

A Hungarian Best-Seller in English Translation

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The Inflatable Buddha by András KEPES, published in Hungarian by Ulpius-ház in 2011, first published in translation in September 2013 by Armadillo Central, Great Britain, translated from the Hungarian by Bernard ADAMS, edited by Emma BODEN-LEE. 328 pp.

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There are plenty of books written on twentieth-century Hungarian history, mainly from the perspective of historians focusing on facts and prominent historical figures. Obviously, we bear so many traumas of the period that we keep asking the *whys* and *hows*. András Kepes's novel is a very special one in its category, dedicated to the equally remarkable ordinary people who may face the same questions as the narrator does in the last chapter: "How many symbols of broken promise and murderous ideology are still there to be excavated and reburied? What do stone walls, both beneath the earth and in the hearts of men, still conceal? Shall we ever be capable of telling one another our common story in such a way that everything will find its place? Or shall we each continue to regurgitate our own, to point the finger at one another, and will our stories go on and on, round and round, like the mindless babbling lunatics?" (288–289)

Despite the fact that *The Inflatable Buddha* is Kepes's first fiction, it is not necessary to introduce the author to the Hungarian reader. It may not be so, however, with an international readership. András Kepes is a well-known journalist, TV figure, producer of cultural programmes and documentaries, filmmaker, presenter of very popular shows featuring international guests and Hungarian celebrities. He is also the author of *Matt a férfiaknak* (Checkmate to Men, 2008), a documentary novel on the noteworthy, chess-oriented Polgár family. He has also published two selections from classical and contemporary Hungarian writers and a third selection from world literature. He is a member of various boards and committees, holder of a dozen awards, and since 2008 a Professor at the Budapest College of Communication and Business.

In *The Inflatable Buddha* András Kepes visualizes many issues and perspectives that existed during the mad 20th century in Hungary. Although the novel takes a fictional village as its setting (Tövisspuszta), all that Kepes captures and tells in the story is nothing but the actual and factual situation in Hungary and in Central-Eastern-Europe from the aftermath of World War I up to the end

of the communist regime in 1989. (And as for certain issues, we could easily go on with the generalization up to a worldwide scale.)

Through the three main characters, Isti Veres, Dávid Goldstein and Pál Szentágostony, the author brings the readers to experience the life of a village turned upside down, where History becomes frantic, events get out of control, families fall apart, friends become enemies, the innocent become victims, the unworthy get forward, the worthy fail – and all in all nobody is capable of telling what is going on, why, for how long and what comes next, but everybody tries to survive one way or another, going with their first instinct. Indeed, it is a “messy soap-opera” written by History in which ordinary people are merely players having their exits and entrances – as the well-known playwright has put it in another context.

Speaking of drastic political, economical, social and cultural changes in Hungary in the 20th century, shown through a personal story, we can recall the Nobel-prize winning Hungarian author Imre Kertész’s novel, *Fatelessness*. But Kepes undertakes a more difficult and no less necessary enterprise. Not only does he depict a wider picture of Hungarian society as he follows his characters’ lives, but he does that in a more extended time frame, roughly all through a whole century. The three main characters give the reader the opportunity to peep into a peasant household, an aristocratic house and a Jewish family’s life. All of them are revealed in a thorough, indirect and witty way so that the readers should have all their senses at work. It is, however, inevitable for the author to deal with too many secondary characters and it is a test for the reader’s memory to remember all the obviously unfamiliar names and sometimes forgettable relationships.

Not being a contemporary of the three main characters, I can only rely on what I have read, have been taught and have heard about the period, and on the stories of my own family going back to two generations, accompanied by personal documentation. It is very similar to what the prologue suggests: all families have their own “coffee-stained letters, yellowing, tattered documents, battered diaries” and, of most importance, memories – individual or collective. This book – as explained by the author himself – is compiled from scattered documents and individual stories that certain people willingly told him without knowing what their narratives would grow into.

The excellence of the original style would not come through without the equal excellence of Bernard Adams’s translation. This outstanding translator of old Hungarian literature shows his brilliant talent, vast experience and thorough know-how in translating this modern literary text as well. He establishes a good balance of what elements of Hungarian culture and civilisation to keep as they are and what to translate so as not to mislead his readers. When necessary, he gives straightforward explanations of terms and expressions which may appear obscure out of their native context. He makes the more or less hidden references, which may perplex an international reader, understandable and explains certain items of Hungarian reality which could not possibly be known by someone who has not lived in the country. The translation of poetry (for instance, that of Attila

József's lines in the chapter *The Book of Verse*) merits particular attention and gives away the translator's exceptional sensibility to the Hungarian language. The fluent, masterfully inventive, but nonetheless accurate translation offers English-speaking readers the opportunity to experience pretty much the same that Hungarian-speaking readers apprehend when they have the original book in their hand.

As I am in a position of being able to compare the original edition with the English one, some remarks must be made relating to two issues. English-speaking readers must know that the publisher has retitled the book. The English title sounds at first little revealing for someone who first read the book in the original language. It is true that the reader encounters an inflatable Buddha in the prologue and again in the last chapter, but I had to seek hard for possible reasons for the choice. Certainly, the English title suggests that we are to live with the balloon-like value system of all times.

Fortunately, the original title, *Tövöspuszta*, the name of the location is thoroughly explained in the endnotes. Indeed, it is a speaking name for Hungarian readers with multiple references to Jesus Christ, human suffering and the vicious flow of History as well as to the setting – not to speak of the introductory episode related to the “wreath of thorny sticks” that the father of one of the main characters put onto the head of a statue of Christ – with a deeply symbolic meaning which is lost in the English title. I can only hope that the venturesome title will create similar echoes in the English-speaking reader and that the international audience will welcome the novel for its merits.

To my eye, the cover of the Hungarian edition (showing three silhouettes of children sitting on a fence) expresses masterfully the universal message of the book: the story could happen to anyone anywhere. The English cover, designed by Caroline Reeves, emphasizes other aspects of the book. The image of an unknown photographer, taken from Sándor Kardos's archive, showing three young men with weirdly painted white masks, standing in a dilapidated place, gives prominence to the grotesque and deteriorating elements in the novel.

With all that being said, I warmly commend this book to at least three generations. First of all to those who actually lived in this period of time, because they may read a nicely written literary version of their own lives, receiving perhaps answers to questions that they did not even dare to ask at those times. Then, to those who have second-hand experience of the era, because they can have a more thorough picture with the very personal stories that the author has collected and made into a whole novel. And finally, to those who are too young to know anything about the period and for whom, thus, those mad years of the 20th century are mere History. All must find themselves in a pensive mood after reading this unique and impressive book in such a vivid translation.