

JUDIT SZATHMÁRI

A GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

(Abádi Nagy Zoltán: *Mai amerikai regénykalauz*, 1970–1990.
[Zoltán Abádi-Nagy: *Guide to Contemporary American Fiction*,
1970–1990.] Budapest: Intera, 1997. 594 [1] pp.)

Irony, entropy, and postmodernism express only a fraction of the issues Zoltán Abádi-Nagy has published on within the abundant field of the American novel tradition. His *Mai amerikai regénykalauz* of 1997 draws upon not only previously researched material but is also a unique enterprise in its own right. A lot is suggested by the title itself and the readers expectations will fully be met when exploring the depth of this publication. The introduction explicitly claims that the book fills the void of a compact and complex overview of the American novel and novelists between 1970 and 1990, overarching trends and tendencies, sometimes narrowly defined classification. As of 1995, the publication of *Regénykalauz*, some works had been available on certain genres, and limited information could be found in literary magazines, and still, Abádi-Nagy's book explores the possibilities not yet offered by such publications in their entirety.

The main focus and conducts any book is to convey are expected to be explicit through the choice of title. Being a teacher of American literature, I have met numerous publications in the field. Yet, very few, whose own function was so appropriately defined and offered such a professional guide merely by the title printed on the cover.

Mai (Today's) provides a flexible time frame for the reader to find his way through the two decades the author decides for himself to explore to set as a boundary in which to place his research. Although

it somewhat narrows the focus with regard to time, by establishing 1970 as the point of entry and ending in 1990, through the authors selected for presentation, it covers the period both prior to and consecutive of the two given decades. Yet another advantage of such a selection is the ability for the reader to see how diverse the literary scene is at a given point in time. The authors in this guide represent the variety and complexity of the two decades' prose. This way the reader becomes more apt to compare and contrast contemporary figures, trends and tendencies of the American canon. Such parallel presentation with the spotlight fixed on a definite era raises awareness of the similarities and differences otherwise too far-reaching to notice.

Kalauz (Guide) is yet another word to dwell upon with its connotative meanings. Translated as guide, it applies on the one hand a helping hand to offer principles which help one reach his destination. On the other hand, the original Hungarian denotation suggests an assistant whose task is to serve as a post in an unfamiliar territory.

Exploring the works of fifty contemporary American novelists with seventy individual novels discussed, Zoltán Abádi-Nagy meets the needs of students, instructors and non-professional readers alike. As stated in the introduction by the author himself, the book is designed to be an enterprise, following the literal translation of the Hungarian "vállalkozás." And, indeed, it proves itself to be one.

Personal experience in teaching American literature at college level has revealed that students found it much easier to comprehend trends, tendencies, literary thought, to analyze prose, poetry and drama if they are familiar with the "background" they claim the need to possess as essential for understanding. What the majority of students imply by background information turns out to be biographical data on the author in question. True, traditional literary education makes us accustomed to Hungarian literature course books which tend to establish such a pattern, yet this guide offers the optimal balance between biographical and literary information.

Entries on the novelists' lives are not extensive to lure the reader into the web of easily digestible, tabloid data. As judged and evaluated by Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, they familiarize the reader with the knowledge indispensable when in the process of meeting new challenge. In focus of these biographies is, however, the literary career pursued and

achieved by the authors within the time frame defined by the book's title. Biographies also smoothly introduce, thus, ease the reader's way into more complex literary analysis. Establishing the relevant literary categories, terminology, and a compact criticism of these before eventually entering the world of novels selected for analysis encourages the reader to pursue further inquires not only in the matters unfamiliar to him as yet. Given the strictly defined time scope the encyclopedic biographies offer, we need to acknowledge the effort Abádi-Nagy invested in broadening the horizon obstructed by the limited space of publication.

Entries on individual novels rely on current literary theory and employ scholarly analyses of the works selected. They follow a strict pattern in proportion as far as plot summaries and descriptions are only cited to support the literary analytical argument of the author. While highly scholarly in approach, no complicated terminology impedes the utilization of information. They are detailed to the extent the given work requires explanation and do not bind the reader in unnecessary details. Depending on the critical acclaim each author is devoted one or two novels' space in detailed analysis. These also contain references to other prose writings by the same author, thus offering a possibility of multilevel analysis.

Through the 595 pages of the book, the reader is to meet authors of the two decades in alphabetical order. Such a presentation, although the size of volume imposes its limits, provides for the subjective presentation of the writers of the age. As the entries on each author prove, and following the rules of the alphabet, hinders any biased approach to the inclusion of either writer or work.

The list of the selected 50 authors is well explained in the introduction. No reader may run into unexpected difficulties when searching for information. *Kalauz* serves as a bridge between the American homeland of the novels and the Hungarian, not exclusively professional audience interested in the genre of the novel. While in the United States the abundance of the genre may cause problems, for the Hungarian reader the availability of such literary products has been rather limited.

The introduction also explains how to manage our way through the information provided about each author and work. Since both the English and the Hungarian titles are given, the reader may conduct his

research on any of the given novels or authors by being instructed whether there is a Hungarian translation available.

With regard to the novels discussed and analyzed in the book, the introduction also states that three quarters of them were prepared for the specific needs of this present guide. It is an important factor to note as the diversity of the authors here would easily display a bias in selection, yet never can the reader sense such treatment of preference. In some cases where there is more information available on a novelist's most well-known work, Abádi-Nagy explores less frequently discussed pieces. The omission of names and works is well explained in the introduction, offering help for further research.

For the general reading public, the names of J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Irwin Shaw sound very familiar and one may be surprised not to find them in the book. However, a careful reading of the introduction will guide the reader towards the rules of selection and he will not feel deprived. Due to limited space and the two decades which binds the book in terms of time, some of the best-known, and most popular names had to be left out to make room for a large number of authors whose career includes novels published in the given time. Many others, who are well-known for the Hungarian reading public, did not receive the kind of critical acclaim required to be the chosen 50. The five-page introduction still paves the way for further discussion and never claims to be exclusive in making the list of seventy novels final and unalterable.

By 1995, the time *Kalauz* was published, Hungarian readers may have been familiar with literatures of the United States not quite yet having made their entry in the American Canon. While minority literatures have reached an increasingly keen reading public, here, they are not treated separately. The fact that American Indians prefer to be citizens of their tribal affiliation first, and then to be seen as American may account for their names missing from the book. On the other hand, since authors and novels are not arranged in subchapters, one finds entries on representatives of other samples of minority literatures.

Not intended a reference book, rather a guide and handbook, the work does not need to offer a list of technical terms employed throughout the text. Since terminology follows the language agreed upon in literary criticism both professional and non professional

readers find it comfortable and easy to work with. With the correct balance of plot and analysis the book serves both scholarly approach and can easily be handled by those not professional in the field of American literature. As implied by the title, the guide cannot include all the works of every individual novelist of the time. The criteria of selection explicitly explain the factors which helped determine the present list. The reader may never find personal bias on behalf of the author; critical acclaim is the basic determining factor in choosing any given work.

Today's student of American literature hardly ever meets the obstacles one came across even a decade ago, when the availability of American novels was somewhat limited not only in Hungarian translation but also in their original form. The problem is rather the opposite: with new media facilities, the shrinking figurative distance between Europe and the United States offers such vast resources that one may find it overwhelming to select current publications. With the encyclopedic biographies and the novels' literary analyses, *Kalauz* is an answer to the need and interest of Hungarian readers, not only scholarly but lay as well. Novels listed but not discussed offer future prospects of interest. The translation of titles assists readers in; on the one hand, locate novels already published in Hungarian, on the other hand the list of not yet available novels paves the way for future studies both for professionals and non-scholarly interests.

With an impressive career in academia, Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's work is unique in its field and proves a successful starting point for further, similar publications beyond the time scope of this guide. The book is written with expertise both in the academic field and in instruction.