

SZILÁRD RUBIN

Szilárd Rubin (1927-2010) wrote 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 the works of Marcel Proust, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald.



CSIRKEJÁTÉK

Chicken Game

Novel, 1963 / 2004, 214 pages

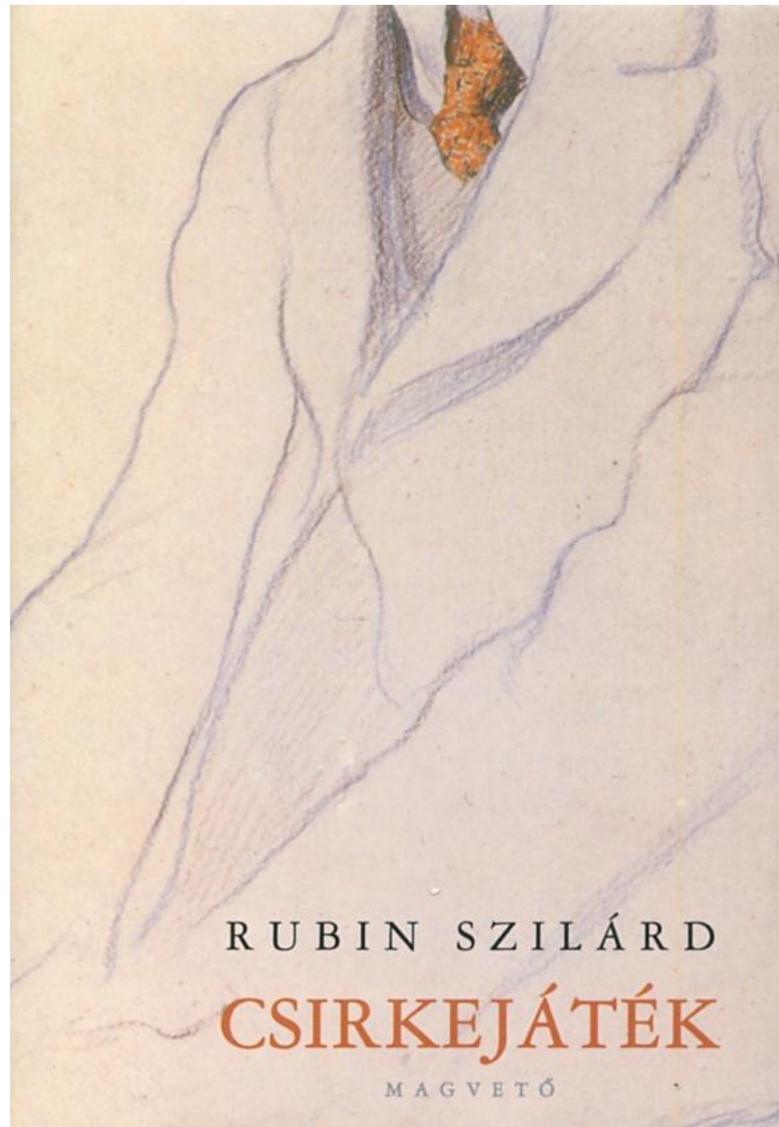
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“It is really rare to read such a detailed examination of self-ugliness in Hungarian with a lack of sentimentalism and the cold fire of dispassionate curiosity. It is a naked, pagan look, not objective but straight and outright. Rare indeed. Calmness. Calmness after defeat, or even in shame; calmness in hysteria: you get what you got. It’s the calmness that makes this book unique; a meteor, a Martian – but still.”

– Péter Esterházy

The title refers to a game where players have to hold out sitting on rails as long as possible despite a train rushing towards them. The novel is the story of two young lovers in post-World War II Hungary. Attila is a poor, aspiring writer, and Orsolya is the descendant of a rich bourgeois German family. Attila has felt drawn to Orsolya since they were children, but he dares speak to her for the first time only after the war, when she returns from burned down Dresden to her former home town near Budapest, still marked by her recovery from typhus. Because her family is German,



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their former riches are all gone, and they have to rebuild from scratch their pharmacy which they had once owned. In contrast, Attila seems to emerge as a winner under the new socialist rule – so the two form an unlikely coalition turned upside down. But the obstacles Attila and Orsolya face are strikingly similar to the old days: Orsolya’s family objects to the relationship, and they quite openly point out to Attila that they don’t consider him a good match for Orsolya.

Soon, Attila and Orsolya start hurting and humiliating each other despite their love. Orsolya wants to end their relationship, but Attila keeps harassing her until she agrees to marry him. However, on the first night of their honeymoon he finds out that she only agreed to the wedding so that she could take up a job in Budapest, and she insists on getting a divorce as soon as possible.

Attila’s obsession with Orsolya and his refusal to let go of his childhood dreams becomes overpowering, and it loses him all his friends who try to reason with him. In the finishing chapter, Attila watches Orsolya and her new husband through an opera glass at the airport twenty years after they first fell in love, but this time he has no one waiting for him at home.

(Portrait by Gábor Gáspár.)



Front cover of the German edition

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