

**Kurdi, Mária. *Kultúrák között. Magyar és más közép- és kelet-európai emigránsok a kortárs ír prózában és színpadon* (Between Cultures. Hungarian and other Central- and Eastern European Immigrants in Contemporary Irish Fiction and Theatre). Budapest: Lucidus, 2011. 168 pp.**

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The present volume, written by a well-known scholar of Irish Studies, Mária Kurdi, is the first book in Hungarian to address this rather timely aspect of Irish-Hungarian and Irish-Central- and Eastern European connections. As the author claims in the “Introduction,” the presence of Central- and Eastern European immigrant characters has become increasingly conspicuous in Irish literary works written during the so called Celtic Tiger period (1994-2007). Relying on recently published Irish sources, in her discussion of the reasons for this phenomenon the author first explores the dynamics of emigration and immigration in the Irish context. She stresses that emigration, exile, and the return to the homeland as a visitor were for a long time part of the national experience and the cultural traditions in Ireland. However, from about the mid-1990s onwards, due the economic prosperity of the Republic of Ireland, a reverse phenomenon has gained momentum, namely, immigrants—in increasing numbers—have been appearing on the island in search of better paying jobs and better living conditions. Irish people, therefore, find that their society now lacks its former (relative) cultural homogeneity. The increasing number of immigrants has caused some tension, even unease, contributing to the reappearance of attitudinal patterns like the fear of strangers which characterized Irish society during the colonial era. This explains why, according to the author, Irish literary works in which Central- and Eastern European immigrant characters feature portray a wide spectrum of issues related both to the historical experience and the new multiculturalism of the host country, including people’s feelings and possible anxieties (20-21).

The selection of recently published Irish prose and drama discussed in the chapters of the book shows great variety. Some of the pieces reach back to an earlier period when refugees from our own region migrated to Ireland, both South and North, and suggest historically grounded parallels between then and now. Among these works the most interesting ones from the Hungarian point of view are Glenn Patterson’s *Number 5* (2003) and Mark Collins’s *Stateless* (2006), novels set in Belfast and in the Republic, respectively. Both deal with the fate of the ’56 refugee in Ireland. As discussed in the

first and second chapters of Kurdi's book, both novels reflect on the problems of the host society as well. In Patterson's novel the Hungarian refugee character, a plumber, lives through the Troubles and eventually falls victim to the paramilitary activities in Belfast. As Mária Kurdi concludes, the Hungarian plumber merely functions as a foil to the figure of an ambivalent Protestant character, and his death, that of an innocent outsider, seems to be a cipher of the civil population's exposure to tragic victimization during the age of sectarian warfare (55). The writer of *Stateless*, Mark Collins, descended from a Hungarian mother who is a '56 refugee, positions Hungarian refugees as main characters of his novel. Collins portrays their plight and conflict with the hosting society after arriving in Ireland in the wake of the defeated revolution, basing the plot on research into documents and archive material from the period. Kurdi claims that *Stateless* is a significant narrative which, through combining informed facts and personalized experience, highlights the misunderstandings between, and complicated relations of, two small nations left wounded by different forms of imperialism (37).

The third chapter of the book is a kind of cuckoo's egg, in that it surveys Seamus Heaney's essays, which are not about immigrants to Ireland from Central- and Eastern Europe but about poets who left or had to leave that part of Europe for political reasons. The chapter is a colourful addition to the volume as it points to several links and parallels between Ireland and our region and provokes thoughts about the ways in which themes and images in our literatures resonate with one another. The final part of the chapter is devoted to Heaney's essay on Czesław Miłosz, underscoring the similarities in the two writers' moral viewpoints and creeds. The focus of the fourth chapter is the portrayal of Jewish refugees in Ireland in fiction and drama. A Hungarian-English playwright, Elizabeth Kuti's drama titled *Treehouses* (2000) is discussed here, among other texts. Kuti lived in Ireland for years and the play was first performed in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin. The plot revolves around a Hungarian Jew who survives the Holocaust by escaping from the country in 1944, thereby uprooting himself. His story unfolds through the memories of two women, the first his sometime friend who betrayed him, the second his own daughter who feels betrayed by her father. Through the timeless poetic beauty of the play which raises a number of questions about humanity and humaneness (101), Kuti created a memorial to her Jewish Hungarian ancestors.

Chapters five and six analyze fiction and drama which present immigrants and guest-workers in present-day Ireland. In the respective novels of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Paul Murray, Kurdi explores the portrayal of immigrant characters as foils and mirrors to the affluent but careless society of Celtic Tiger Dublin. A highlight of the section on drama is where the author provides information about the work of Polish Theatre Ireland, which represents the cultural contribution of Ireland's largest Central European immigrant group, usually producing plays in both Polish and English (111). By a very fortunate choice, the seventh, final chapter of the book scrutinizes the representation of multiculturalism through the connections of Ireland, Central Europe and the larger world. Here Kurdi discusses the novel *Zoli* (2006), written by Colum McCann, an Irish-born writer who now lives in the United States. Most critics of the novel ignore the fact that Zoli is a Hungarian name; the Slovak Roma woman protagonist of the book goes by a man's name given her by her grandfather, indicating a very complex heritage in her case. Although the novel is not concerned with Irish issues directly, the migrating Zoli

and her Roma community, Kurdi comments, bring to mind the problems of the Irish national outsiders, the Travellers (155).

In sum, the prose and plays examined in Mária Kurdi's book illustrate that the hosting of immigrants and the fate of refugees form complex, far-reaching and sensitive issues for many writers of Ireland (and also some writers working in Ireland), who approach these by deploying a variety of genres and modes. On the one hand, the importance of the book lies in adding to the readers' knowledge about a special segment of contemporary Irish literature and theatre, while offering insight into Ireland's efforts and concomitant sense of compulsion to draw away from its traumatic past which tends to live on at the level of suspicions, intolerance or xenophobia. On the other hand, the book is an important read also because it facilitates—through the aesthetic mirror of another nation—a better understanding of our own experiences and newly emerging challenges in Hungary and the Central- and Eastern European region.