

Parallel Stories

Párhuzamos történetek

Presented by: Richárd Vincze

Párhuzamos történetek follows several families and individuals whose lives connect Hungary and Germany during the twentieth century. The novel moves between different periods, places, and generations, and it attempts to bring together experiences and events that at first seem to have only a little connection with one another. Political history shapes these lives in many different forms: through war, the Holocaust, fascism, state socialism, the 1956 revolution, family memories, silence, sexuality, and the ways people learn to live with what has happened to them. Nádas's books are interested in putting together large historical processes and personal experience.

The novel consists of three books and thirty-nine chapters. Its temporal range stretches from the first decades of the twentieth century to the collapse of state socialism in 1989. Budapest and Germany are its main geographical centres, with Berlin, Düsseldorf and the fictional German town of Pfeilen among the important locations. The opening takes place in Berlin in 1989, where Döhring discovers a dead man while jogging in the Tiergarten. This seemingly simple event opens up a vast network of stories, memories and family histories.

From there, the narrative moves constantly back and forth in time, with plenty of narrative hiatuses and cuts. A character introduced in one part of the novel possibly disappears for hundreds of pages and returns in a completely different period of their life (without any clear sign). Or a situation that initially seems not so important can acquire a different meaning much later. The reader is therefore forced to remember, connect and reinterpret according to the different contexts. Thus the structure of the novel resembles the workings of memory itself, as all the experiences do not arrive in chronological order, and their significance is often understood only afterwards.

The title *Párhuzamos történetek* refers to this structure. The stories go alongside one another, sometimes for long periods without an obvious connection. And then, relationships, similarities and repetitions begin to emerge or become more obvious. E.g. different people can find themselves in very similar situations without knowing anything about one another. With this technique, the novel somehow creates a sense that individual lives are moving along separate lines inside a much larger historical field.

Nádas does not treat history as something that exists somewhere outside the lives of his characters. Historical events enter the most intimate parts of their existence. The Holocaust, the war, the German and Hungarian political systems, the experience of 1956 and the Kádár period all leave traces in families and individual 'bodies'. These can appear as fear, shame, silence, sexual behaviour, distrust, political attitudes or simply as something that cannot be talked about.

The aforementioned body has a particularly important role in this. Sexuality and political history repeatedly come into contact throughout the novel. Nádas pays extraordinary attention to physical

experience: gestures, smells, movements, sexual encounters, illness and bodily sensations are described with nuanced precision. This gives them almost the same historical importance as political events. The private body becomes one of the places where history is always present.

The Hungarian side of the novel works in a similar way to the German part. The political history of twentieth-century Hungary is there through families, friendships, social positions and personal relationships. The Revolution of 1956 and the decades that follow are part of this wider network of experiences. Its effects continue to be felt in the lives of people who experienced the period directly and through those who inherited its consequences.

This approach gives the novel a particular understanding of political power. Power is rarely located in one place, nor bound to one function. On the contrary, it can be found in institutions, family structures, social expectations, economic relations and intimate relationships, or exactly written into the body. People carry political history with them, sometimes without consciously recognising it. So every political system can disappear while its habits and effects remain.

The novel's form is built on fragmented chronology, and the constantly shifting perspectives make it impossible to construct one simple explanation of the past. The reader has to build connections between different pieces of information. Memory becomes an active process of reconstruction. The same event can look different depending on whose experience is being followed.

This is one of the reasons why *Párhuzamos történetek* is an important work of postmodern Hungarian prose. The novel deconstructs the single, stable narrative perspective. Its huge structure contains elements of the family novel, historical novel, psychological fiction, crime narrative and erotic prose. So these genres interconnect and interfere with one another. The reader is never given a final key that would make every character and every event completely understandable, making the process of reading a hard and time-consuming one.

Nádas's prose can be extremely precise at the level of an individual scene while the larger narrative remains difficult to grasp. Long passages stay close to physical perception and consciousness, sometimes following a character's thoughts or bodily sensations in extraordinary detail.

The political significance of *Párhuzamos történetek* lies in how it can show the difficulty of separating private life from the historical structures surrounding it. People inherit more than names, property or family stories. They inherit fears, silences, desires, prejudices and unresolved experiences. As aforementioned, political history can survive long after the institutions that produced it have disappeared.

Finally, the novel pictures twentieth-century Central Europe as a network of interconnected lives. Hungary and Germany, private experience and public history, sexuality and politics, memory and forgetting continually come together. *Párhuzamos történetek* then, without providing a single interpretation of this history, leads the reader to experience its complexity and to recognise how much of political life remains present in the most ordinary and intimate aspects of human existence.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

CENSORSHIP STATUS: