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Dávid Barna

A HUNGARIAN NOVEL

Novel (Libri), 2011, 176 pages

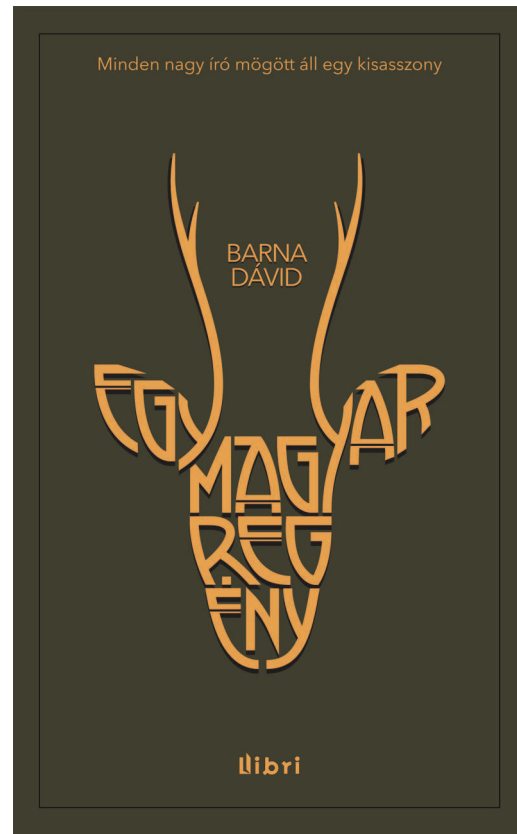
Publication: 2011. 09. 26.

“A man cannot touch a woman and go unpunished.”

It is a windy, cold September night in 1936 when a well-off gentleman, unable to sleep, crosses the Franz Josef Bridge in Budapest, finding a twenty-something girl there stubbornly staring the river with grim thoughts in her head. They start talking, and

finish the night in a shabby little hotel from where the older gentleman swiftly disappears before the break of dawn, going back to his wife and family, and leaving a note for the girl to arrange another rendez-vous for the following day. But what if these two already knew each other, from another one-night-stand one and a half year ago? And what if from that first encounter, a little boy was born, now living in the countryside with foster parents, his mother not being able to support him? And what if the elderly gentleman, finding his youthful vigor and lust for life reanimated by the girl younger than his adult daughters, is in fact the great Hungarian writer Zsigmond Móricz (1879-1942), the pride of the nation, the favourite of elegant salons and one of the brightest stars of literary life?

The stunning debut novel of Dávid Barna tells the story of this unconventional relationship, leading the reader through the different stages of a passionate and uneasy liaison with uncompromising frankness from their first – or second – night through their more-or-less established life together in the writer’s country house until the illness and death of the great man. Móricz introduces Kati to the world as his foster daughter, and after his separation from his second wife, a famous actress,





takes her to his house officially as a housekeeper. He visits his illegitimate son regularly, and later brings him over too in order to ensure his education. But when Móricz falls ill and dies after some dreary and heart-rending days of agony, his family immediately throws Kati and her son out of the house, her only hope for survival being the little job her protector arranged for her some years before his passing.

Later she marries a lawyer and they open a little second hand bookshop in Budapest – but history doesn't leave much place for domestic idylls in the 1940's, and soon they find themselves printing illegal papers in the attic of the shop and saving Jewish children from the Budapest ghetto: among them, a young boy who is later to become the novel's author's father. It is because of this surprising twist that *A Hungarian Novel* is way more than just the imaginary portrait of a great writer and his last mistress and muse: it is also a confession of the young author, a second-generation Holocaust survivor and son of an assimilate Jewish family, moving to Israel after high school with his brother to reclaim his long-lost cultural and religious identity. If it wasn't for Móricz's mistress who saved his father, Dávid Barna wouldn't be here with us today. It is because of this that he endeavours to retrace the story of this extraordinary woman, who from a poor orphan girl first became a mistress, then from a mistress a muse, then from a muse – a hero.

Since the novel is more about private affairs and relations, and the life work of Móricz serves rather as a backdrop for the story, it is not necessary for the reader to be familiar with the writings of [Zsigmond Móricz](#) or his place in the history of Hungarian literature in order to enjoy this thin little masterpiece. Even more so that on the other hand, *A Hungarian Novel* gives a unique portrait of everyday life in the Hungary of the thirties and the forties, with a vivid atmosphere and fast-paced dialogues worthy of the best film scripts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dávid Barna was born in 1982 in Budapest. After studying in Budapest, he left the country for Israel after high school. He graduated at the University of Tel Aviv, and currently lives in Jerusalem. *A Hungarian Novel* is his first book.



A HUNGARIAN NOVEL

26 September 1936

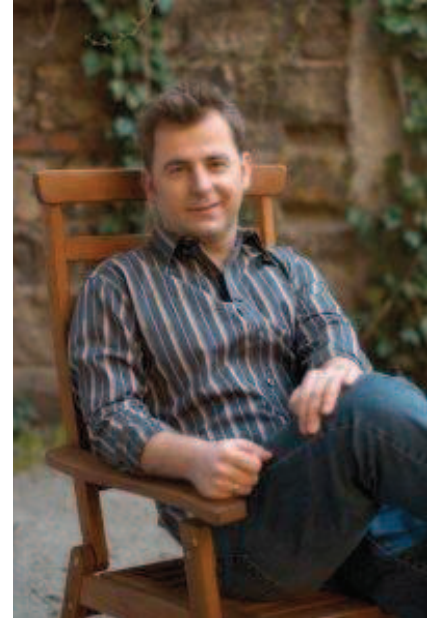
As my story begins, a portly gentleman of advanced years stepped onto the Pest end of the bridge named after the apostolic emperor and king, Franz Josef. It was two thirty in the morning.

The two halves of the city sat like magnets apart in this early September dawn, the Pest and the Buda, let me say it this way as they do in the capital, putting the article before the name like the Germans, *der Stefan*; the metallic Danube slithered between their opposing poles. And the steel bridge arched over the river like the skeletal remains of an ancient creature.

Beyond this gentleman with his elegant coat and hat and silvery moustache, there was no one else to be seen at this end of the bridge in the bitter cold at such an ungodly hour. A swollen moon outshone the pale stars over the Buda Castle.

The gentleman appeared uncomfortable and restless. He just hadn't been able to fall asleep at home and, despite being an early-to-bed-early-to-rise type, he'd kept tossing and turning well past midnight before deciding to switch his bedside lamp on and reaching for a book to read, but he couldn't calm his random thoughts enough to concentrate. He'd take a turn around town, then. He dressed, slipped out of the flat, out of the building, and down onto the street. He lived on the square at the Pest end of the bridge.

KRISZTIÁN GRECSÓ was born in 1977. He is a writer, a dramatist and an editor; his unique voice and storytelling made him one of the most successful authors of the new generation of Hungarian literature. His works often relate the seemingly irreconcilable differences between life in Budapest, the Hungarian capital and the countryside with its little towns and isolated village communities. He works as an editor for *Élet és Irodalom*, the most prestigious literary magazine of the country. Grecsó has written five books and won the most prestigious Hungarian literary prizes. He lives in Budapest.



ROOM FOR YOU BESIDE ME (MELLETEM ELFÉRSZ)

Novel, 2011 (february 10), 290 pages

“His wandering motifs and marvellous depiction, cast in his own personal ‘Grecsó idiom’, with everyday miracles familiar from the works of magic realist authors, propel the author to the forefront of younger fiction writers in Hungary.”

– Népszabadság on *Long time no see*



When the protagonist and narrator of the novel – a tax expert in his thirties recently left by his lover – is asked by a local newspaper to write an incidental article about an old family photograph, this seemingly harmless task entangles him in a web of family mysteries and long-forgotten stories.

Turning to his all-knowing, beloved grandmother for advice, he succeeds in making her confess all the secrets behind the photograph, no matter how the old woman wants to hide behind her illness to keep silent. It is revealed that the highly respected family member uncle Benedek was in fact never a monk, only a servant at a monastery, and he even had to leave that position because of a scandal, when it became known from a letter that he was not only fond of one of his childhood friends, but was undoubtedly and passionately in love with him. The story of the reunion of these two men in their old age is breathtaking, painful and beautiful at the same time.

Every character of the book is driven by some kind of stubborn and never satisfied desire for love: one of the grandfathers, in the Budapest of the fifties, desperately falls in love with a bourgeois girl, despite being a simple construction worker, and they almost start a new life together when the woman decides to stick by her former husband, a doctor working in the Soviet Union, although she knows very well that he is a coward and the informer of the secret service. The father of the protagonist never recovers from losing Irina, a Russian woman who suddenly leaves him for one of his best childhood friends, whom she will leave also... The lives of the two men collapse when they realise that it was the same woman who made their life miserable, and they become mortal enemies for life: the childhood friend's biggest ambition is to steal the wife of the other.

The narrator tries to indulge his love-lust with prostitutes, only to put himself in more and more humiliating situations, and it is only by the end of the novel that, after uncovering all the family secrets, his own life seems to get better: but we never know whether the girl invited ever gets to show up at the rendez-vous.

This novel of Grecsó resonates with the heavy and magical tone of Central Europe, taking it's reader through all of the twentieth-century Carpathian Basin from Romania and Transylvania through Hungary and to the Alps of Austria. Starting from the servant-world of the Hungarian countryside of the thirties and showing the working-class milieu of Budapest in the fifties, we even reach our contemporary times of ruin pubs and next-generation hipsters.

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

The way Imre spoke about my Uncle Márton, you just had to feel sorry for him. Imre gave him the role of the unfortunate, cheated man and it suited his character. His face held a form of born humbleness, his futures remained fine even when he drank or shouted. He was a sensitive, touchy-feely type and you could see it on his face, behind his beard, behind his glasses, behind his inebriated eyes. He'd somehow managed to inherit his father's care and attention, the family's excruciating neuroses, and a kind of unmanly joy from somewhere. Finding herself in a conflict such as this, any woman would categorise them thus: Imre's to be desired, Márton's to be pitied. A couple of palinkas and the now aged childhood friend was happy to tell a tale or two. He never intended to insult my uncle, he just wanted to recapture belief in his own glory passed. He also had his doubts as to whether such a past had ever actually existed. I bore witness to the fact the world he described was real as were the figures, families, stories, desires and disputes he described. So was the sports field that now forms part of the village. And the factory, that closed down, and the endless stacks of bails, and the donkey train that have all long since gone. Gone along with my grandparents, his parents and all the others, who I thought of as old men who had fought on the Russian front, but were just real and had lived just like the rest of them. Then I thought for a minute, *Who could he tell this to there?* We stood in the outer room of the new pub, there was a disco inside, thickly made-up boys and girls were strutting their stuff, ordering sweet drinks, staring at us with suspicion. Death cut through all comparisons, the competition was no

longer valid. Celebrating himself as the victor, Imre provided a pretty pathetic spectacle as we gave Márton a dignified send off.

After the failure in the bar, Imre started to set out later to collect grass and flowers. He tried to head for the centre to coincide with Róza getting off the bus. He folded his cleanest stripy plastic bag under his arm, slipped his hat off, spat in his palm, flattened his hair and strode out, stepping hard on his heels as if he were approaching a drawing board rather than setting off to pick chamomile and snails. Róza knew full well that he was off to gather chamomile but she smiled at the sharp-stepping, charming man when he appeared from behind the notice board on the corner. Imre's heart beat hard, they only ever passed one another and exchanged greetings, that's all, but in Imre's eyes, every quick hello was a step closer. It was still an achievement that he dare show that all he ever desired was Róza. Walk, hellos, walk, this is how the days and weeks passed, then towards the end of the summer, he eventually spoke to her. He had no idea what to say so he asked if he could walk her home. He crossed the road, he slowed down, Róza didn't notice him stop, she said hello, she carried on, Imre called after her in a croaky tone. My uncle's wife turned around and, for a second, nothing showed on her face. They crossed the square that had a figure of Christ chopped out of a single block of stone. Imre adjusted his step to hers, Róza laughed, it was hard to decide whether she chuckled with glee or her laughter described a naive and aimless situation mixed with a hint of sarcasm. This was the same square where Benedek and Sadi had met and it was the one where the windmill had stood guard on the corner for a hundred and fifty years, with the hemp bails behind it, with the old donkey train and with the vast soaking ponds choked with reeds and crisscrossed by a maze of rickety bridges. This was where Benedek and Sadi had touched for the first time. Worlds began and worlds ended here, this is where the circus pitched its tent where my father saw the East German artiste, the girl he abandoned the priesthood for. The horse market square. Five roads met at this grassy, muddy meadow shaped something like a star, and young Márton appeared from the least likely route, lined with acacia trees running from the cemetery. He stood by the house, the one where Sadi had grown up and where Benedek had touched his shoulder under the eiderdown before the Pannonhalma Fair. My uncle stood at attention there like some sort of guard, with his bicycle beside him, as if he were waiting, should he be forced, to pursue and expose Imre and Róza. They'd been walking side by side for a minute but Imre couldn't bring himself to speak for excitement, he felt stifled by his own ineptitude. He wanted everything too soon just like Márton. But Márton wanted to be married now while Imre imagined that Róza also knew: he had a claim on her. After Irina, he thought it was the least she could do and he considered any unnecessary romantic gestures as an insult. Imre didn't even want to say hello, just get under Róza's skirt and have her. This had happened so many times before in his head, why did he have to make such a fuss? Márton stood on the other side of the road in the cover of a side street. He seemed to nod. Róza didn't look ruffled, she remained perfectly natural. She took her leave of Imre, crossed to the other side, and kissed her husband. Imre thought they appeared to be laughing.

KRISZTINA TÓTH was born in 1967. She has written two books of short stories, and is one of Hungary's most highly acclaimed young poets. She has won several awards, and her poetry has been translated into many languages. She lives in Budapest where, apart from writing and translating (from French), she designs stained-glass windows. <http://www.tothkrisztina.hu>



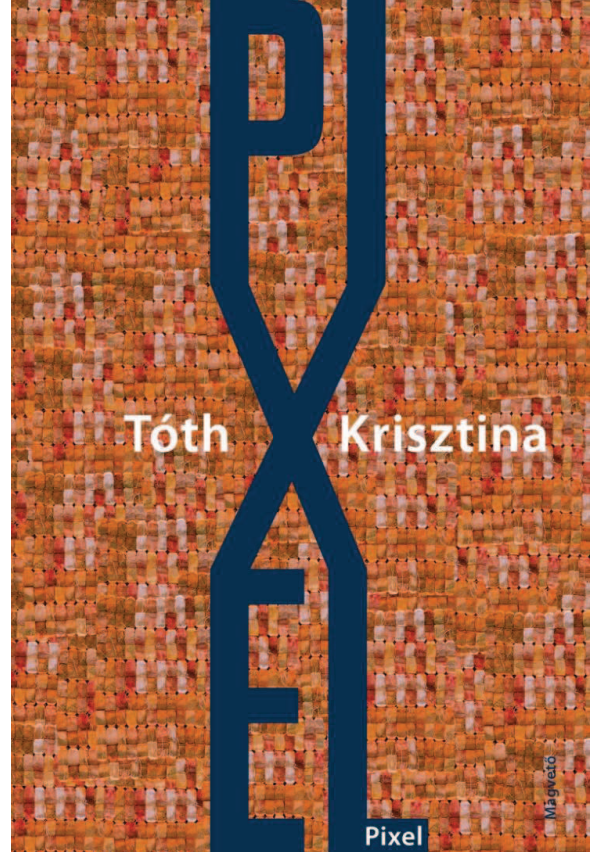
PIXEL (BODY OF TEXT)

A novel in short stories, 2011.06., 168 pages

In her highly anticipated second book of prose after the successful *Barcode (Vonalkód, 2006)*, Krisztina Tóth goes further and further in exploring the invisible threads that connect relatives and strangers alike, determining our lives in dramatic, comic or tragic ways without our knowing. Each one of the thirty chapters can be read as an individual short story, telling tales of love, loss, failed attempts of communication or self-determination, in a snapshot that reveals a decisive moment in someone's life when his or her destiny is forever changed – or the moment when it is decided that it will never change at all.

But these stories are also like pixels of a bigger picture, since all the characters appear, disappear and reappear in the chapters as dancers in a choreography that is only known to the narrator, and the reader, who is constantly looking for clues and links between the events and characters from story to story. A young girl meets an Indian man who visits Hungary only for the sake of a rendezvous fixed with the girl on the internet, presents her with a pair of earrings, but flees after the unsuccessful attempt of romance; in another chapter we see the same girl, wearing the earrings, trying her luck at a more traditional matrimonial agency and finding the picture of her father among the eligible bachelors; in yet another story we see the Indian man in England, finishing his gay relationship with the son of the protagonist of another chapter – and the dance goes on, slowly building up a vast panorama of contemporary Hungary and Europe, a kaleidoscope of interlinked destinies.

Brief encounters, furtive glances on the street can just as well make these connections as ties of blood or love in the case of parents, children, spouses and adulterous lovers. The chapters all bear a subtitle evoking a bodypart: *the story of the eye, the story of the navel, the story of the heel, the story of the fingers* etc., marking that it is always our body on which the story of our life is written, either with tickles and amorous touches, or with slaps and scratches.



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BARCODE (VONALKÓD)

Short Stories, 2006, 186 pages

Rights sold to:

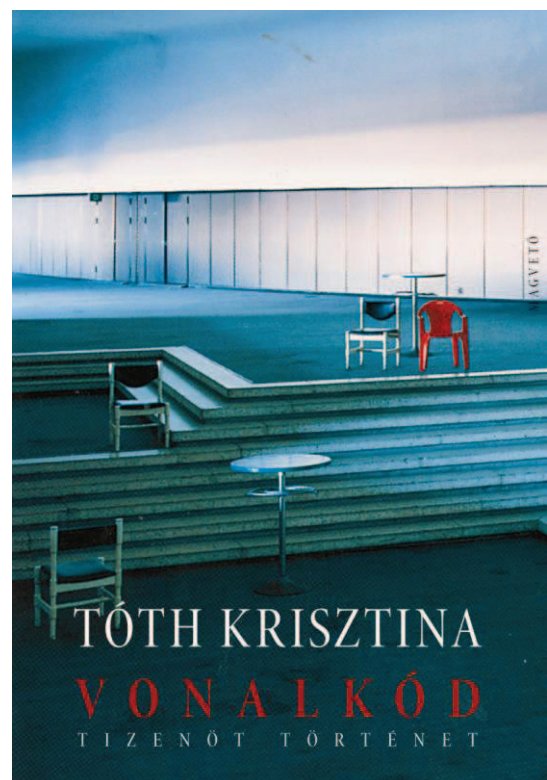
Bulgaria, Ergo – Czech Republic, Agite/Fra – Czech Republic, Tympanum (audio book) – France, Gallimard – Finland, Avian – Serbia, B92 – Spain, El Nadir

This is the first work of prose from a remarkable poet. It contains fifteen short stories, each having subtitle containing the expression line/bar.

The seventh story, Warm Milk, has the subtitle “Barcode” – it is about an American girl, Kathy, who visits her friend in Budapest in the early eighties. Kathy disrupts her host's life, edges her out of her room, and unravels her relationship with her boyfriend, Robi. The young girl eventually begins to consider suicide. Barcode acts as a metaphor for Western goods and therefore symbolises an unreachable world faraway from Hungary.

The narrator of the stories is either a young girl or a young woman, depending on the reader's interpretation of each story and some may see her as the same person all the way through. However, every action is seen from a woman's point of view: childhood acquaintances, school camps, love, children, deceit, and journeys set against the backdrop of the Kádár era towards its close.

The body, especially the body in pain, carries a central position in the work. Tóth often links the ailing human body to the wounded bodies of animals and the structures of buildings. And she also does a fair share of humoring the body. Directly alongside moments of the absurd, Tóth peppers her stories with the brutal and the grotesque. She builds a narrative world which is both tragic and comic. Her world is at once unsettling and invigorating as she leads the readers on a romp through everyday existence distilled to its extremes, with all of its attendant traumas, serendipities and vagaries in the spotlight.



FROM THE PRESS

„A mature, sensitive, incredibly nuanced and original voice... Feminist literature 'fighting' for its rights should calm down when reading Krisztina Tóth's Vonalkód: the author's voice is autonomous in every way, granting a permanent place for her as a short story writer in the contemporary literary scene.”

<http://www.litera.hu/hirek/valasztovonal>

„This book, conveying a vision, is great, thrilling, but somehow uplifting at the same time. It is the work of an extremely talented writer of fiction, already deserving a place beside the best works of Ágnes Gergely and Zsuzsa Rakovszky as equally valuable reading.”

<http://mozgovilag.com/?p=2622>

„Krisztina Tóth, like in her poems, dedicates her efforts to the tiny rules of the world and the questions hidden behind them. Sensitively, beautifully.”

<http://www.kortaronline.hu/0903/chovan.htm>

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<http://hungarianbookfoundation.hu>

MIKLÓS VAJDA was born in 1931 in Budapest. He is a writer, essayist and translator: his works include a great number of translations from British, American and German authors, and about five dozen plays for the theatre. He was the editor of the review *The New Hungarian Quarterly* until 2005. *Portrait of a Mother in an American Frame* is his first novel which contains his own family story and the fatal history of Hungary in the 20th century.



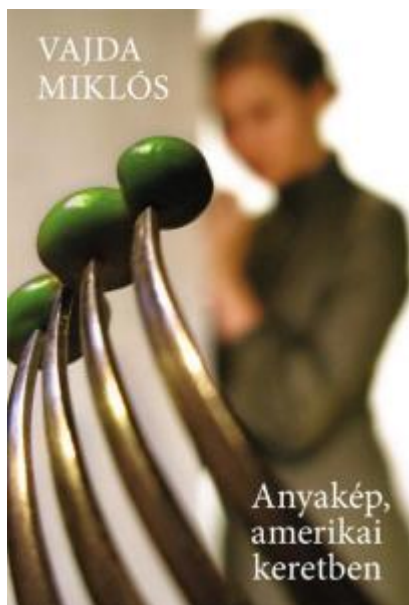
PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER IN AMERICAN FRAME

(ANYAKÉP, AMERIKAI KERETBEN)

Memoire-novel, 2009, 207 pages

„Elegant, reserved but not unemotional. Ironic, but not cynical. So this portrait, or this fragment of an autobiography is the triumph of good taste and the sense of proportions. But above all, it is touching. And we can also add, without further ado, that it's beautiful.”

– Litera.hu



Vajda grew up in a rich family in the first half of the century. His father was a lawyer who represented the Hungarian investments of the Habsburgs. His mother was born into a noble family. Because of the special family background they were fugitives during the WWII and after that in the communist era alike. His father died right after the war and his mother spent years in prison than moved to America immediately after her release. Their son stayed in Hungary because he fell in love with somebody else's wife. Since that time mother and son lived their lives far from each other.

The key figure of the family's hard years was a beautiful woman, the most famous actress around the middle of the century, Gizi Bajor – the godmother of Miklós Vajda. Gizi Bajor also died tragically in 1951, murdered by her husband. She, as the favourite actress of the two dictators Horthy and Rákosi, tried to do everything to save her friend, Vajda's mother and her godson. She hid the whole family during the war and then frequently wrote letters to the dictator Mátyás Rákosi pleading for her friend's release (those letters are the supplement of the book).

The three of them are the protagonists of the novel – the antagonist is the History itself. Vajda as narrator tries to tell the memories of the mother and understand her years in America as well as the death of his godmother. The novel is a confession of a son who couldn't tell how thankful he is to these women.

Rights sold to: Austria (Braumüller Verlag)
Czech Republic (Havran)

Pál Závada



PÁL ZÁVADA was born to a Hungarian-Slovak family in 1954 in Tótkomlós, in the south-eastern corner of Hungary. He is a writer, a sociologist and the editor of the prestigious Hungarian literary review *Holmi*.

OUR ALIEN BODY (IDEGEN TESTÜNK)

Novel, 2008, 390 pages

„Pál Závada's latest novel is his best and most mature work to date.”
– Könyves Blog

The novel's scene is set in a photographer's studio in September 1940 at a gathering of relatives, friends and lovers all linked by the single figure of a house wife called Janka Weiner – her cousin who works in a fashion boutique, her seminarian brother, a military attaché, a young poet, a reporter, girlfriends, journalists, some Swabish, some Hungarian, some Jewish and many less simple to define. They are enthralled by news of regained territory lost in the First World War and mystified by the race laws. Where have they come from and what will become of them when the war is over?

Pál Závada gathers his cast for a single evening in which he skilfully portrays the mental, physical and spiritual trauma created by the trials and tribulations of the 20th century. He looks at how elements of society become fragments. What does it mean to lose your country to war and how are the seeds of a new dictatorship sewn? This novel is close-up and provocative.



Also in the Backlist:

Jadviga's Pillow (*Jadviga párnája*, novel, 1997, 448 pages) This best selling novel portrays a Hungarian village with a Slovak minority and spans the period from the First World War, through the national awakening of the Slovaks, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, to the Second World War. Told in the intricate form of several overlapping diaries, it is also an unforgettable love story between András Osztatni and Maria Jadviga Palkovits. *Rights sold to: Germany, Luchterhand – Netherlands, Wereldbibliotheek – Slovakia, Kalligram – Czech Republic, Argo – Serbia, Laguna*



Milota (*Milota*, novel, 2002, 700 pages) Another story of a family, a village and a love rolled up in one in the form of parallel and alternating texts, *Milota* is set in a similar Slovak-speaking community as *Jadviga's Pillow*, but this time in the 1990s, depicting the complex love life of two narrators remembering at the same time, both in full knowledge of the other's texts.

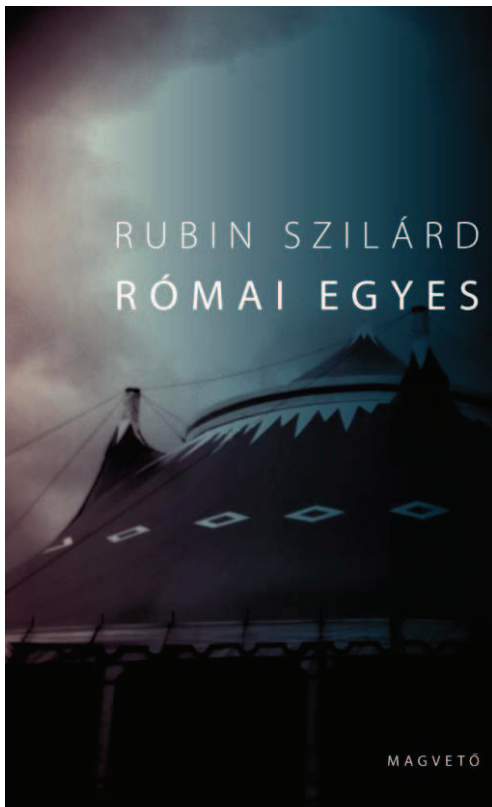
The Photographer's Legacy (*A fényképész utókora*, 2004, 413 pages) The photographer of the title is deported to be killed in a Nazi death camp in 1944 because of his Jewish descent. He may no longer be present himself, but the novel concerns his legacy and specifically a photograph that he took in 1942, in which all the main figures can be seen. The photo eventually ends up in the hands of Ádám Koren, grandson of the Slovak woman who appears in the picture and we follow the story of Ádám's life right up to the present day. *Rights sold to: Germany, Luchterhand – Slovakia, Kalligram*





SZILÁRD RUBIN

Szilárd Rubin (1927-2010) has written five books, two of which have earned him a late, but worldwide recognition: his unique and concise writing, mixing sentimentality with cruel self-examination has been compared to works of Marcel Proust, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald. (Portrait by Gábor Gáspár.)



RÓMAI EGYES

Roman Numeral One
Novel, 1985 / 2010, 130 pages

Rights sold to: Germany, Rowohlt

Originally published in 1985 and republished in 2010 with great critical acclaim, *Roman Numeral One* is a poetic recollection of an impossible love story between a middle-aged writer who „has grown old but has never managed to grow up”, and an enigmatic, fiercely independent and frivolous dentist called Piroska. As the narrator waits for the long hoped-for return of his lover in a provincial thermal bath, he recalls in carefully ordered fragments his youth in war-torn Hungary, the poor but glamorous life of artists in the seventies – including his long therapeutic stay at Karlovy Vary during the film festival – and the curious events of his love with Piroska, constantly changing between sheer

hopelessness and ruthless joy. The novel can also be read as a *roman à clef*, since in the two friends of the protagonist, one can easily identify the world-renowned poet János Pilinszky and internationally acclaimed Hungarian film director Miklós Jancsó. A sort of sequel, or sister-book to Rubin's *Csirkejáték*, despite its concise size, this short novel gives a unique panorama of after-war and socialist Hungary, and presents a deeply touching story of ageing, of giving up on our greatest hopes and finding redemption in silence and simplicity – all this in a beautifully weaved prose that mixes the melancholy of Proustian recollections with the grotesque images of Central Europe's kafkaesque experiences.



EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

He knew that it would be only a matter of minutes before the question was asked. “Christa?”

He made a broad sweep with his hand. “She’s working! Her thousand-page book has just been published. The history of religion in Russia...” His tone managed to combine sarcasm and accusation with understanding just as it had when I was the topic of conversation.

Academics, he said, you know. Their kind are forever working and can’t stand it when someone they live with does nothing all day but smoke cigarettes and stare into space. Sooner or later such behaviour is guaranteed to bring on a fit of hysterics. And now he always had paper at hand and quite recently, after a night spent arguing, he wrote out Reviczky’s poem, *Death of Pan*, that he always liked as a child and could still recite from memory. Of

course, he made sure to pace himself so that it took the whole of the afternoon with a great deal of erasing, crossing-out, rewriting and correction. He might well still be at it if he hadn’t realised that he was doing practically the same as a famous footballer had when he was sent to the World Peace Congress and ended up writing swearwords on a receipt so everyone would think he was paying attention and taking notes. In other words, he and Christa still experienced the same kind of Ingeborg-Holm-and-Tonio-Kröger tension between them, which he would never feel if he were with a black woman or a Japanese girl. It was then that he mentioned Bob Wilson’s black actress for the first time who nursed him, cooked and cleaned for him when he had pneumonia in Paris and Christa was with her husband in Bremen. The actress was the one he wanted to call from his hotel in Sevastopol between six and seven.

“I hope I can find the number...” he muttered as he searched through his pocketbook and gave a tired sigh. “What is this place? Nothing in Europe has any integrity left. Perhaps Ireland, Poland. Maybe the English countryside? I don’t know. Maybe even Transylvania. This is place is more like Lillafüred blown up to the size of Berlin. I think this is it... I’m off!”

He waved goodbye with an expression plummeted to freezing point so typical of a depressive and his mood swings. It was as if he’d wiped me from the blackboard of his view with a wet sponge: he was still looking but he couldn’t see me anymore.