Interview with Margit Sárdi

Translated by Beata Gubacsi

Margit Sárdi is a literary historian, specialising in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hungarian historiography and women's writing. In the 1990s she began offering a regular science fiction course at Eötvös Loránd University—the first and only available at the time. Her dedication to science fiction studies led to the foundation of the Magyar Scifitörténeti Társaság [Society for the History of Hungarian SF].

The interview was conducted online in the summer of 2021, and translated by Beata Gubacsi.

Guest Editors Vera Benczik and Beata Gubacsi: How do you see the development of Hungarian fantastic from the 1980s? What aspects do you consider as strengths of the fantastic in Hungarian literature and culture? How can you see these changes through the Magyar Scifitörténeti Társaság [Society for the History of Hungarian SF]?

Margit Sárdi: Hungarian science fiction (or fantastic literature as a whole) has been on a wild roller coaster ride for the past few decades. Following a brief period of flourishing in the 1980s, in the 1990s writers and publishers fell into a difficult situation. There were fewer opportunities: book publishers were suddenly facing a competitive market, and magazines and series ceased to exist alongside the small fanzines SF readers and their communities had created and supported. The majority of accomplished authors began writing in other genres. The 2000s was a period of stabilisation; of the few communities and organisations that survived this murky phase, publishers and magazines were able to begin operating with greater security, providing a platform for new groups of predominantly young writers. Compared to these shifts, the changes in 2010s have been less transformative. I think these cliques continue to be relevant: it's easier to publish if you belong to one or the other community, so it's harder for new talent and creative practices to emerge. At the same time, there's a growing discontent among "outsider" readers and writers, who dislike current, leading forums and organisations, and who wish to see a greater variety and diversity of writing. In the past few years, the Society has mostly felt difficulties caused by the pandemic: due to the lack of regular meetings and events, we can't really see how Hungarian SF is currently changing.

Guest Editors: How does the Hungarian fantastic incorporate and/or subvert the themes and tropes of Anglo-American fantastic tradition?

Margit Sárdi: First of all, I have to admit that I don't read in English; I encounter Anglo-American fiction in translation, so my knowledge of it is sporadic. As a researcher I regard my call to be unearthing and documenting the history of Hungarian SF (and so does the Society).

As a literary historian, I believe that SF, just as other literary genres, is embedded in its era and responds to it, but science fiction uses a completely different set of "codes." (This is why we often refer to SF as "hidden literature.") The influence of Anglo-American literature has gradually increased over the past two decades. However, the Hungarian fantastic remains predominantly concerned with and responding to specifically Hungarian issues, so there might be huge differences. For instance, overpopulation, increasing crime rates, urban alienation, and artificial environments are not pivotal concerns in Hungary, so these provide little inspiration for writers; cyberpunk, steampunk and dieselpunk themes and aesthetics are mostly utilised by small groups to express their identities. Hungarian authors are more partial to the topics of soft SF. Depictions of diverse human and sentient non-human groups in future societies and civilisations is quite common, but even among these trends Botond Markovics's (Brandon Hackett) engagement with transhumanism, the range of biological and augmented humans, or the biologically enhanced non/humans in Zoltán László's fiction feels exciting and innovative.

Guest Editors: How does the uniquely Hungarian storytelling appear in the Hungarian fantastic, and how does the fantastic as a mode itself aid and amplify the Hungarian perspective?

Margit Sárdi: A peculiar characteristic of early science fiction writing in Hungary is that compared to other genres' spatial journeys, they tend to focus on time travel or exploring the future. This can be explained by the possibilities utopia can offer: in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political factions of both sides would use the rhetoric of utopia for expressing their views (and for propaganda purposes). Utopia as a genre needed the toolkit of SF to be able to imagine the future and depict a utopian society for which the present has no blueprint, and which thus remains unattainable. This literary tradition is still strong, however, these days you mostly see dystopias in Hungarian SF, and this seems to be true for the other strands of the fantastic as well. It is no surprise that these imagined futures tend to be inspired by the future of humanity's relationship with the environment, and as a result, an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenario.

Guest Editors: In the field of Anglo-American SF, generic boundaries have become increasingly porous, and experimenting with different genre-bending practices has been encouraged and celebrated. How do you think fantastic genres appear in Hungarian fantastic literature and culture?

Margit Sárdi: Mixing different genres and tones can be seen in the earliest SF authors, from the mid-nineteenth-century (SF and transcendent worlds, SF and crime fiction, see Miklós Jósika), or the twentieth century (Mária Szepes, András Gáspár). In the past two decades genre-blending has become increasingly present, especially with new SF authors. Yet, perhaps the most outstanding examples for these experiments would be more accomplished writers who work in a wide range of modes (Sándor Szélesi, Tibor Fonyódi). It's worth mentioning that the Hungarian

SFF readership is not considerable enough to be able to maintain continuous support for a variety of approaches. For this reason, publishers are more inclined to group together works with different genres and tones, which doesn't help readers to navigate these differences.

Guest Editors: What aspects do you consider the strengths of the fantastic in Hungarian literature and culture and how could they be supported?

Margit Sárdi: Hungarian SF is often concerned with future societies, and the relationship of people and power. (This seems to be a common Eastern-European concern). Twentieth-century Hungarian SF often blends into social satire. Since many traumatic events of Hungarian history have not been dealt with, they're still painful and present in everyday conflicts; it is understandable that SF writers are drawn to alternate histories, where they can envision positive outcomes to real, tormenting issues. So much so that our time travel narratives are never concerned with the theoretical/technological aspects of time travel—they are a chance to resolve the sins of the past, committed by us or by others, even on historical scales. It is perhaps another typical Hungarian thing that short fiction has developed and reached a higher aesthetic quality than long-form prose, and short fiction is still a distinguished form, with well-known writers embracing it and using it as their first line of experimentation.

Guest Editors: How do you see the development of fan communities in Hungary? How do they shape and reflect changes the fantastic is going through?

Margit Sárdi: In the 1980s and 1990s small SF fan communities played an important role in rural areas and universities; their fanzines represented modernity and a chance for renewal. Current laws regulating the foundation and operation of societies and small organisations complicate things, and in the past decade several SF communities have ceased operating. Websites and the fan communities attached to them took their place, with the intent of influencing SF writers and publishers with their critical engagement and reviews. The significance of their impact was especially felt during the discussions surrounding the only existing SF award, the Zsoldos Award, which resulted in the award being split.

Guest Editors: Considering current trends in the production and consumption of fantastic literature and media, how is the Hungarian fantastic likely to change in the future? What new directions do you think are possible?

Margit Sárdi: Whatever I say here, it won't be more than fortune telling. It's hard to see how social circumstances will change, and what direction the trends building upon them will take. The situation of fantastic fictions will remain to be impacted by the publishing industry and the respectively small readership, the readers' and writers' disorganisation, the isolation of these communities due to the pandemic, which has, for example, affected the Hungarian Writer's Alliance's SF Division, as well as the regular meetings and events they organised. There's still a lack of expert criticism, and I think for a long time, we won't see critical, literary historical surveys or public databases, which could showcase the directions and values of the Hungarian fantastic.