

Collins, Mark. *Stateless*. Ladywell, Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny: Pillar, 2006. 314. pp.

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This novel appeared in the Republic of Ireland in October 2006, one might perhaps say for the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary. Its title is *Stateless*, rhyming with the English translation of the title of Nobel-prize winner Imre Kertész's novel, *Fateless*. It is the first novel of a young journalist, Mark Collins, whose mother is a Hungarian who left her home country for Ireland as a child in the aftermath of the defeated revolution. *Stateless* is based on family experiences as well as on documents to be found in Irish archives about how Ireland hosted 530 refugees from Hungary who escaped there at the end of 1956 and in early 1957. Although the book is marked by the flaws that often characterise the first novel of a young author, the reading of *Stateless* should be a must for those who cherish overly romantic notions about Irish-Hungarian historical relations and national similarities without being aware of the full picture.

Unfortunately, the novel did not have the reception in the Republic of Ireland that it might have deserved as an eye-opener to certain delicate questions with regard to the self-image of both of these small nations. "Lost in historical detail" is the title of the review in the *Irish Times* published on 2 December 2006, written by Alan O'Riordan. The article claims that Collins's novel tends to have a dry and factual style, and on the whole falls short of being really good fiction. While this may be true to an extent, as a Hungarian reader I was deeply moved by the vividness of the introductory passages about the main characters' dangerous night-time flight across the Austro-Hungarian border, a kind of flight thousands chose to take at that time rather than face retaliation.

The point where I can definitely take issue with O'Riordan, the *Irish Times* reviewer, is character portrayal. He suggests that Collins' text does not construct emotionally authentic figures, which seems to be a somewhat old-fashioned claim nowadays. Moreover, there is evidence against it, as the novel offers a detailed and sensitive picture of the main character, Sándor Lovas's dilemma concerning the prospects of the Hungarians in an Ireland which was a rather poor country with a high rate of unemployment in early 1957. Sándor is one of the three who emigrate together to Ireland, the others are his sister, Éva, and the latter's eleven year-old daughter, Krisztina. Like the other few hundred Hungarians landing in Ireland in those weeks, they think they are entering a western country, which was, at that time, true only in the geographical, but not in the economic sense. It was a country which 200,000 of the native population left during the five years before the arrival of the Hungarians, which is about the same number that left Hungary in the wake of the defeated revolution. The plot of *Stateless* centres around the gradual confrontation of the Hungarian refugees with the problems underlying the Irish reality they had known nothing about earlier.

For them the major issue is how to get out of the camp near Limerick, which they hope to be only a temporary base.

The hosting Irish characters also become confronted with something they had not been aware of before, namely the fact that their generosity as a free country toward the citizens of an unfree one has its limits, especially as part of it is the effort to demonstrate that Ireland is now an equal member of the UN it has just joined, capable of offering humanitarian aid to political refugees. There are several signs in the novel that Ireland was not yet ready to integrate refugees from another culture at that time. For instance, most of the Irish in the novel are eager to grant the Hungarians, exiles from a country run by atheists, access to the practice of Catholicism without considering whether they are really in need of it or not. Collins portrays the mounting tension between the two sides by referring to, for instance, how the Irish workers in a closeby factory boycott the employment of the Hungarians. The tension culminates in the hunger strike of the Hungarian refugees with the purpose of forcing the Irish government to make a clear decision about their status and prospects. Involving the representatives of two small nations that suffered from colonial oppression and dictatorship in comparable ways as evidenced by history, the conflict takes tragic proportions, with the result of a widening gap in understanding each other. As a kind of go-between, a Hungarian woman who has been living in Ireland for years says:

I know the Irish. [. . .] like any other race they have their faults. They are full of talk. They lack efficiency. They don't always speak their minds. We are more direct. But there's nothing insincere about their desire to help you and now this help has been thrown back in their faces. How do you think it makes me feel to have people stop me in the street to ask about this hunger strike? People cannot understand it, they think that you are not only ungrateful but insulting. (223)

The novel concludes by describing that most Hungarians decide to leave Ireland too, and seek work and a better future elsewhere. Éva settles down in England while Sándor sails to Argentina, their family thus suffering the second split since the flight from Hungary where they left their parents behind. The only promising sign is that Krisztina, the eleven year-old girl feels at home in Ireland where she makes friends and receives her education—her figure was probably modelled on the mother of the writer. In sum, Collins's novel combines personal with national history in delicate ways. The theme of Irish solidarity with the '56 Hungarian refugees is bound up with issues which engage the Irish themselves, foregrounding their own problems. A mirror is held up to both the Irish and the Hungarians by re-considering the plight of the Hungarian fifty-sixers. In more general terms, parallels, affinities as well as differences between the two small nations are interrogated by Collins's novel in the light of their relations to Europe and the international context, to their own past and present.