life was possible, if with restraint, under the Kádár regime, and it was subtly intermixed with superstition and the beliefs expected by the communist system. Slowly, light is shed on the past and on how the dean, who has a suspicious past, came to replace the former priest. The dean, in accordance with his last wishes, is beheaded on the first page of the book by Pista, the handyman at the church. The narrative structure of the novel mixes the stories of the people of the village, which are sometimes coarse and sometimes bewilderingly absurd and humorous, with linear and biblical storytelling. Different narrative voices reveal to the reader the story of the village dean's turn towards a new faith and his slow descent into madness (or perhaps his conversion?) and the tale of Zechariah, or rather the circumstances of the birth of Saint John the Baptist as a kind of pseudo-gospel. These voices create three different narrative planes, with exciting shifts of perspective in different narrative languages and varying poetic styles. The subtly blasphemous way in which the village interprets the world of religion and belief is brilliantly intertwined with the voices of Zechariah, his wife, and their adopted daughter, or in other words the narrative voices of the fictive biblical texts. The stories of the fates of the villagers, which unfold in the tales from the tavern, are as interesting as the details concerning the dean's past and the unusual circumstances of the birth of the new savior. This gives the narrative a rich musicality and complexity which makes the book particularly enjoyable, not to mention the way in which it presents a shared cultural treasure which inspires us to raise new interpretive questions through these texts and to rethink how biblical stories might work today.

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Róbert Milbacher

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*rights contact*  
Ágnes Orzóy  
orzoy.agnes@lira.hu





## RÓBERT MILBACHER

*Róbert Milbacher was born in 1971 in Nagybjom, a small village in Hungary. He graduated from the University of Szeged with a degree in History and Hungarian Studies, and he then completed a doctorate in nineteenth-century Hungarian literature. He teaches literary history at the University of Pécs. His first book, The Betrothal of the Virgin Mary, won the Margó Prize in 2016.*



He went up the stairs, and indeed with every step he took, it seemed as if his naked soles were barely touching the cold stone, as if he were being lifted by wings, or at least so it seemed, though he could not have said where the unusual feeling was coming from. Then, taking care that the fragrant grasses not catch flame and the hot smoke not burn his hands, he sprinkled the sacrifice intended for the glory of the Lord on the glowing embers of the altar.

The smoke filled the space around the altar with an inconceivable and at the same time excruciatingly sweet scent, and Zechariah, who had never experienced anything like it before, thought that it could only mean that the Lord had accepted the sacrifice from his hands.

A sense of joy surged through every fiber of his body, an elation so sudden and boundless that all that remained of his very being was this exultation, which pierced his every cell and which was, in truth, unbearably painful and yet uplifting as if to the very skies, and he felt as if it were almost tearing his body to pieces, and then, a moment, later, the blindingly sharp light, perhaps only a sudden flash, burned everything from his eyes.

Then just as suddenly, everything fell dark around him, and he remembered nothing of what had happened to him in next to God's Altar.

He realized that people were speaking to him. They were not saying his name, but rather were sputtering distant, incomprehensibly foreign words at him, words that sounded like little more than gibberish. As if they were asking over and over again, repeating the question more and more deliriously while the words themselves almost seemed to shatter into meaningless shards of sound, whether this meant, surely, that Jahve had remembered them again.

Those who were there say that they were never able to forget the look on his face, alarmed, almost delirious with fear, when the priest who had performed the sacrifice stumbled forth from the Sanctuary and then collapsed helplessly on the stairs of the temple.

For he had had just enough strength to look at them, to cast his gaze at those foreign faces. As if he were looking for someone among them who would call him by his real name again and invite him to rejoin them, and he would tell them that there was nothing wrong. But they probably didn't recognize him, so utterly had he changed in the short stretch of time during

which he had been in the Holy of Holies, for who could recognize him like this, stripped of everything that he once had been, almost like a bare, whimpering animal trembling in the scorching light of the sun.

At first, they just stared in wonder, then some of them began to speak to him, but only from afar, for they dared not go any closer, as they knew that the Angel of the Lord had paid a visit upon him, or perhaps the shadow of the Lord himself had fallen on him, pressing from him with its immense weight all that remained of him that was human. He felt as if their incomprehensible words were cutting through his skin like sharp claws, tearing the remaining flesh from his face, ripping apart the tendons, the nerves, as if greedily searching for something, and then, disappointed, they would abandon him with not the slightest trace preserved in memory, for what memory could possibly compensate for the nearness of the Almighty.

He could not open his mouth to speak and calm them, or rather, to ask their forgiveness, for he sensed that, although he would not have been able to explain why, he had to plead for their forgiveness. Somehow, the words whose path seemed blocked had come to life in him like so many little animals. They were scampering nimbly hither and fro, but first and foremost inwards, towards the undiscovered darkness. At first, he felt as if they were settling on the walls of his veins, and then he felt a torturous pang, as if they were devouring his lungs, his liver, his kidneys... But there was nothing he could do to stop them. He could but stare, terrified and helpless, as they consumed what was left of him, as with each passing moment he was more

and more depredated, ever emptier inside, until in the end, the only thing that remained was the skin stuck to his bones like dried parchment. A body weightless, with neither flesh nor any other living tissue. And then he accepted this too, for why tremble at the will of the Lord if, after all, there is nowhere to flee.

He may well even have thrown up, for he could sense the taste of something more bitter than bile in his mouth, and there was something covering his teeth, thicker and stickier than saliva. And when he regained his voice, he would feel that bitter taste on his tongue if he spoke or even if he merely took a breath. He could neither swallow it nor spit it out. And true, while it is hardly pleasant to admit it, after several long minutes had passed, he realized that he had urinated on himself. He felt a cold, pungent wetness on his thighs, all the way down to his knees. He was trembling uncontrollably, though the sun was burning down on him with merciless indifference. He felt as if all the warmth had flowed from him and gathered into a small, shameful puddle under his kneecaps in a barely palpable depression in the unevenly worn, cool marble.

He lay helpless on the steps of the Temple, leaning on his right elbow, his head half raised. Every bone in his body felt empty, as if even the slightest breeze might lift him and drop him in the courtyard. Alarmed, he tried to grab the marble, which had been worn shiny, as if it were the last thing firm and certain to which he had any claim. Nails scratching at the cold marble, struggling despairingly to catch hold of something – the onlookers, frozen rigid, may well have seen little more. This too was just grotesque clawing, yet no one laughed.







## ÉVA PÉTERFY-NOVÁK

*Éva Péterfy-Novák was born in 1961 in Diósgyőr. She did not pursue any ambition to be a writer, but rather began to write, at age 52, better to grasp and work through personal tragedies she herself had endured. Her first book, A Woman, was a tremendous success in Hungary, and it put Péterfy-Novák at the forefront of contemporary Hungarian literature. She and her husband run a writers' academy, and Péterfy-Novák writes articles on current events and works as an activist. She currently lives in Italy.*



I'm standing in the big tub in the kitchen. Mom is kneeling in front of me and washing my belly with a sponge. I am looking at the hair on the top of her head. It's pretty. Light-brown. The curls combed back and carefully intertwined. We went to the hairdresser's yesterday. She always takes me when she goes, and I always decide that when I grow up, I'll be a hairdresser. I'm looking at the tresses of hair on her head and thinking I could do it too. Maybe even better. And then she wouldn't have to pay for it.

She turns me around and soaps up my back. Then she rinses off the soap and turns me back around. She looks me up and down and mumbles something about how good lord, what

a big girl you are now. Though I've been big for some time now. She just didn't notice. Suddenly, she has a serious look on her face.

"Don't get undressed in front of your father," she says.

I don't quite know what she means, but I'm not really listening either. I'm looking at my feet and showing her where there's still some dirt. She washes it off without saying a thing, though she coughs a little while she scrubs.

She's breathing slowly, not like usual. As if she were doing it on purpose. Then she grabs my arms. She wants me to look at her. And pay attention. I keep looking down. There's a black spot on the bottom of the tub where the glaze has come off. The shape of a pear. I'm looking at the pear. I can smell the soap. And then suddenly I understand what she said, as if she had said it again or as if I were hearing an echo. I lift my gaze slowly, like how she's breathing slowly. It's like we weren't even there. I look at her.

"Don't let him look at you like that, and don't primp and preen in front of him."

She starts to breathe more quickly.

I don't say a word, though there are a thousand questions I'd like to ask. I'm starting to breathe quickly too.

I take note of what she says, because mom is always right. I take note because I'm sure she knows best, knows what to do and how to avoid trouble. Mom told me that toast that's been toasted dark brown won't taste good, but I still insisted on dark brown toast. I'd heard the girl with the big ears at the place next door bragging to her friends about how she was so grown up that she ate toast that had been toasted almost black. Mom even let the bread burn when I asked her to. It was terrible, terribly bitter. Mom also told me that jumping from the swing

while screaming at the top of my lungs would be trouble too, and of course she was right. The scrape on my knee is a constant reminder that mom is always right.

She grabs my towel from the stool and wraps it around me. I hate the cloth towel. It's hard, and it's rough against my skin. This time, I don't whine for a change.

I've got a really bad feeling. I try to breathe slowly again, but I can't. I'm afraid. Like when I broke the little plate with the rose design. Though I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't broken mom's prized treasure. I don't know why my stomach is in knots.

I'm all clean, but I still feel dirty. I tell mom that I'm cold. She grabs my pajamas and helps me put them on. She keeps talking the whole time, a little confusedly.

"You know, dear, there are fathers who harm their own daughters. I've even heard of cases, they write about them in the newspaper, when a father rapes his own daughter."

My mind is racing. I'm trying to remember if I know this word, rape. I want to know what it means. It must be some terrible crime. I can tell that mom is very tense. What does it mean, rape? Is it like when people kick somebody, or spit on him? Or maybe like that time that really dirty man threw up all over the woman at the newspaper stand?

I can tell from the expression on mom's face that rape is something even worse, something really horrible.

I've gone totally numb. Why is she talking such nonsense? Fathers who do stuff like that, those are other fathers! My father is gentle and kind. My father is a good man. I'm breathing very fast, but I don't dare say a word. Mom's hands are trembling. But then I can't hold it back any longer.

"But dad would never do anything horrible, ever!" I say, almost in a scream.

"Of course he wouldn't, honey, but you know, men aren't good. Men are bad, and they're capable of doing anything."

Mom's hands are still shaking, and she seems to regret having brought the whole thing up. She braids my hair nice and tight, like she always does after we've washed it. She says you have to braid it or otherwise it will look like a haystack in the morning. Because it's important to keep our hair looking nice. Messy hair is for crazies and lazies. Crazies, they're crazy, but laziness is a sin. The worst sin. Mom is not lazy. Mom is always doing something, no matter what. I wish she wouldn't clean all the time. I wish she would pay more attention to me. Even now she's talking about this horrible thing, and just talking and talking instead of paying attention to me.

Though there are so many things I want to ask. I want to know what I should do. Should I be careful not to look at dad if he sits down across from me? Should I not run to greet him when he comes home from work? Or not sit in his lap if he wraps his arms around me? Is that primping and preening? Or when he lies down next to me and tells me a bedtime story about the three little pigs, should I not snuggle up to him like his little croissant (that's what he calls me)? But I don't dare ask anything, because then mom will think that I primped and preened until in the end dad raped me.

She takes me into the bedroom, puts me on my bed in the corner, and tucks me in. I ask her to stay, to talk to me. She says she has to tidy up in the kitchen, but that she'll come back when she's done. Ok, I say, I'll be waiting for you. I'll just think a little till you come back. But she always does the same thing. She goes to tidy up so that I'll fall asleep before she comes back.



# WINNERS

# AND LOSERS

In Miklós György Száraz's novel *Shared Lots*, two very different worlds collide. We are offered glimpses into the everyday lives of Tim, a young man who lives according to his own rules, and a family which at first appears quite normal. As we learn more about the characters of the story, however, we discover that the twin boys in the family are not the easiest cases. They end up away from home because of a change of schools, and Liza, their little sister, has a maniacal passion for mountains, mountain climbing, and environmental protection (there's a strong dose of Greta Thunberg in her). Her parents are very worried about her, in no small part because her climbing stunts often bear too much of a resemblance to suicide

## *Shared lots*

attempts. In the meantime, a one-legged homeless man who lives somewhere in the neighborhood starts shuffling around in the husband's wake. The tale is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, but we come to know Tim, an unusual character, from an internal point of view. His story is complex and full of losses, and yet it seems as if happiness were always little more than a stone's throw away. He and his friend break into the family's apartment and steal, among other things, a winning lottery ticket. They split the money—a sizeable amount—but find that it brings them more grief than anything else. Tim, who becomes homeless in the meantime, gives the money back to the family, but it hardly helps them solve their problems either, much as Tim's life remains a mess. He loses his sweetheart to a deadly disease and then his leg when he goes on something of a rampage and climbs a mountain, and yet, alongside the money, this will be one of the links that ties Tim to the family. As for the money, no one has touched it, since Liza's parents have kept it in the box it was in when they got it. Thanks to Liza's unusual perceptiveness and her adult grasp of the world around her, the meeting between Tim and her parents goes off without a hitch, and indeed the meeting seems to promise some hope for change, suggesting that while incident and accident may well play decisive roles in our fates, we may also have some role ourselves.

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Miklós György Száraz

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*rights contact*  
András Kozma  
rights@scolar.hu





## MIKLÓS GYÖRGY SZÁRAZ

*Miklós György Száraz was born in Budapest. He studied history and archival sciences at the Faculty of Arts. He has worked as a journalist and literary director for publishers, and in addition to his novels, he mainly produces history albums. In 2003, he received the József Attila Award for his writings.*



Quite unbelievable to think that they won with our ticket and then tossed us a few crumbs from our winnings, but it's still the most plausible explanation, because any other explanation is even more unbelievable.”

With this complicated sentence, which seemed quite unlikely coming from the mouth of a child, she opened the door on her father, who at first had no idea what she was talking about, but who then remembered what the excitement of the trip some five months earlier and the shock of being burglarized had erased from his brain, something, indeed, he had wanted to forget anyway, as he saw it as proof of his own cravenness. He hadn't hidden it. On the contrary, he had put it out for public viewing by

sticking it to the refrigerator door, but only because he would have been even more ashamed of himself if he had hidden it.

He didn't say a word. He wanted to gain a little time to consider the issue, though he sensed that the girl was right. However improbable it seemed, of the improbable explanations that had been rattling around in his head for a day now, this was the most plausible and also the most unsettling. For if this were true, then clearly the whole thing was his fault, and if he wasn't careful, he would have to shoulder the shame not only of gambling, of distrust and lack of faith, but also of collusion with very people who had burglarized him.

The little girl was watching her father closely. She felt neither pity nor compassion for him. She simply understood him. For such was her nature. She was scientific, precise, and alarmingly persevering. She then went into her room and only came out an hour later. She rummaged around in the kitchen, took a mandarin from the wooden bowl, but she didn't peel it, she just went back into the study, got comfortable in the armchair opposite her father's desk, took a whiff of the mandarin, and sank into thought. Ábrahám looked at his daughter and sank into thought himself.

“We know nothing. We haven't even the slightest inkling of what is going on in the heads of our loved ones, the people with whom we share a roof. We know what they are like. We know what they like and what they don't like. We have some sense of their yearnings. But we still don't know what's going on inside their heads.”

Lest the magic of the moment be broken, lest he call the girl's attention to himself, he continued to fiddle with the stuff on his desk. He acted as if he were writing something, working on his speech, and the little girl just kept taking whiffs of the mandarin, lost in her own world, which for those minutes was the only reality as far as she was concerned, and Ábrahám could not decide whether he wanted to know where he thoughts had strayed or whether everything was just perfect the way it was and it was safest if he didn't know any more than he was able to know.

Liza Ábrahám was thinking of the men who, some five months earlier, had climbed up scaffolding which had since been taken down and then put back up again somewhere else in the city and made it to the roof of the building next to theirs. From there, they had clambered onto the roof of their building and lowered themselves down to the balcony, barely one and a half square meters, in front of her room on the fourth floor and broken into their apartment. She wasn't angry at them and she wasn't afraid of them either. She thought of them like she thought of the villains in superhero stories, who are compelled to commit evil acts, who

cannot do otherwise, for such is their fate, and they follow their paths, paths from which they cannot stray, they hesitate, but in vain, for they must play their roles, roles which, she was quite certain, they had not yet finished playing.

She could have let her thoughts wander to a thousand other things. The mountain, for instance, which but two days earlier she had never even heard of. She had stuck a picture of it on the wall of her room, not so much because of the beauty of the mountain itself, but rather because of the magical sound of its name: Zangezur.

Ábrahám watched her with a sense of amazement and aversion. “Just a kid,” he would hear people say on the street or the tram, and it always made him sad. We are not worthy of the reward, he thought. “Just a kid” is like saying “just life.” An adult draws sustenance from this, lives off the child inside him as long as it lasts. Looking at his youngest child, it was this that was lost. She was an adult child. She never played. He feared for her, and he was also a little bit fearful of her. It was even difficult to be strict with her. She did everything that she said she would do, and she did everything they asked her to do, whether it was schoolwork or chores, but she did it as if she weren't even there. Homework, writing exercises, cleaning up, washing dishes, going to the store, taking out the trash. Her mother was sometimes bitter. She felt that her daughter would not let her get close to her.

“As if she weren't living among us, as if she were somewhere else where other things are important.”

Ábrahám understood. *Like you just like you exactly like you.* He understood very well.

She could have thought of a thousand other things, but she was thinking of the burglars. That it would be good to get to know them. Then she thought of Christmas. Because of the scent of the mandarin? Then the mountain. *Zangezur Zangezur zangezurzangezurzangezur...* She muttered the words until she ran out of breath, but she waited in vain for the sounds to switch places, for the word to become Zurgezán or Ganzezur. It didn't, and this steadfastness, the word's fidelity to itself thrilled her and strengthened her conviction that she had stumbled across a magic mountain and a magic word.

She could have thought of her gym class that morning, since she had almost broken her neck on the wall bars. But as she was constantly climbing things, fences, trees, bannisters, driving her mother quite mad ever since her kindergarten years, she had almost broken her neck so many times that the incident that morning hadn't left much of a mark in her mind.



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EDGE

Mátyás Szöllősi's novel *Illegal* contains two exciting, dynamic novellas. In the first story, *Guest Performance*, a murder case unfolds. We learn of the murder committed by Ádám Fazakas, a once successful pianist, from the perspective of his lawyer, Illés, a man in his 30s (whose family name is never revealed). Though the backbone of the narrative is the dialogue between the attorney and his client, we are still given a very precise portrait of the challenges with which Illés is grappling in his private life. Illés is struggling to meet his

*Illegal*

parents' and, in particular, his father's expectations, but try as he may, he fails time and time again. He also wants to sort out the problems in his relationship with his girlfriend Anikó, but alas, she never answers his calls. Power, corruption, and the deepening moral and cultural crisis of the elite are all themes of the novella. Illés, who is both narrator and an analyst of the events and the characters' inner worlds, draws parallels between the murder case and his own life. The ever-palpable sense of guilt generates a tension which keeps the reader glued to the page. The protagonist of the other novella, *Illegal* (the eponymous story of the volume), is also a man in his 30s who is overworked and weary of his job at a multinational company. He has decided to take stock of his life. On a rainy Friday afternoon, he happens to run into an old friend, B. As teenagers, the two of them had passed the time by covering the walls in certain spots in the city with graffiti. The two of them recall the many stunts they pulled and the many times they put themselves in serious danger. They go to one of their old haunts and think back on one of their most unsettling escapades, when they painted the train cars at a train station in the countryside, and they also recall how they had once had to escape by climbing out of the windows of a moving train. The story unfolds both in their past and present, and it offers a stirring glimpse into the graffiti subculture in Hungary in the first decade of the new millennium.

*author*  
Mátyás Szöllősi

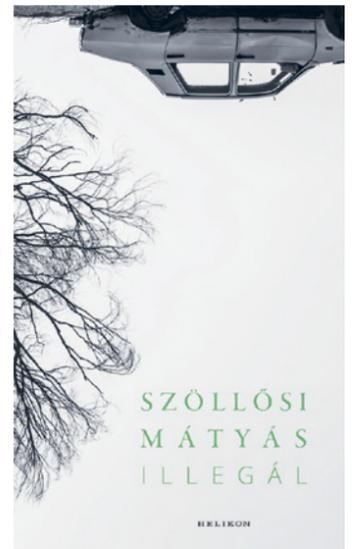
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Zoltan.Pap@kolibrikiado.hu





## MÁTYÁS SZÖLLŐSI

*Máttyás Szöllősi was born in 1984 in Budapest. He is a poet, writer, and photojournalist. His works have been translated into English, Croatian, and German. In 2017, he won the Margó Prize for his volume of short stories entitled Alternating Current, which includes a short story which later grew into the novella Guest Performance.*



Supa talked a lot over the course of the two hours or more that it took us to get there. It was typical of him to dominate the situation, he was pretty insatiable, and today I better understand that the way he reacted, the way he spoke, it was more because of his lack of self-confidence than because of any sort of desire to stifle or intimidate any of us. He and K. had made such perfect couple because they seemed to agree and to accept entirely that they were different in every way. Today, were we able to sit together again in the heat, I would think them beautiful. At the time, undoubtedly because of my lack of experience, they were simply incomprehensible.

Supa was retelling in great detail an incident that had happened a few days earlier. With

tremendous verve, perhaps coloring things a bit from time to time. I don't remember whether the whole story seemed like a bad omen from the perspective of our plans for the day, but it was disturbing. B. and I sat quietly, trying to pick out, between the sounds of the clatter of metal, the essence of the whole thing, which turned out, in this case, to be that no matter what happened, we would go with even greater resolve.

By then, there were tons of people doing graffiti, mostly in Budapest, but all over the country too, and anyone who was interested, at the beginning of the new millennium, would find works wide-ranging in quality. Everyone was familiar with the wall in Filaorigát, as if it were some very upscale display case where the finest works were put on show, and all you had to do was glance out the window of the commuter train. There were other places too, of course, half-legal or illegal, where you could find the most amazing drawings. Mostly running along the railway lines, on the various stretches leading just in or out of town, like the endless concrete walls near the spot known as "Sharp Corner," or the Rákosrendező station, or the end station of subway line three. The gray surfaces of Kőbánya were all pleading for some paint anyway. But you could find impressive works in the heart of the city too. In the underpasses for the tram by Fővám Square or Clark Square. They were both perfect spots with the highest quality walls, and after night had fallen you didn't really have to do anything other than get yourself there. By then, the city had been completely blitzed with graffiti. Quite visible everywhere, though the various surfaces didn't necessarily make clear to the people living around them what the whole thing was about. Lots of them just used the cans of paint in their hands to leave some kind of mark at any cost. No aspirations for perfection or improvement ever took root in them. I remember the ring street start to finish, and how in some of the strikingly prominent spots a clumsy chrome drawing would screech at the innocent passerby. Tarpaulin trucks were scattered across the parking lots by the shopping centers, and you could easily tell where the scrawlers were headed with their black cans and fat caps in the morning mist. The tags were almost overlapping on the walls of the buildings, which had been waiting to be replastered for decades. There were no cameras to deter us, and the police presence in the areas around most of the popular spots was a joke. The more serious groups had all claimed some part of the city as theirs, and a member of a different clique wan-

dered in at his own risk, and our thirst for adrenalin had grown strong, like in the body of an extreme athlete.

The adventurous members of one of the Pest crews had descended into a stretch of the tunnel near the subway stop by Nagyvárád Square a few days earlier. At the time, you could get down through a ventilation shaft. Supa spoke about the whole incident for a good three quarters of an hour. He had the ability to conjure the events as if he himself had actually taken part in the undertaking. It was a pleasure to listen to him tell his tale, and also pretty disturbing.

The only scalp more prized than a train car is the subway. In the subway, every flick of the finger counts. When you're standing next to a wall or a train car, you have an hour or so, let's say, to dither. Down in the subway, you have no idea how much time you have to do anything. Just getting down there is scary enough. The claustrophobia, the dust. The light from the occasional lamps that glimmer in the darkness is more unsettling than helpful, and you don't have many ways to get out. You can only move slowly at the side of the tracks or even on the platform between the trains. It's a fucking maze, the whole place, and at any moment some prick or some group of pricks might pop up and start asking what the fuck you're doing down there. Pricks who, unlike you, know every square meter of every tunnel, and where the live rails are, which shaft covers it would be best to avoid, and when the subway cars, which can easily crush you under their wheels, are going to start moving.

The guys had finished painting. Everything went smoothly, at least until they got back to the ventilation shaft. Supa said that they had used some kind of rudimentary alpinist technique to get up and down, but this claim sounded more like proof that he had just heard the story from someone who had heard it from someone. Info gets around quick, and though the details are distorted, the essence remains the same. One of the guys stepped on some cover plate which hadn't been properly attached, or maybe the material was just worn, but either way, the iron snapped under the kid's weight. He plunged nine meters down, to the bottom of the shaft. I remember holding the bag with the cans tight in my lap while Supa told the story, despite the heat. The kid was like 20 years old, and the most awful part, his brother saw the whole thing, how he died, cause he was there too. And of course after his brother had fallen, the kid looked down the shaft and screamed into the darkness.



*The*  
**HUNGARIAN**  
*Who* **REVOLUTIONIZED**  
**THE PRESS**

It's quite possible that very few people know that the most prestigious award in journalism was named after a man of Hungarian descent. István Wisinger's documentary novel *Pulitzer* presents the life and work of Joseph Pulitzer, the world-famous press magnate, in captivating detail. The narrative perspectives shift, as the story begins from the point of view of an omniscient narrator and then changes to a first-person narrative from Pulitzer's perspective, but the

## *Pulitzer*

bulk of the novel is told from the point of view of Wisinger's documentary narrator, who tells the reader about Pulitzer's life and the fates of several rival press powers. The narrative also touches on historically significant moments, such as the Spanish-American War, the Cuban War of Independence, developments in the sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Panama scandal, and the construction of the Statue of Liberty in New York, which hardly would have been possible without Pulitzer. But the pinnacle of Pulitzer's life, in addition to his successes as a businessman, was undoubtedly the journalistic revolution which he ushered in. In the hopes of increasing sales and print runs, he was the first to publish a separate sports section and articles intended to appeal to a female readership, but he also considered it important to report on public affairs and to name names and call attention to corruption, thus laying the foundations for sensationalism and scandal journalism. He himself ventured into the world of politics, and he served as a congressman and was the first member of Congress who was of Hungarian descent. His name is associated with the creation of the first faculty of journalism. The novel retells this amazing success story, but it also touches on family conflicts. Pulitzer's adventurous life is captured in dialogues, contemporary reports and reports after the great Caesar of the American press had died, diary and letter excerpts, and interesting facts in the footnotes. The book also contains an appendix with a rich array of photographs.

*author*  
István Wisinger

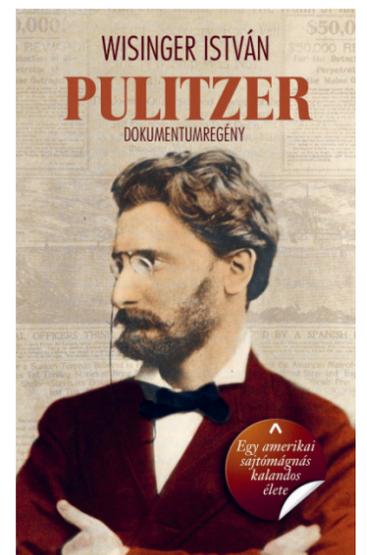
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*rights contact*  
Viktória Dian Phd  
orzdian.viktoria@lira.hu





## ISTVÁN WISINGER

*István Wisinger was born in 1943 in Budapest. He is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, sociologist, media researcher, and college instructor. He started writing as a university student, and for a long time he worked as a television anchorman. Pulitzer is his third documentary novel. He has also presented the lives and work of János Neuman and Albert Szent-Györgyi in the form of documentary novels.*



There was a presidential election in 1884, and of the candidates, Pulitzer supported Democrat Grover Cleveland, the former mayor of the city Buffalo (1882) and the former governor of the state of New York (1883–1885). The Republicans had nominated a well-known senator, former House Speaker James G. Blaine, as their candidate. During the campaign, a serious spending competition started, and the Sunday edition of the paper began to appear with additional content. The editor-in-chief was Morrill Godard, an incredibly skillful professional. He was entrusted with the task of transforming *The World* into a color publication, which ten years later they managed to pull off. And lo, the negative version of “new journalism” was born, scandal-hungry

journalism, also known as “yellow journalism,” a name which was borrowed from the *yellow kid* comic strip figure around 1893. Now, this symbolic figure could actually appear in a truly colorful (yellow) cloak on the pages of the paper... Though I should note, the name “yellow journalism” can also be traced back to the fact that Sunday papers were printed on yellow paper when they came off the presses.

As Emery wittily observed, “The worst example of ‘yellow journalism’ was the soulless version of ‘new newspaper writing.’”

One of the defining features of the sensationalist American press was that it created the scandals itself, and the election events provided the first and most important sphere for this. The newspapers frequently integrated events which they themselves had organized into the campaign. Thus, they were full of daily election reports, statements of political stance by individual candidates and their parties, explanatory articles which offered paraphrases of their views, or in other words, they were full of the ongoing “stories” of the country’s political life, which, as noted in the first motto to this book, later became the sources on which histories were based.

At the time, comic strips were becoming increasingly widespread, i.e. stories which always involved the same main characters (sometimes with several stories at once) and which were done with finely executed drawings. On the front page, news of events of the previous day was often told with humorous or revealing cartoons or woodcuts. These images were accompanied by writings by the editorial staff which provided the most important content. The news columns reported on basic information and events, not always in the spirit of objectivity, a spirit to which the editor-in-chief

of *The Manchester Guardian* referred with his famous dictum, “comment is free, but facts are sacred.”

This notion, of course, was a fundamental principle of the Pulitzer creed well before it was captured in these words in Manchester in 1926. True, it was an idea to which people showed less and less devotion... The stakes were raised by the fact that, were Cleveland to win, a politician from the Democratic Party would capture the White House after many, many years of Republican rule. In the history of political campaigns, suddenly the dominant role came to be played by “combative, negative elements, personal attacks, accusations, mudslinging, and disparaging the opponent,” as András Csillag writes in his monograph. Csillag notes, at the same time, that, “in Pulitzer’s view, the person who best met the criteria of a president for candidate was Grover Cleveland, the governor of the state, [...] who had taken steps to put an end to corruption on the local level without giving in to pressure from the party machinery, which was under the influence of the leadership of Tammany Hall, and in doing so had even won the sympathies of independent Republicans.”

In its first issue, which came off the presses on May 11, 1883, *The World* had called attention to Cleveland. He was presented in an editorial article as someone who was suitable as a candidate for president, and in subsequent weeks, several articles were published in the paper supporting Cleveland. The contributors to the newspaper had a very negative opinion of his opponent, the Republican James G. Blaine, because of his inclination to corruption.

In the first phase of the campaign, Pulitzer spoke out in support of Cleveland in the state capital, Albany, and he then openly took part in the election campaign by writing positive

reports and editorials on him in *The World*.

Five other, smaller parties also nominated candidates, but they failed to win a single electoral vote. For Pulitzer, the victory of the candidate he supported was so important that he contributed \$1,000 of his own money to the Democratic Party campaign fund. William A. Swanberg makes specific mention of this in his 1967 biography of Pulitzer, an essential monograph which stretches to more than 400 pages. (In 1961, Swanberg, a major historian of the press, published a similarly thorough biography of William Randolph Hearst, who was one of Pulitzer’s most important opponents.) Csillag offers an account of the rough last phase of the campaign at the end of July. The most blatant example of the personal attacks came when, “A Buffalo newspaper [The Evening Telegraph] found out that Cleveland, the unmarried governor, had had a child out of wedlock. Cleveland acknowledged the truth of the report, and it seemed as if his prospects as a candidate in the election had been ruined. The campaign then began to seep into the candidates’ private lives and sank to the level of repulsive mudslinging, which is not unusual in American elections. [...] There were reports that around this time, groups of protesters marched down Broadway chanting derisive rhymes about Cleveland’s illegitimate child.” One of the most mean-spirited lines was the following: “Ma, ma, where’s my pa? Gone to the White House, ha ha ha!”

When the leaders of the Democratic Party campaign asked Cleveland how they should reply to the chants shouted in chorus at the conventions and the accusations in the pamphlets that were passed out in the streets, he answered laconically, “tell them the truth.”

His paternity, it should be noted, could not be proven.



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## CONTACT

### DÁNIEL LEVENTE PÁL

GENERAL DIRECTOR -  
DIRECTORATE OF LITERATURE  
[daniel.pal@plf.hu](mailto:daniel.pal@plf.hu)

### ZOLTÁN JENEY

PROJECT COORDINATOR  
[zoltan.jeney@plf.hu](mailto:zoltan.jeney@plf.hu)

### MÁRIA HAJBA

APPLICATION COORDINATOR  
[maria.hajba@plf.hu](mailto:maria.hajba@plf.hu)

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