

**KRISZTIÁN GRECSÓ** was born in 1977. He is a writer, a dramatist and an editor; his unique voice and storytelling made him one of the most successful authors of the new generation of Hungarian literature. His works often relate the seemingly irreconcilable differences between life in Budapest, the Hungarian capital and the countryside with its little towns and isolated village communities. He works as an editor for *Élet és Irodalom*, the most prestigious literary magazine of the country. Grecsó has written five books and won the most prestigious Hungarian literary prizes. He lives in Budapest.



## ROOM FOR YOU BESIDE ME (MELLETEM ELFÉRSZ)

Novel, 2011 (february 10), 290 pages

*“His wandering motifs and marvellous depiction, cast in his own personal ‘Grecsó idiom’, with everyday miracles familiar from the works of magic realist authors, propel the author to the forefront of younger fiction writers in Hungary.”*

– Népszabadság on *Long time no see*



When the protagonist and narrator of the novel – a tax expert in his thirties recently left by his lover – is asked by a local newspaper to write an incidental article about an old family photograph, this seemingly harmless task entangles him in a web of family mysteries and long-forgotten stories.

Turning to his all-knowing, beloved grandmother for advice, he succeeds in making her confess all the secrets behind the photograph, no matter how the old woman wants to hide behind her illness to keep silent. It is revealed that the highly respected family member uncle Benedek was in fact never a monk, only a servant at a monastery, and he even had to leave that position because of a scandal, when it became known from a letter that he was not only fond of one of his childhood friends, but was undoubtedly and passionately in love with him. The story of the reunion of these two men in their old age is breathtaking, painful and beautiful at the same time.

Every character of the book is driven by some kind of stubborn and never satisfied desire for love: one of the grandfathers, in the Budapest of the fifties, desperately falls in love with a bourgeois girl, despite being a simple construction worker, and they almost start a new life together when the woman decides to stick by her former husband, a doctor working in the Soviet Union, although she knows very well that he is a coward and the informer of the secret service. The father of the protagonist never recovers from losing Irina, a Russian woman who suddenly leaves him for one of his best childhood friends, whom she will leave also... The lives of the two men collapse when they realise that it was the same woman who made their life miserable, and they become mortal enemies for life: the childhood friend's biggest ambition is to steal the wife of the other.

The narrator tries to indulge his love-lust with prostitutes, only to put himself in more and more humiliating situations, and it is only by the end of the novel that, after uncovering all the family secrets, his own life seems to get better: but we never know whether the girl invited ever gets to show up at the rendez-vous.

This novel of Grecsó resonates with the heavy and magical tone of Central Europe, taking its reader through all of the twentieth-century Carpathian Basin from Romania and Transylvania through Hungary and to the Alps of Austria. Starting from the servant-world of the Hungarian countryside of the thirties and showing the working-class milieu of Budapest in the fifties, we even reach our contemporary times of ruin pubs and next-generation hipsters.

## EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

The way Imre spoke about my Uncle Márton, you just had to feel sorry for him. Imre gave him the role of the unfortunate, cheated man and it suited his character. His face held a form of born humbleness, his futures remained fine even when he drank or shouted. He was a sensitive, touchy-feely type and you could see it on his face, behind his beard, behind his glasses, behind his inebriated eyes. He'd somehow managed to inherit his father's care and attention, the family's excruciating neuroses, and a kind of unmanly joy from somewhere. Finding herself in a conflict such as this, any woman would categorise them thus: Imre's to be desired, Márton's to be pitied. A couple of palinkas and the now aged childhood friend was happy to tell a tale or two. He never intended to insult my uncle, he just wanted to recapture belief in his own glory passed. He also had his doubts as to whether such a past had ever actually existed. I bore witness to the fact the world he described was real as were the figures, families, stories, desires and disputes he described. So was the sports field that now forms part of the village. And the factory, that closed down, and the endless stacks of bails, and the donkey train that have all long since gone. Gone along with my grandparents, his parents and all the others, who I thought of as old men who had fought on the Russian front, but were just real and had lived just like the rest of them. Then I thought for a minute, *Who could he tell this to there?* We stood in the outer room of the new pub, there was a disco inside, thickly made-up boys and girls were strutting their stuff, ordering sweet drinks, staring at us with suspicion. Death cut through all comparisons, the competition was no

longer valid. Celebrating himself as the victor, Imre provided a pretty pathetic spectacle as we gave Márton a dignified send off.

After the failure in the bar, Imre started to set out later to collect grass and flowers. He tried to head for the centre to coincide with Róza getting off the bus. He folded his cleanest stripy plastic bag under his arm, slipped his hat off, spat in his palm, flattened his hair and strode out, stepping hard on his heels as if he were approaching a drawing board rather than setting off to pick chamomile and snails. Róza knew full well that he was off to gather chamomile but she smiled at the sharp-stepping, charming man when he appeared from behind the notice board on the corner. Imre's heart beat hard, they only ever passed one another and exchanged greetings, that's all, but in Imre's eyes, every quick hello was a step closer. It was still an achievement that he dare show that all he ever desired was Róza. Walk, hellos, walk, this is how the days and weeks passed, then towards the end of the summer, he eventually spoke to her. He had no idea what to say so he asked if he could walk her home. He crossed the road, he slowed down, Róza didn't notice him stop, she said hello, she carried on, Imre called after her in a croaky tone. My uncle's wife turned around and, for a second, nothing showed on her face. They crossed the square that had a figure of Christ chopped out of a single block of stone. Imre adjusted his step to hers, Róza laughed, it was hard to decide whether she chuckled with glee or her laughter described a naive and aimless situation mixed with a hint of sarcasm. This was the same square where Benedek and Sadi had met and it was the one where the windmill had stood guard on the corner for a hundred and fifty years, with the hemp bails behind it, with the old donkey train and with the vast soaking ponds choked with reeds and crisscrossed by a maze of rickety bridges. This was where Benedek and Sadi had touched for the first time. Worlds began and worlds ended here, this is where the circus pitched its tent where my father saw the East German artiste, the girl he abandoned the priesthood for. The horse market square. Five roads met at this grassy, muddy meadow shaped something like a star, and young Márton appeared from the least likely route, lined with acacia trees running from the cemetery. He stood by the house, the one where Sadi had grown up and where Benedek had touched his shoulder under the eiderdown before the Pannonhalma Fair. My uncle stood at attention there like some sort of guard, with his bicycle beside him, as if he were waiting, should he be forced, to pursue and expose Imre and Róza. They'd been walking side by side for a minute but Imre couldn't bring himself to speak for excitement, he felt stifled by his own ineptitude. He wanted everything too soon just like Márton. But Márton wanted to be married now while Imre imagined that Róza also knew: he had a claim on her. After Irina, he thought it was the least she could do and he considered any unnecessary romantic gestures as an insult. Imre didn't even want to say hello, just get under Róza's skirt and have her. This had happened so many times before in his head, why did he have to make such a fuss? Márton stood on the other side of the road in the cover of a side street. He seemed to nod. Róza didn't look ruffled, she remained perfectly natural. She took her leave of Imre, crossed to the other side, and kissed her husband. Imre thought they appeared to be laughing.

I didn't dare speak when Imre told me this. I could clearly see that he hadn't thought through for many years what had happened that summer and into the autumn. He surprised himself that he wasn't the one in the victor's role. He was stunned by his own recollections and he felt slighted because Márton had even humiliated him in death. I ordered two palinkas to soften the situation. We didn't speak for the longest while. It was then I understood that my uncle could have profited from this struggle. If he'd had more strength, and if he'd loved Róza that little bit more, the woman would have found her peace beside him. I thought it through and it shocked me. Then why had Róza moved out? I took a look at Imre who was clutching his palinka. I felt sad because it was obvious that if I was ever going to find out, it wasn't going to be from him.

Imre began his next story as if that would finally give him his glory. We went to sit in one of the inner rooms, the music wasn't beating out there, it was friendlier. A poster of a naked woman pinned to the wall was spotted with grease. Imre made out as if he knew everything, and I let him. I didn't ask him where he got his information from for fear that he'd stop. The kids of rich farming families sat at the next table showing each other their wristwatches. They spoke with such relish about these expensive instruments that it made my mouth water. Imre claimed that the Steiner boy summoned up the courage that same day and asked "Auntie Róza" – whose face started to twitch at being addressed as "Auntie" – to come and help blow up the leather footballs in the club changing rooms. Imre was sick with desire and staggered like a half-starved wild animal up by the factory. By the time he got to the sports field, he could barely walk his knees were knocking so hard. He realised that he hadn't eaten for a day and a half and he hadn't had a drink in an age, his throat burned with thirst. He walked onto the field and there was Róza's bicycle lying in the grass, he went to the tap, took a long drink, the cool force filled his body, he could even feel it in the soles of his feet, he felt better. He hoped he'd be capable of fucking the woman if the opportunity arose. He couldn't see Róza anywhere, only Vali Steiner the caretaker who smiled at him. *She must live here*, Imre thought, and he didn't understand what the woman wanted and why she was grinning at him like that. He walked towards the stage, past the changing rooms and the function room, and in the latter, among the cups and medals, under the signed and framed football strips along with masses of team photographs from the glory days, stood Róza. And the Steiner boy. No more than an unfortunate, lanky lad in Imre's head, he didn't look such a snotty-nosed kid as he stood there. He was holding a trophy of some sort, Imre recognised it, it was the Agrotrade Cup, he'd been in that factory team, but not in this one. He was half an hour late and all for nothing, the Steiner boy got the gold. He'd just told Róza that he'd easily be able to fill the comely cup if "Auntie" lent him a hand. "Auntie, my eye!" said Róza but the undertaking appealed to her. Imre didn't want to watch the whole thing to see quite how Márton's wife helped the boy, just for a short while. The woman's wonderment set him thinking. Róza crouched down in front of the kid, she didn't touch, just stared in awe, *no dick looks that good*.

Imre started back, his bones twinged with desire, he could hardly put one foot in front of the other. He got as far as the caretaker's room, Vali Steiner stepped out and now he

understood what the woman wanted. Vali's shrivelled body, worn face and droopy tits hadn't been touched for a long time, in fact, the last time she'd had her flesh clenched had been at that infamous class reunion where her son was conceived. Vali had waited in the caretaker's room listening to hear when Imre turned to go back. She'd thought that the situation spoke for itself, and she was speaking for herself, she prayed, now or never. If not now, she'd never see mercy from a man's body again. Imre stopped in front of the woman, he felt insulted, he was much too good a man to have to satisfy himself with an old bag like her. His whole body filled with paralysing tension, he didn't smile back, he wanted to walk away but he looked at Vali one more time. The desire had gone from the woman's eyes that now showed terror, she pulled the pleading thin as if she were squinting, her lip trembled and slowly, as the fat drops plopped out, tears streamed down her face. Imre walked off, and when even he wouldn't have thought it, he turned back around. He changed his mind, took hold of the woman's hand and pulled her into the room. Áron Steiner lost his virginity the burden of which he'd carried for so long at the exact same moment that his much younger sister was conceived.

Vali Steiner and her boy set off home with lofty lightness, they laughed happily down the street, the dogs barked at them. Márton pedalled back from the shop. He watched the two laughing people, mother and son, especially the growing man. His stomach tightened. Áron leaned over to his mother, they both laughed like drinking companions. The boy kissed the air, the mother laughed and cuffed the son. Márton knew that Róza had stopped pedalling at the pitch. He sensed she'd still be there. An egg cracked in his bag. He stared at the greening lilac bushes. Pain shot through him, the bitterness of a cuckolded man, but it soon passed. He saw Imre coming up from the sports field, his old friend looked at him, he didn't avoid his glance, but neither did he slow down, his back bent as he cycled crookedly on. He appeared neither happy nor unhappy, just like someone whose shirt cut him under the arms, was tired or needed shit rather than a man pressured by his usual problems and who found himself unusually pressured by them to the point of breaking today. Imre nodded, Márton took the greeting. The Steiner boy's laugh could he heard far from the square, they both looked that way. Márton smiled. He'd never wanted to be crippled by jealousy but the fact that it had passed so quickly, that was a surprise.

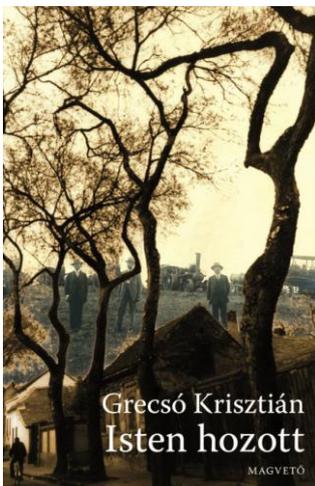
*Translated by Ralph Berkin*

## OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

### **LONG TIME NO SEE (ISTEN HOZOTT)**

Novel, 2005, 319 pages

**Rights sold to:** Croatia, Fraktura – Italy, Atmosphere Libri – Czech Republic, Kniha Zlin – Germany, Claassen – Slovenia, Didakta – Turkey, Yapi Kredi Kültür



GreCsó's first volume of extended fiction is a coming-of-age novel; a singular detective story which brings unusual events in the life of a provincial village in Hungary. An orphan, Gergely has to leave the village as a young boy to pursue his studies, marking the break-up of the Ede Klein Club. He returns as an adult to explore his roots and starts to ask questions about his past and village history.

He suspects that Ede Klein, the man after whom the children's club is named and who was expelled from the village in 1948, may have been his father, although in the end that does not prove to be the case. However, a blood libel case actually did occur in Szegvár in 1948 resulting in the expulsion of one of its residents. The Klein diaries, written to Aunt Panni (who may be Gergely's mother), occupy an important role in the village: although they don't know anything about it for certain, everyone has their own interpretation, whether they think it contains prophecies of the future or reveals dark secrets from the past.

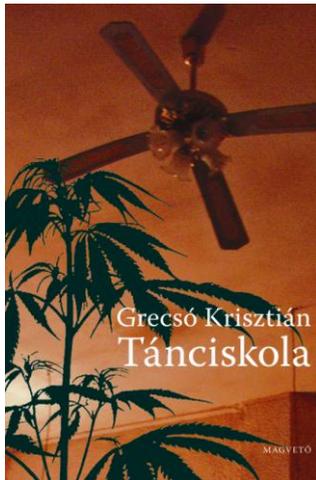
Mystical matters play a major role in the novel with threads of superstition and local lore weaving their way through its fabric, the roots of which stem back to an unusual religiosity, pagan belief, and frequent drunkenness: shadows without their owners appear on the streets and the hair of young girls turns grey overnight.

Masses of marvellous subsidiary stories about the strange residents of the village, their lives both tragic and comic, provide the reader with an insight into the realities of rural Hungarian society.

## DANCE SCHOOL (TÁNCISKOLA)

Novel, 2008, 304 pages

**Rights sold to:** Czech Republic, *Kniha Zlin*



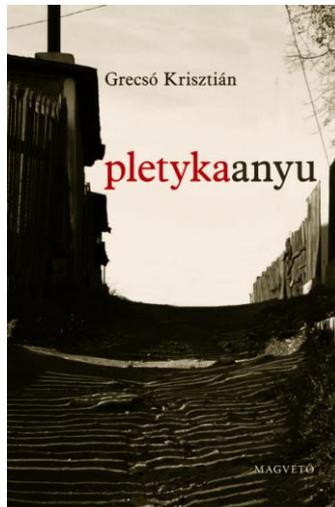
There are times in Krisztián GreCsó's novelistic world when even the goulash has a soul as the hero of the tale sits down to discourse with the Devil in a shady bower. The locale of Dance School is a small town in the same region as in *Long time no see*, a place that is both modern-day and timeless, fixed its mundane reality between the proximity of the rural and metropolitan expansiveness.

The protagonist, Dr Jokó as he is referred to at one point, is a young man who, having just graduated in law from the University of Szeged arrives in Slovaktown in none-too-eager anticipation of commencing his career with a local solicitor's firm. He has a place to live there with his eccentric uncle, Lajos Szalma, who teaches biology and physical education at a local school. He becomes acquainted with his uncle's circle of friends, male and female, and with his weekend cottage where he is able to take big trips with speed and other amphetamine-based drugs and come face to face now with the Devil himself, now with his own self as a separate person, so to speak. A devil of a fellow, one might say. His worries are eased, his whole character changes. Jokó strings several women along at once, though none of the relationships can be truly committed or untroubled.

By the end of the novel, after Slovaktown adventures, startling discoveries and the small-town tragedies that play out there, Jokó is forced to a realisation that he has come of age and must take steps. He starts to do so on Christmas Eve, but those steps are the ones referred to in the title of the novel: dance steps. As to who he takes them with, and whither—let that remain a secret. As it is, in dance schools one needs to kick off from the stove. GreCsó knows on which side of which streets passers-by are strolling. In this novel, he employs a sort of magic naturalism to relate his intricate, eventful story.

## MOTHER GOSSIP (PLETYKAANYU)

Novel, 2008, 194 pages



In twelve stories presenting modern village life, sometimes with descriptions of sociographic precision, GreCsó avoids equally the traps of old-fashioned and empty anecdotizing, and dry documentation. The protagonists of these stories chatter away uninhibitedly, speak their own minds in a full-bodied, witty and quirky language, an entertaining, supple and telling prose. The characters are continually on the track of something or other, seeking to get to the bottom of things, whether it be a mysterious death and life-and-death matters in general, or mere tittle-tattle and dreams. The best story is perhaps „I, András Schriwanek” in which Uncle Schriwanek reflects first on the meaning of life, then on the male-female principle present in all things excepting dread, which he is unable to associate with

either principle. The factor that binds all the stories together is the genre of gossip implied by the title. Elements that can be verifiable rub cheek to cheek with those that are unverifiable; hearsay and news in the papers, local affairs and national politics, historical facts and legends are accorded equal weight. The tone is somewhat in the Czech tradition, reminding one of the likes of a Hrabal.

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