

[PREFACE]

During this summer I stopped for lunch in a small Italian town and the elderly waiter found out during our conversation that I was Hungarian. "Oh, you come from the country of *The Paul Street Boys*," he enthused. "I read it as a teenager and I remember every chapter." When I told him that I happened to be the grandson of the author, he shuffled back to the kitchen and doubled the portion.

Indeed, this book is a true world classic of its kind and it has been translated into fourteen languages up to date. I was bombarded with letters from the large expatriate Hungarian communities of the English speaking countries, especially from America, asking me why Molnár's book has been out of print for decades, impossible to find even in antiquarian bookshops, and how much they would like their children to read their favourite childhood story, which would also give them the taste of the time and age of their great-grandfathers. Perhaps the publishers felt that a novel written in 1907 in a somewhat dated 1927 translation would not appeal to the teenagers of our computer age. The sad truth is that some of the juvenile classics I re-read had lost their old magic, at least for me. But not this one. *The Paul Street Boys* is still the same fascinating story of two gangs of boys fighting a war for a piece of land, a derelict building site, a temporary storage place for timber, which is their beloved adventure playground, to them a cherished symbol of freedom.

Paul Street is not an imaginary location; it still exists, bearing the same name, in Budapest and it has not changed very much since 1907. Kids do not wear sailor's suits or straw boaters any more, but when the boys flock out from a nearby school, I can still see among them all the characters from Molnár's book: good-looking Boka, the leader of the gang, a head taller than the others; sly Geréb the traitor; and of course there is a little boy who looks like the story's hero, Ernő Nemeček, who was "like the figure one in arithmetic, he neither multiplied nor divided things" and being so insignificant became an ideal victim. A victim he was, but also, with his great moral strength, an example for all.

At the time Ferenc Molnár wrote *The Paul Street Boys*, Cooper's Indian war-stories were extremely popular in Hungary and there is the flavour of their morality in this book. There are examples of good camaraderie, loyalty, idealism and, of course, love of freedom – just the kind of virtues still needed today. Molnár always manages to save himself from being just a shade too sentimental. Like Mark Twain he has the wit and the good writer's sense to mix the grotesque with the pathetic.

The Paul Street Boys first appeared as a serial in a teenage magazine, each instalment was sold out within hours. For this new edition here and there the dialogue has had to be freed of its period staleness, but "period" in this case also means a kind of *belle époque* charm, of hackney cabs and top hats, which provide the young reader with an interesting journey in time, – away from our age of the computers.

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