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**Critical Recognition of Women's Literature in Hungary:
Reception of the *Kitakart Psyché* Series, 2005-2011**

Abstract: *With the appearance in 2005 of *Éjszakai állatkert. Antológia a női szexualitásról* (Night Zoo. An Anthology of Women's Sexuality), the first volume of the *Kitakart Psyché* (Uncovered Psyche) anthology series, women's literature finally started to generate serious discussion in the Hungarian literary community. This paper examines the series as a whole, the editors, the contributors, the critical response, as well as the events surrounding publication.*

The past six years in Hungary have been formative for the advancement of and critical attention to women's writing, brought on in part by the publication and fiery reception of a series of anthologies of Hungarian women's literature, the first of their kind. The *Kitakart Psyché* series' opening volume on women's sexuality sparked some of the liveliest debate the Hungarian literary community has seen in the last decade and sold over 7000 copies – an impressive number for the Hungarian book market. The aim of the present note is to provide an overview of the four volumes of the series published to date and examine the reception and impact the series has had within the literary community.

The three editors of the opening volume of the series, Kriszta Bódis, Agáta Gordon and Zsuzsa Bruria Forgács, have been leading figures in efforts to broaden and retrain traditionally male-centric Hungarian literary and cultural discourse to include and thereby potentially be reshaped by women. As an acclaimed documentary film director and novelist, Bódis has treated such topics as prostitution, domestic violence and the Hungarian Roma population. Fellow editor and openly lesbian novelist, Gordon (for more on Gordon see Miller 2007) founded the literary talk series, *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, together with Bódis. They launched *Irodalmi Centrifuga* (Literary Spin) in 2005 with the aim to “disturb the waters” of male literary tradition and provide a forum for female authors and critics to discuss and read their work. Expanding their mission to include general issues of human rights and women in the public sphere, *Irodalmi Centrifuga* has morphed into an active on-line magazine and forum (<<http://elofolyoirat.blog.hu/>>). Potently blending writing and activism for years, the chief editor, Forgács, created quite a stir with her 2001 *Magyar Narancs* (Hungarian Orange) piece on the female orgasm (Forgács 2001), and in 2007 she was the force behind the publicized body of correspondence that arose between female literary figures and male editors of *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature) regarding sexist editorial policies (“Álmomban két férfi voltam és játszottam egymással“ [“In My Dream I Was Two Men And We Played With Ourselves“] 2007). As editor across all four *Kitakart Psyché* volumes, Forgács was awarded the Artisjus literary prize in 2009 for her work on the anthologies.

The primary editorial aim behind the *Kitakart Psyché* series was to develop and bring into focus women's perspectives within the Hungarian writing tradition. These anthologies are first and foremost a means to disseminate and encourage increased literary output by women on a whole host of topics. Speaking directly to the output goal, the number of authors and the number of texts in each book is placed prominently on the series's book covers. Forgács states up front that she is not invested in the false binary of "good" and "bad" literature and that the

series is not meant to be exclusively comprised of "high literature," but offer rather a variety of caliber, tone and perspective (Szekeres 2010).

Each of the four collections published to date in the series revolves around a respective theme, beginning with one of the most culturally provocative themes in Hungary today: women's sexuality; followed by the second volume which addresses the female body; the third volume, mother-daughter relationships; and the fourth, father-daughter relationships. In an interview with *Népszabadság*, Forgács explained that she began thematically with sexuality as the "source of life," continuing on to the body that is born of sex, and moving on to girls' childhoods and their parental figures. She added that the next volume may follow this loose lifeline chronology to examine friendships, and then, in the final volume, broad family histories (Králík 2007). Autobiographical writings and first person narrative fiction comprise the majority of the works Forgács commissioned or collected to speak to these themes, in a deliberate effort to encourage reader identification with the work.

Among approximately seventy authors represented in all four volumes, Forgács has aimed to collect a wide swathe of viewpoints from a variety of professions, sexual orientations, age groups, time periods, and regions within Hungary, as well as from Hungarian-speaking regions in Transylvania and Vojvodina. The authors, some of whom had never written or published before, include well-known and lesser known artists, singers, film directors, actors, journalists, psychologists, literary critics and of course, writers. Such current big-name cultural figures as Krisztina Tóth, Alaine Polcz, Ibolya Fekete, Bea Palya and Orsolya Drozdik are among the contributors, as well as a few of their early 20th century forerunners – Sophie Török, Csinszka and Ilona Harnos. According to Forgács, every volume also contains writing by at least one known male writer, in a playful subversion of the frequent publishing practice of throwing one symbolic woman into otherwise all-male anthologies. The men's pieces, however, appear under female pseudonyms, and Forgács plans to "out" the men only when the series reaches its last planned volume. Given the fact that some women, too, publish under pseudonyms throughout the collections, pinpointing the male authors is not as easy as sniffing out a pen name. One of the pseudonymous contributors who has attracted particular interest is one "Eszter Házi," prompting speculation that Péter Esterházy might be hovering behind this name. This possibility is especially intriguing given Esterházy's past history of publishing a rather sexual and some would argue sexist novel, *Tizenhét hattyúk* (Seventeen Swans), under the female pseudonym of Lili Csokonai.

In mid-2004, Forgács, Gordon and Bódis began work on the first anthology, *Éjszakai állatkert. Antológia a női szexualitásról*, with the awareness that Hungarian literature by both men and women has not dealt adequately with the topic of sexuality. Author Péter Nádas, who praised *Éjszakai állatkert*, has noted that due to the taboo nature of these subjects in Hungarian society, Hungarian lacks sufficient language for sexuality, sex and the body (Vasvári 2006). With an eye on offsetting this deficit, the editors and authors therefore approached sexuality not simply as a set of sexual practices and identities, but also as a sociocultural construct.

The authors of *Éjszakai állatkert* present a range of elements that connect directly or indirectly to sexuality: power, intimacy, desire, violence, rape, family, dominance, and a host of random erotic moments. Among the various stories in the first volume the reader is at turns faced with, for example, an illicit lesbian-coded coupling of an elephant and a human in a night zoo (Zsófia Bán), a bar bathroom murder carried out by a transvestite prostitute (Noémi Kiss), or a young woman gang raped by occupying Soviet soldiers (Alaine Polcz). Such narratives problematize any facile understanding of women's sexuality.

Among the contributors who received the most notice in the first anthology (and in subsequent anthologies) were Krisztina Tóth, Viktória Radics, Zsófia Bán, and Noémi Kiss, while at the same time critics pointed to the absence of certain contemporary as well as dead women writers such as Magda Szabó, Zsuzsa Rakovszky, Erzsébet Galgóczi and Margit Kaffka. In a letter to the editor in *Élet és Irodalom*, Forgács attributed the absence of these authors to a number of factors. In the case of Rakovszky, Forgács said that she had been invited, but declined, possibly because she was scared off by the topic of sexuality, as were unnamed others. Galgóczi's estate and Magda Szabó had originally agreed to inclusion in the book, but just prior to publication each requested that their texts be pulled. To make up for these last minute losses, Alaine Polcz agreed to contribute to the volume with an excerpt from the memoir of her WWII experiences, *Asszony a fronton* (A Woman on the Front). The editors considered Kaffka's novellas, but did not find anything relevant to the theme (Forgács 2006).

Feminism remains a highly flammable concept in Hungary, and interestingly, Forgács distanced the book from feminism, labeling it as a literary anthology, not a feminist anthology (Thüringer 2005a; see also Horváth 2011 in this issue). Forgács added that of the thirty-three authors (including the editors) in the book, only six would identify as feminists. In contrast to Forgács's tenuous separation of the feminist and literary, her coeditors Gordon and Bódis considered and spoke of their editorial task as a natural extension of their feminist activism ("Artizánok: Ez a könyv az igazi szexről szól" 2005) ("Artisans: This Book is About Real Sex").

The October 2005 book launch for *Éjszakai állatkert* was dramatic. A birdcage full of freshly printed copies sat beside the Endre Ady statue on Ferenc Liszt Square, and in front of a large audience of authors and spectators, the three editors opened the cage and "freed" the books – in a gesture suggesting the liberation of women's literature and the repressed subject of women's sexuality and as a playful reference to the anthology title. Following the performance the audience piled into Írók Boltja (Writers' Store) for a discussion between the editors and authors. The event was punctuated and brought to a close by a shrieking vocalization by the experimental singer, Ágens. In the next months the dramatics surrounding the book's release continued with vehement discussions between critics and one particularly memorable display of theatrics during a heated discussion in the Centrál Café when Forgács, in a very literalized performance of the silencing of women's voices, sat in front of the audience and speakers with a gag in her mouth.

Across newspapers and literary journals, the critical reception surrounding *Éjszakai állatkert* varied widely from praise to outright hostility, often yielding to prickly attacks on women's literature. Nóra Séllei offers an in-depth, biting analysis of much of this reception in her chapter, "'A nagy kitárulkozás' – Az *Éjszakai állatkert* recepciójának értelmezése," in *Mért féliünk a farkastól? Feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* (2007) ("'Great Revelation' – Interpretation of the Reception of *Night Zoo*" in *Why are We Afraid of the Wolf? Feminist Literary Views Here and Now*). Séllei pinpoints the following central questions running throughout the reception literature: is such a book really necessary and what purpose does it serve? Also a common element among the negative responses, according to Séllei, was the rejection of the notion of writing and reading as "gendered practices," that is that performances of writing and reading differ across gender identities.

Much of the criticism directed at *Éjszakai állatkert* was concerned primarily with dismissing the validity of the book's two grounding conceptual frameworks – women's literature and women's sexuality – without even getting to the writing itself. Then there were critics who stated at the start of their reviews that they didn't want to get into the thorny topics of women's

literature and sexuality, but just wanted to discuss the anthologies as "pure literature," while there were still others who found fault with the apparently confusing blend of sexually violent and gently erotic threads among the various stories in the collection. Finally, there were a few critics who embraced both women's literature and women's sexuality as valuable frameworks and built their reviews atop the solidity of those accepted foundations (for examples representative of these views see Trencsényi 2005, Thüringer 2005b, Szabó 2005, and Kálmán 2005).

In October 2007, two years after the publication of *Éjszakai állatkert*, the second volume *Szomjas oázis. Antológia a női testről* (Thirsty Oasis. An Anthology of the Female Body), was greeted with a much calmer reception, coasting in on the wide wake of the first volume. The new output of literary criticism dwelled less on ideological debate and more on the collection's contents, which confront the female body in the full sweep of its encounters with adolescence, aging, childbirth, sickness, abortion, abuse, pleasure, objectification and sex. Most critics opened their reviews of *Szomjas oázis* by acknowledging the importance of *Éjszakai állatkert* and the attention it had directed towards women's literature, citing its commercial success, and noting that the grounds on which to critique the new volumes in the series were firmer, given the foundation of amassed reaction to *Éjszakai állatkert* (for examples see Sári 2007 and Kálmán 2007). Following the introductory nods to *Éjszakai állatkert*, many reviews began to hone in on individual pieces and on analysis of Forgács's editorial work, especially its role in the unevenness of the texts.

The third volume on mother-daughter relationships, *Dzsungel a szívben. Lányok és anyák antológiája* (Jungle in the Heart. An Anthology of Daughters and Mothers), and the fourth on father-daughter relationships, *A szív kutyája. Lányok és apák antológiája* (The Dog of the Heart. An Anthology of Daughters and Fathers), were jointly launched to a packed house at Nyitott Műhely in October 2010. These so-called "twin books" present complex portrayals of daughter-parent relationships via stories of mourning, misunderstanding, violence, tenderness, emotional distance, absence, longing, incest and murder. What has emerged so far of the critical reception is quite similar to the reactions to *Szomjas oázis*. Responding to the characteristic variety and variability of the texts, critics either praise Forgács' editorial approach for its democratic nature or they condemn it for privileging quantity over quality (for examples see Gy. 2010, Kálmán 2010, and Kabai 2011).

Six years after the publication of *Éjszakai állatkert*, the literary community has reached a point of critical sobriety in its dealings with women's literature, and an acceptance of women's literature is building. Just prior to the publication of *Éjszakai állatkert*, Magvető Press's well-regarded annual collection of the year's best fiction, *Körkép 2005*, carried work by four women and twenty-one men. In a remarkable shift, over half the writers in the *Körkép 2010* were women, marking the very first time that writings by women not only match the number by men, but even slightly exceed it in *Körkép*. Genders of authors continued to strike a balance in *Körkép 2011*, and three texts from *Dzsungel a szívben* and *A szív kutyája* made an appearance in the volume. This is a sea change for Hungarian literature and a hopeful sign of potential changes in the Hungarian literary canon. Not only has the series helped draw attention to new and old generations of women writers, it has also successfully fragmented archaic, monolithic definitions of "women's literature" in the process. The wide-ranging effects of this series, its editors and its authors on the publishing world and literary landscape will be the compelling subject of much examination in the future.

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