Star Girl on the Time Train: Children's Science Fiction by Hungarian Women Authors in the Kádár Era (1956-1989)

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Introduction

The Kádár era (1956–1989) was a distinctive period of Hungarian history in the twentieth century. After the occupying Soviet army brutally ended the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, the regime named after Communist premier János Kádár offered a period of relative calm and slow, gradual modernization and democratization. The era lasted until the collapse of Communist rule and the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989. The Kádár era was more culturally liberal than the preceding Rákosi era, whose repressive features led to the 1956 uprising. Yet, the Kádár era was still characterized by a lack of freedom of speech affecting all areas of publishing (Czigányik; Horváth).

Censorship mechanisms in this era did not adopt the Soviet approach of centralized, regulated oversight in its entirety; but just like in the Soviet Union, works were subjected to external oversight. First and foremost, authors were expected to self-censor, and most interactions happened in an informal context between editors and authors (Gombár; Sohár; Panka). While self-censorship was also an expectation in the Soviet system, in Hungary, informal networks developed so that work would receive oversight *before* reaching an official censor.[1] Translations were often censored in a similar manner, and many foreign works were banned (Horváth)—both in literary and genre fiction.

Like elsewhere in the former Soviet sphere of influence, some Hungarian authors originally interested in writing for adults found a refuge from repression in children's publishing.[2] Science fiction was also an outlet with relative freedom. Under the leadership of Péter Kuczka, the *Galaktika* SF anthology, then magazine and attached imprints could publish writing that could not be printed as literary fiction: among others, the works of Borges and Eliade (Falcsik; Szatmári). While Kuczka himself generally worked with adult manuscripts and authors, his work allowed SF to develop a reputation for comparatively less censorship than non-genre literature, which probably also influenced children's SF. There were no dedicated children's SF novel imprints, but the main children's publisher of the era, Móra, frequently released SF novels.

Women authors fit into the Hungarian publishing landscape uneasily: massive gender disparities existed throughout the Kádár era, and even prolific and popular women writers like Magda Szabó or Erzsébet Galgóczi were often excluded from the literary canon (Várnagyi 26–27). Hungarian society in the Communist period was gender-egalitarian in terms of political rhetoric, like elsewhere in the Eastern bloc. A characteristic figure of Rákosi era propaganda, also popular later on, was the woman tractorist, demonstrating that women could perform any job (Farkas).

However, society remained sexist in everyday practice (Kiss). People were legally mandated to work regardless of gender, citing the ideological approach of Engels that this was a precondition of achieving true gender equality; but while the expression 'working woman' (*dolgozó nő*) was often used in propaganda and common parlance alike, there was no parallel 'working man' (Göndör 123-124). While most people were employed, forcibly or not, women were also expected to manage the household and child-rearing—with men often not participating in these tasks, or only to a severely limited extent.[3] Women intellectuals sometimes turned to translation as a form of work that could be performed in a flexible time frame and while maintaining a work-from-home lifestyle, or even during maternity leave (Sohár 17); and the same probably holds true for writing in general.

All these trends combined in the case of women authors of children's SF. While the publishing industry was not gender-egalitarian, the nature of the work allowed for relative flexibility: both children's publishing and SF were less affected by restrictions on freedom of speech, and the labor of writing itself allowed people to choose when and where to work. In this time period, women authors often worked full time either as writers or in some other related job in the industry (e.g., in editorial), a form of employment comparatively less common among Hungarian women authors today. Still, women writers had a variety of motivations in choosing these career paths. Some turned to children's publishing after having been excluded from adult publishing and then returned to fiction for adults after the Communist regime collapsed, but some continued to write for children.

Research Questions

To investigate children's SF by women authors in the Kádár era, I outline three research questions:

1. What were the children's SF books by Hungarian women authors produced in this time period? (i.e., a comprehensive survey of all available works produced by systematic search, which had not been conducted previously.)

2. How can we characterize the speculative settings these works presented, and how did they depict future societies? By so doing, how did they reach and/or subvert the desired aims of the Communist state?

3. How did these speculative worlds relate to women authors' social-political context, and how did they fit into their authors' oeuvres?

Methods

I constructed a comprehensive list of children's SF books by Hungarian women authors

published in the Kádár era using the following methods:

1. Searching in my own collection of Hungarian SF from this time period
2. Searching on Moly.hu (the largest Hungarian social book website akin to GoodReads) by combining the tags "sci-fi" + "ifjúsági" (kidlit) + "női szerző" (woman author), and also "sci-fi" + "ifjúsági", then reading through the results list to find Hungarian women authors.
3. Crowdsourcing titles through asking people in Hungarian SF groups on Facebook.
4. Querying current Hungarian women editors of SF.

Each method garnered books not found via the other methods, though there was some overlap.

Exclusion criteria were the following: purely fantasy, mythic and fairytale books were not included. In case of series where only some of the volumes had SF elements, volumes without those elements were excluded. (This affected the series *Pöttyös Panni* by Mária Szepes, and the loosely connected children's books of Franciska Nagy.) I did not survey short stories, but I did survey works that were novella length, because the distinction between novel and novella was not sharp in this time period. Inclusion criteria were the following: SF books with at least one woman author in case of shared authorship, and a first publication date between 1956 and 1989, were included. I also included multi-genre books as long as they had SF elements; e.g., in *Tündér Lala* by Magda Szabó, fairies use a fairy X-ray machine to determine if fairies have human organs inside their bodies. I also included books where critics disagreed about the target age range—despite expectations, this only affected one book, *Oxygénia* by Klára Fehér. I identified ten books, by six authors—see the complete list in Table 1.

Table 1

Author	Title	Publisher	Date
Klára Fehér	A földrengések szigete [The Island of Earthquakes]	Móra	1957
Magda Szabó	Tündér Lala [Fairy Lala[4]]	Móra	1965
Zsuzsa Kántor	Zenél a Zakariás [The *Zakariás* is Playing Music]	Móra	1973
Klára Fehér	Oxygénia [Oxygenia]	Táncsics	1974
Zsuzsa Kántor	Matekária [Matharia]	Móra	1974
Mária Szepes	Gyerekcsillag [Childstar]	Móra	1979
Zsuzsa Kántor	Hajszesz és bolondgomba [Hair Lotion and Toadstool]	Móra	1980
Franciska Nagy	Űrbicikli [Space Bicycle]	Móra	1984
Zsuzsa Keller	Csillaglány [Star Girl]	Kossuth	1988
Mária Szepes	Pöttyös Panni az idővonaton [Panni Polka Dots on the Time Train]	Móra	1989

Imaginary Futures and Future Societies

How did Hungarian women authors of children's SF imagine the future, and which characteristics did they ascribe to future societies? Four characteristics emerge:

1. The protagonist's perspective compared to the society shown (interior, exterior or both—are they members of the society that they observe / describe?)
2. Time
3. Speculative element (anything not commonly considered as attested in observable reality; e.g., extraterrestrial beings)
4. Utopian/dystopian societies.

I classified each book along these dimensions; the results are in Table 2.

Table 2

Author	Title	Date	Perspective	Time	Element	Mode
Fehér Klára	A földrengések szigete	1957	**Interior**	**Future**	(Future)	**Utopian**
Szabó Magda	Tündér Lala	1965	**Interior**	Present	Fairies	**Utopian**
Kántor Zsuzsa	Zenél a Zakariás	1973	**Interior**	**Future**	(Future)	**Utopian**
Fehér Klára	Oxygénia	1974	Exterior/(Interior)	**Future**	**Aliens**	Dystopian
Kántor Zsuzsa	Matekária	1974	Interior/Exterior	**Future**	**Aliens**	Both
Szepes Mária	Gyerekcsillag	1976	Exterior	Present/ Future	Time travel	**Utopian**
Kántor Zsuzsa	Hajszesz és bolondgomba	1980	**Interior**	**Future**	(Aliens)	Both
Nagy Franciska	Űrbicikli	1984	Exterior	Present	**Aliens**	**Utopian**
Keller Zsuzsa	Csillaglány	1988	**Interior**	**Future**	**Aliens**	**Utopian**
Szepes Mária	Pöttyös Panni az idővonaton	1989	Exterior[6]	Present/ Future	Time travel	Both

Works were split almost evenly along an interior or exterior perspective; five novels used a predominantly interior viewpoint, four an exterior one, and one novel showed two different future societies—one from an interior and one from an exterior perspective. Works were more clearly associated with the future, with six works having an unambiguously future setting, and two further time travel novels both starting out from the present and traveling into the future. Only two works were set in the then-present. There was a wide spread of main speculative elements, with the most common one being extraterrestrials/aliens appearing in five books. In two novels, the main element was the extrapolated future setting itself, in two others, it was time travel into the future. In one book, the speculative features involved a hidden, high-technology world of fairies coexisting with our own present. (While the fairies could be characterized as a nonhuman sentient species, they were not portrayed as extraterrestrial.)

The majority of novels were utopian, with six characterized as utopian, three showing both utopian and dystopian societies in the same setting, and only one shown as dystopian. Even in the sole dystopian novel, the assumption was that the main characters were from a utopian society marooned in a dystopian one, even if their home society was not described in detail. While works sometimes showed negative aspects of utopian and positive aspects of dystopian societies,

generally the speculative settings all had a positive or negative emotional valence and did not present a 'neutral' setting, or one with balanced positive and negative characteristics.

A striking association between these features concerned perspective and valence. Societies shown from an interior perspective tended to be utopian, modeling a hopeful future—contrary to expectations, infrequently identified as Communist, and never identified as Soviet.

Overall, science fictional elements were used to demonstrate future development of societies in a positive fashion; by contrast to e.g., contemporary American children's SF, where dystopian elements can also take front stage.

Was any of these works intended for a dual audience of children and adults? Klein Tumanov describes the phenomenon of Aesopian fiction in the Soviet Union, where works written ostensibly for children include political subtext critical of the regime aimed at adults; a function of censorship and attempts to evade it. While this phenomenon has been described in Hungarian literature (Hammarberg), and Soviet SF authors like the Strugatskys have been called Aesopian (Givens 4), it hasn't been investigated whether Hungarian children's SF used Aesopian strategies. Women authors might have been likely to use this approach as they were relatively marginalized in publishing.

To explore these topics, we will take a look at where each of these works could be situated in their authors' oeuvres, and examine what this could tell us about author motivations.

Author Motivations in Choosing Children's Literature in an Oppressive Regime

Authors who wrote primarily for an adult audience include Magda Szabó, Mária Szepes, and Klára Fehér. Authors who wrote children's books first and foremost include Franciska Nagy and Zsuzsa Kántor. (Zsuzsa Keller only had one book publication, so in her case such a distinction could not be made; but her oeuvre as a scriptwriter and playwright featured both children's and adult works.) These authors had different trajectories, and as far as it can be reconstructed, different motivations in writing for children.

Klára Fehér (1919-1996)

Klára Fehér started her career in the Rákosi era, writing journalism and political nonfiction with a heavy pro-regime slant, then also moving into children's and adult fiction. As a journalist, she became increasingly disillusioned with the Rákosi regime. Her husband László Nemes, working at the same newspaper, experienced repression and was fired, at least partially due to antisemitic reasons. After the 1956 uprising, the two of them left and did not rejoin the Party, and according to Nemes's description, agreed not to find day jobs in publishing (Várnai). Fehér only became a full-time writer in 1979 (Csuti).

She created work in a wide range of genres, from travel writing to Jewish family saga. She wrote two children's SF novels at different points in her oeuvre. Her *A földrengések szigete* [The

Island of Earthquakes] is a science-based adventure story for children set in a utopian far future, published in 1957; while her *Oxygénia* [Oxygenia] from 1974, a work aimed at an older teen audience, presents the escape attempts of a just-married young couple marooned on a planet ruled by an oppressive regime. This novel is the clearest example of a dual-readership text on our list; it was reprinted by adult publisher Gondolat in 1988.

Magda Szabó (1917-2007)

Magda Szabó, author of the adult literary classic *The Door*, is probably the best-known Hungarian woman author globally. She started out as a poet in the 1940s, but experienced a complete ban on publication between 1949–1958 due to her political views and her family belonging to the upper middle class (contrasted with working-class and/or rural writers favored in this period). In those years she worked as a schoolteacher, together with her husband, also a banned author. She kept on writing without any hope of publication; she moved from poetry to fiction. She struggled with the ban: "If [my husband] hadn't stood by me, I would've smashed my typewriter with a hammer instead of writing . . . 'Write it for me!' he asked me when I was about to quit it all for good" (n.p.).[6] The ban was lifted in 1958, and two of her novels she had drafted earlier were published in rapid succession. She transitioned to working full time as a writer and playwright in just a year, with the support of Party functionary György Aczél, leader of Kádár era cultural policy (Oikari).

Szabó wrote primarily for adults, but she enjoyed trying different approaches and writing for different age groups. Her first children's work published in 1958, *Bárány Boldizsár* [Balthasar the Sheep], remains popular to this day. She published her only SF novel for children in this time period as well, possibly as part of her newfound relative freedom: *Tündér Lala* also pushed against the boundaries of genres, using both SF and fantasy to tell the story of a young prince escaping a high-tech fairy kingdom to live among the humans. Her publisher described this work as a 'speculative fairy tale novel' (*fantasztikus meseregény*) and while she wrote children's fantasy and fairytales, she did not explore adult speculative work.

Zsuzsa Kántor (1916-2011)

Zsuzsa Kántor was a prolific author of books and short stories for children and teens, most of them focused on contemporary everyday situations, with the occasional historical work. She wrote an SF trilogy focused on far-future Young Pioneers and their adventures which included alien contact and political upheaval. She was considered a writer aligned with the Communist regime; she wrote a novel for teens (Práter utca) which portrayed the 1956 uprising as reactionary. Interestingly, her SF contained subversive elements and tackled topics such as censorship of art and large-scale breakdown in a utopian society, bringing to mind the Aesopian concept. Some of her contemporary fiction also pushed boundaries—e.g., her novella *Szerelmem, Csikó* [My Beloved, Csikó] explored gender nonconformity (Takács, in preparation).

She worked as a librarian and schoolteacher, eventually becoming a school principal (Mán-Várhegyi). She stopped publishing after the regime change in 1989, though she only passed away in 2011. Her eulogy authored by her son, poet Péter Kántor, discussed that she did not stop writing even at an advanced age (Kántor).

Mária Szepes (1908-2007)

Mária Szepes was primarily a writer of occult fiction and nonfiction, areas of state-mandated suppression during the Communist period. Her alchemical novel *A Vörös Oroszlán* [*The Red Lion*] had originally seen publication shortly after World War II, but was banned when the Communists came into power (Szepes). Many of Szepes's adult works, extant earlier in manuscript, were only published after the collapse of the Kádár regime; like her series of occult-themed novels *Raguel hét tanítványa* [The Seven Disciples of Raguel] that she considered her magnum opus. She wrote this series between 1948 and 1977, but it only saw publication in shortened form in 1990, and at its full length in 1999.

Looking for acceptable topics after the Communist takeover, she turned to children's literature—her biography by the Mária Szepes Foundation states that she "hid away in children's stories" (n.p.). She published a lengthy children's book series titled *Pöttyös Panni* [Panni Polka-Dots] with Móra, about a young girl in a contemporary everyday setting. *Pöttyös Panni* became a smash hit, and the kind and gentle stories were popular with children and their parents alike. In one of the last volumes of the series, *Pöttyös Panni az Idővonaton* [Panni Polka-Dots on the Time Train], she brought in SF themes: Panni traveled into the far future using artificially produced ball lightning. Her earlier children's SF novel *Gyerekcsillag* [Kidstar], a stand-alone work, likewise presented transdimensional travel.

Unlike any of the other women authors of children's SF in this time period, she also published several adult SF novels with Galaktika; Péter Kuczka even managed to release a revised and censored version of *A Vörös Oroszlán* in 1984.

Franciska Nagy (1943-present)

Franciska Nagy is probably the only author on the list who is still active. She studied journalism and worked as a journalist in the 1960s, then turned to writing and editing full time in 1966. She predominantly writes children's fiction, often with fantasy elements. Some of her works are set in a shared continuity, but out of these, the only one that includes SF topics is her novel *Űrbicikli* [Space Bike]. In this book, an extraterrestrial child crashlands in contemporary Hungary with his space bike, causes untold trouble while trying to repair his spacecraft, and enlists a group of children to his aid—while a detective is already on his trail.

Nagy continued to write children's books after the regime change, up into the early 2000s—in her case, we can probably say that writing for this age group was not imposed on her by the political context. In the late 1990s, she published two adult mystery novels with ghost story

elements. She currently works at the journal *Magyar Iparművészet* [Hungarian Applied Arts] (Nagy).

Zsuzsa Keller (?-present?)

Little biographic information is available about Zsuzsa Keller; she primarily worked as a playwright and screenwriter, on both children's and adult productions. Her only published book, *Csillaglány* [Star Girl], was an adaptation of one of her stage plays for children that also existed as a television recording of the theatrical performance. (She later obtained funding from national arts board NKA in 2001 to produce a script for a movie adaptation, but to my knowledge, the movie was never filmed.) In *Csillaglány*, an extraterrestrial who assumes the shape of a young woman escapes to a future Earth from an evil power, then enlists a ragtag band of kids, adults and talking animals to fight back. Earth is portrayed as idyllic and has seemingly no ties to the present day of the author. This is an unusual, atypical novel published shortly before the regime change that might be considered somewhat of a bridge to 1990s children's fiction—a period that was characterized by stylistic and thematic explorations in a rapidly changing publishing marketplace after the collapse of the Communist regime.

Discussion

Even though the ten novels presented disparate speculative approaches and used perspectives that were both exterior and interior to the societies they portrayed, they showed remarkably cohesive trends. While the futures on display were potentially Communist, these elements were underemphasized in contrast to their "international" nature, with freedom of movement—inaccessible to Hungarians in this time period—often depicted as a positive. None of the novels spoke of the specifically *Soviet* nature of society, and only Kántor's trilogy featured elements of Communist life prominently: specifically, the Pioneer youth movement. (Even this series shied away from portraying Communist ideological tenets in an explicit, didactic manner.)

Contextualizing these works in their authors' oeuvres demonstrated that even as many women authors of children's SF had experienced friction with the political regime, the bulk of these conflicts started in the Rákosi era and gradually lessened in the Kádár era.

SF was not the main genre of any of the authors; they were literary writers open to experimenting with genres and approaches, and SF was one component of that. Only one of them, Mária Szepes, wrote SF for adults. Most authors also wrote non-genre fiction for adults, with the exception of Zsuzsa Kántor.[7]

SF offered a form of experimentation to these authors that allowed them to make statements about society while evading censorship. The imaginaries presented were partially, but not entirely in line with the official ideology of the Kádár regime; just as they pushed boundaries of genre, they also pushed boundaries of what was expressible and desirable.

Further Questions

Close readings of each work could potentially reveal how the mechanisms of Aesopian fiction influence presentations of future or alternate-present societies. It might be just as fruitful to investigate author positionality and how this fits into the broader context of Kádár-era Hungarian society, especially with respect to mechanisms of oppression within publishing.

Some writers were marginalized in other ways besides gender; at least three authors (responsible for six books) were of a Jewish background. (One author was an ethnic majority Hungarian; for two others, biographical information was inadequate to determine their ancestry.) Jewish authors experienced more conflict with the regime and more censorship; a phenomenon described in Hungarian literary fiction, the arts, and public discourse about Jewish topics in the Kádár era (Szécsényi). This hints at potential intersectional aspects of censorship affecting Jewish women authors, that might be investigated also among authors of non-genre fiction in this time period.

The further development of children's science fiction, and the role of women authors in it, could likewise be explored. After a relative lack in the 1990s–2000s, the 2010s have seen many new works by women authors, with over twenty books just in the past decade. Genre boundaries have also loosened, especially with the introduction of steampunk themes. These new authors often follow and react to Anglo-Western—and less commonly also Japanese—trends in speculative media, rather than building directly on their forerunners' oeuvres. Still, they do incorporate specifically Hungarian aspects of storytelling, and not only in their choice of locales and themes, but structurally as well: for example, the *Időfutár* [Time Courier] series of novels, with multiple women contributors, is an adaptation of a radio drama series similarly to how Endre László's *Szíriusz kapitány* [Captain Sirius] series also had popular novelizations published in the 1980s. I am currently planning a follow-up article that will address some of these topics.

Many questions remain and this brief survey could only provide the first step. Hopefully it will serve as further inspiration to investigate Hungarian literatures often excluded from the literary canon, be it due to their choice of genre, audience, or the gender of their authors.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Voloncs about television writing.
2. For a Soviet parallel, see e.g., Klein Tumanov's analysis of Daniil Kharms's oeuvre (140).
3. For Soviet parallels, see Lemberg.
4. Translated into English as *The Gift of the Wondrous Fig Tree* by Noémi M. Najbauer, published by Európa in 2008.
5. Two different societies are shown, but both from an exterior perspective.

6. "Ha ő nem áll mellettem, kalapáccsal verem szét az írógépemet írás helyett . . . 'Nekem írd meg!'—kért, mikor végképp abba akartam hagyni mindent" (Szabó)
7. While this article did not survey men, men authors who wrote children's SF predominantly or exclusively did exist in the time period, like Péter Tőke or Endre László.

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