

Hargitai, Peter. 2014. *Barbarian Fantasy*. Gulfport, FL: ipubs.

Reviewed by Paul Sohar, poet and translator

An English professor, a prize-winning poet and an eminent translator of Hungarian poetry and prose; that was the way I had known Peter Hargitai until I came across his latest literary product, *Barbarian Fantasy*, a novel (a re-edition of his 1994 *A Barbarian's Bedtime Story* [New York: Puski-Corvin], which was translated in 2014 by Laura Lukács into Hungarian as *Barbár fantaszia* [Budapest: Fapadoskönyv Kiadó]). Another coming-to-America family saga? The back cover hints at more: science fiction or at least fantasy. The first chapter though is realistic enough and relates the story of the whole Nagy family crossing the Hungarian border into Austria after the brutally suppressed 1956 Uprising. The focus is on the nine-year old Attila Nagy, and it is through his eyes that the events unfold, but not quite in the first chapter, which ends in a cliffhanger well before these refugees reach the actual border. The story of the crossing is picked up after a few chapters of flashbacks to Attila's earlier adventures as an unenthusiastic member of the Young Pioneers, the children's version of the Communist Party. At the actual border we are left with yet another fadeout which is followed by a few more chapters of surrealistic flashbacks to the Uprising. Next, we find Attila safe in a hospital in Austria but subject to amnesia; therefore, no explanation of the escape from the dire situation is given. All that is presented as background material to Attila's formative years takes place already in America; therefore, the novel is not about his adjustment to the New World (these issues burden his father and uncle who have their expectable share of problems with the break), but his growing up, which he does faster than he should when it comes to marriage and too slow in making a life for himself and his family. In both these areas he is hobbled by a psychiatric condition and/or the medications he is forced to take. Still, this condition grants him -- and the author -- long flights of fancy that slowly evolve into a sci-fi dimension, especially in the last quarter of the book. Why barbarian fantasy? When Attila finds himself making progress in the area of science he increasingly identifies with his barbarian namesake until the two become inextricably entwined as the story explodes into star wars leading to apocalypse. At the end -- and I do not think this will be a spoiler -- either by sci-fi magic or by the device of waking up from another flight of fancy, Attila finds himself again in the company of his wife and their son, Attila Jr., in their New York apartment, this time with a better understanding of himself and his mission in life.

Even with the addition of hints about experimental conceits, such as a fractured timeline and unexpected sci-fi touches, this summary of the basic story does not do justice to the novel's very personal style and its unique blend of reality and fantasy that set it apart from the usual 1956 Hungarian "immigrant experience." Surrealistic scenes and outright sci-fi episodes grow out of realistic events in an experimental style that leaves it to the reader to decide whether these events take place only in Attila's mind. The narrative is told in the third-person singular but it is so narrowly focused on the main character that it feels like first-person rambling; so much so, that it is hard to tell where the intensely obsessive internal monolog becomes a dialog with mythical forces. This open-ended approach, however, does not muddy the narrative but rather



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enriches it, at least for a reader who welcomes deviation from the routine storytelling formula. In a recent issue the *New Yorker* critic James Wood praises Scottish writer James Kelman for being "unafraid of boredom, banality, digression, repetition, and verbal impoverishment" (vol. 90, issue 24, Aug 25, 2014). If these are valid literary devices, then they allow Hargitai to build his Hungarian emigré *bildungsroman* with a layer of adventure story mixed with sci-fi on top and the two ornamented with Hungarian mythology. In Hargitai's hands the various genres blend seamlessly into one, exciting albeit labyrinthine narrative.

A central component of Hargitai's success in this difficult feat is his fluid, simple but expressive prose, as he does not indulge in the modern conceit of fractured and/or convoluted sentences. Hargitai's lifelong pursuit of poetry was paralleled with short story writing, and the skills he developed in that area come in handy in this novel, which covers a period of roughly twenty-five years, where many of the chapters or episodes work as separate units or short stories. As an example of Hargitai's clear prose, a paragraph describing Attila's unsuccessful efforts to fall asleep will serve well, especially those of us who are similarly afflicted:

He made a conscious effort to synchronize his breathing with Kitty's. After several repetitions he realized this was never going to work. His nerves were jittery. Under the covers he cracked every knuckle on his ten fingers. Not all the fingers made the popping sound, some just plain hurt, and it ticked him off. Nothing was helping. He was more agitated than ever, restless like a wild animal trapped in the cage, except with him the cage was his rib cage, and he was conscious of his heart banging against it. If he turned on his side, he could feel the blasted heartbeat drumming in his ears and echoing like underwater sonar. If he could, he'd climb out of his skin (66).

Hargitai's prose becomes more intense in the internal monologs, fueled by Attila's obsessive thoughts that somewhat reminded me of Knut Hamsun's early novels, *Mysteries* (1892) and *Hunger* (1890), both of which revolve around one character, the alienated protagonist, a quintessentially angst-ridden figure, very much like Attila. Except in this case the protagonist manages to break out of his isolation and find meaningful human contact in spite of himself.

The other thing that works for this novel is the way the sci-fi and mythological elements grow out of the realistic story base instead of being arbitrarily grafted on to it. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1968) is unquestionably one of the greatest novels of twentieth century American literature, but that is in spite of the sci-fi paragraphs sprinkled on it here and there; they are only distractions, they have nothing to do with the story. Perhaps the main theme was too personal, and the writer needed to hold it up at an arm's length; it was only through the window frame of another story that he could deal with it. But for the reader now, nearing forty years after its first publication, the sci-fi frame seems totally unnecessary. Hargitai's novel, too, is largely autobiographical, but the fantasy in it is an integral part of the protagonist's makeup, his persona, and his life. Thus one man's story of landing in America, from a whole different Hungarian "cosmos" or "universe," becomes a many-layered, complex work of art, well worth exploring in all of its aspects.