



Embers

Sándor Márai , *Carol Brown Janeway* (Translator) , ???? ????? (translator)

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Originally published in 1942 and now rediscovered to international acclaim, this taut and exquisitely structured novel by the Hungarian master Sandor Marai conjures the melancholy glamour of a decaying empire and the disillusioned wisdom of its last heirs.

In a secluded woodland castle an old General prepares to receive a rare visitor, a man who was once his closest friend but who he has not seen in forty-one years. Over the ensuing hours host and guest will fight a duel of words and silences, accusations and evasions. They will exhume the memory of their friendship and that of the General's beautiful, long-dead wife. And they will return to the time the three of them last sat together following a hunt in the nearby forest--a hunt in which no game was taken but during which something was lost forever. **Embers** is a classic of modern European literature, a work whose poignant evocation of the past also seems like a prophetic glimpse into the moral abyss of the present

Embers Details

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Author : Sándor Márai , Carol Brown Janeway (Translator) , ???? ????? (translator)

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From Reader Review *Embers* for online ebook

K.D. Absolutely says

***Embers* is perfect.** I just cannot find anything not to like about this book. It's a kind of book I have never quite read before. It's a simple novel but will definitely stay in my memory for a long time. To think that it sat there, gathering dust, in my bookshelves for more than 2 years. What a pity if I died without reading this flawlessly engrossing work. I only picked this because it is thin and seemed to me like a quick read. I was behind by 8 books in my 2011 Reading Challenge here in Goodreads last weekend and I thought of catching up.

Sandor Marai (1900-1989), a Hungarian novelist and journalist, wrote *Embers* in Hungarian when he was 42 and already living in San Diego, CA. He had to flee Hungary during the Nazi occupation not because he was a Jew but because he was profoundly an anti-Fascist. Just like Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson and Richard Brautigan he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. He was 89 years old. His works had been largely forgotten outside of Hungary and were only "rediscovered" in 1992 when *Embers* was re-published in France then translated to other European languages. In fact, Marai's works are now considered as part of the European Twentieth Century literary canon. (Source: Wiki).

Embers or "The Candles Burn Down to the Stump" is written in a precise and clear realist-style narrative. It tells the story of two male friends: the rich man, **Henrik** and a poor man, **Konrad**. Their friendship started when they were in school and Henrik introduced Konrad to his rich father. They became best friends, almost like real brothers and inseparable. Konrad was even the one who introduced a girl called **Krisztina** to him who later became Henrik's wife. Then one day, when the two men were 34 years old, they went hunting and Henrik saw that Konrad was aiming his gun at him. Later that day, the three, Henrik, Konrad and Krisztina, had their last dinner together in Henrik's castle. The following day, Konrad left to Singapore without saying goodbye. Henrik went to Konrad's apartment and when he was about to leave, he saw Krisztina there and uttered her last word to Henrik: "Coward". From that day on, Hendrik and Krisztina separated by living in the different buildings in Henrik's property. They did not talk to each other until Krisztina's death 8 years after. On her deathbed, Krisztina was calling for Henrik.

The novel opens when Henrik is 75 years old and Krisztina has been dead for 33 years. Henrik receives a letter from Konrad, also 75, saying that Konrad will come for dinner that same day. What follows next is the slow and engrossing unfolding of truth on what happened 41 years ago: during the hunt, the dinner and the day at Konrad's apartment. The plot is this thin and almost no twists. The storytelling is dominated by Henrik's monologue that is a mixture of lamentation, reminiscences and philosophy but delivered in composed, swift, firm yet almost in monotone. That style makes the mood of the novel as chilling, suspenseful and mind-boggling as it delves into the core of our being human: the pain of friendship, love, betrayal, revenge and acceptance. For 41 years, Hendrik only thought of that day and he waited for Konrad's return to know the truth. The slow unfolding of it amidst the eerie locale - Hungarian castle in the middle of the forest - the silence, the dark and the image of the two old men talking to each other. The slowness of the development of the story strangely makes the reading interesting. It is like the slow opening of the castle's door with all the creaking sound while the stillness of the night reverberates in one's brain.

The only caution? If you are a type of a reader who wants fast-paced action and lots of twist, don't go for this book. I guess you will appreciate this more if you are at least in your middle-age already and/or you've been wronged or hurt by a loved one before and you haven't forgiven him or her. Marai's words, uttered by Hendrik, can be a good start for you to find forgiveness lurking somewhere inside your heart.

Alice Poon says

This was a powerful read that pulled my heart along with the narrator Henrik's soul-searching dialogue (perhaps monologue is more appropriate) with his best friend and enemy Konrad whom he has not seen for forty-one years. The story is set in the 1900s in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The speech evokes a past love triangle between the two and Henrik's wife, long dead, and a murder attempt. Henrik chose to stay silent about the double betrayal and to live on stoically. Konrad chose to escape to the tropics. Henrik's wife chose to die.

Henrik's mordant observations about fidelity and betrayal between intimate man-friends, passionate and possessive man-and-woman relationship, dark human nature like arrogance and cowardice, and the solitude and sorrow of aging are beautifully woven into a web of silky smooth words that has the power of swallowing one's heart and mind whole with no reprieve.

I find these passages especially striking:

It's the moment when something happens not just deep among the trees but also in the dark interior of the human heart, for the heart, too, has its night and its wild surges, as strong an instinct for the hunt as a wolf or a stag. The human night is filled with the crouching forms of dreams, desires, vanities, self-interest, mad love, envy, and the thirst for revenge, as the desert night conceals the puma, the hawk and the jackal.

Every exercise of power incorporates a faint, almost imperceptible, element of contempt for those over whom the power is exercised. One can only dominate another human soul if one knows, understands, and with the utmost tact despises the person one is subjugating.

There is this question of otherness....So just as it is blood alone that binds people to defend one another in the face of danger, on the spiritual plane one person will struggle to help another only if this person is not 'different', and if, quite aside from opinions and convictions, they share similar natures at the deepest level.

Is the idea of fidelity not an appalling egoism and also as vain as most other human concerns? When we demand fidelity, are we wishing for the other person's happiness? And if that person cannot be happy in the subtle prison of fidelity, do we really prove our love by demanding fidelity nonetheless? And if we do not love that person in a way that makes her happy, do we have the right to expect fidelity or any other sacrifice?

Do you also believe that what gives our lives their meaning is the passion that suddenly invades our heart, soul and body, and burns in us forever, no matter what else happens in our lives?.... Is it indeed about desiring any one person, or is it about desiring desire itself? Or perhaps, is it indeed about desiring a particular person, a single, mysterious other, once and for always, no matter whether that person is good or bad, and the intensity of our feelings bears no relation to that individual's qualities or behavior?

This novel forces one to ponder on one's own intimate relationships.

Tony says

Come in. Come in, come in, my friend. And you are my friend, closer to me than any brother or sister, even though we have not seen nor spoken to each other in 41 years. It is brutally cold outside, but in here there is a fire, and very fine wine. The room is meticulously set as it was at that last meal, down to that third place setting, empty now. I have figured everything out, what happened then, and why you fled. And now I will tell you.

An eavesdropper might wish for more dialogue between us, but he would be unable to turn away. There's story enough, and human emotions, and discovery. People like discovery. But they also like denouement. What will I do with you? Forgive you? Force a confession? Maybe go all Cask of Amontillado? Oh, people really like that!

But I'm no spoiler. Instead, let me turn this back over to the enigmatic idiot who usually scribbles here.....

I would deny being 'enigmatic' but some of you would recognize that as a negative pregnant. I'm just trying not to spoil any plots. Instead, a word or two about the reading experience and the road to insanity.

My last read was 'The Gate' by Natsume S?seki. There was even a picture of a gate on the cover of the book. It was a simple tale that raised a zen koan in its final pages: *What was his original face before his parents were born?* Ruminating on that is The Gate that gets you into The Way. I would get kicked out of zen school because I like shortcuts and glib renderings and thought about that koan just long enough to consider history as some long river that any individual changes just by dipping his toe in. Next book.

Well, this was the *next* book. There is a gate on the cover. And there was this:

Things do not simply happen to one. ... One can also shape what happens to one. One shapes it, summons it, takes hold of the inevitable. It's the human condition. A man acts, even when he knows from the very onset that his act will be fatal. He and his fate are inseparable, they have a pact with each other that molds them both. It is not true that fate slips silently into our lives. It steps through the door that we have opened, and we invite it to enter. ...

There's not one answer, Grasshopper. It's a process, and a procession.

Lynne King says

“So he’s come back,” he said aloud, standing in the middle of the room. “Forty-one years and forty-three days later”.

“ These words seemed suddenly to exhaust him, as if he had only just understood the enormousness of forty-one years and forty-three days. He swayed, then sat down in the leather armchair with its worn back. On the little table within reach of his hand was a little silver bell, which he rang...

Oh my, a depressing but brilliant book. A tale of loss but so beautifully portrayed. Read it!

Brina says

Sandor Marai was born in 1900 in the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire at a time when honor to one's country was of the upmost importance. A staunch anti-fascist following the rise of the iron curtain, Marai was forced to flee his homeland and lived out his remaining days in California. First published in 1942 and recovered with his other novels, *Embers* is fast becoming a modern classic. A throwback to a time when royalty living in isolated castles was a common practice in Europe, *Embers* reveals an intimate look at life and relationships.

Henrik has turned 75 and has lived with his nurse Nini, aged 91, in a castle outside of Vienna for the past 41 years. Upon hearing that his old friend Konrad will be arriving and joining him for dinner, Henrik looks back at the chapters of his life, focusing on how both he and Konrad have gotten to where they are at this moment. Once friends as close as twin brothers, the pair has not seen each other since a incident with Henrik's wife Krisztina forty one years ago. After the incident, Konrad fled to the Tropics while Henrik remained in his castle, alone.

A son of the landed aristocracy on both sides of his family, Henrik was expected to go into the military academy at a young age. Yet, the only person who he ever felt love and affection from was his nursemaid Nini. As a result, Henrik became depressed at the academy until he met Konrad. Henrik's father welcomed Konrad into the family yet cautioned his son that Konrad was a different type of person destined for a career other than military. The pair, although polar opposites, remained friends through their twenties.

Marai writes how Henrik's and Konrad's lives moved on divergent paths. All these years later, the men do not desire to rekindle their friendship as the title may imply, but to find out the answers to questions that have lingered for this long. Styling his prose by alternating between posing questions between the two with Henrik's recollections of the past had me desiring to find out the conclusion to this complicated web of emotions. Marai also posed an intriguing view on friendships and relationships that left me captivated by the novel through its closure.

Sandor Marai is a new author for me and I am glad that I uncovered this fascinating novel. His novels were considered bestsellers before Hungary fell into fascist hands, and are now being translated into English. I rate this hidden gem a solid 4 stars, and look forward to reading more of his works as they become available.

Stephen P says

How do you untie knots you cannot see, invisible ropes slung around you? Freudian landscapes of unconditional love sought by birthrate, unfound. Does one spend life seeking? But how does one ever know? Even if found is it right, will it disappear, leave, be taken? Or does one live a life only in forward motion? The perspective changes when one is elderly, looking back on perspectives with an old friend one hasn't seen in forty years.

Within is a book of links and linkages, of the tryst of duty with heathen cries. The nature of one never desists. Attempts only lead to further acreage to be walled. In the face of time it emerges stronger, larger. This book is literature conquering time. Time tumbles, slithers, sluices forward, backward, but all within the paced serenity of the style's simplicity, fluency. The enchanting elegiac prose fascinates the reader under the currents of its multilayered meanings.

Why is this person returning after forty one years absence to visit this friend living in a mansion in a dark wood? Suspense is there from the outset. However, it is an embroidery of the literature that is about to take place rather than a tool of mystery genre. The book is gripped by tension, refusing its closing. A novel of aromatic atmosphere yet if you were to slip the corner of any letter up from the page, the primeval, bloodlust howls contained within the darkened woods of each persons cultivated persona, would spurt in gushed dark blood. This book sets forth one who has structured-in passions through the locked steel joints of military discipline and conformed social customs leading to popularity, with another whose nature is beguiled by art. Márai places them within the sweet bounds of unconditional friendship from an early age. What do these men have to talk about, reveal, that forty one years have interceded?

The denouement though of significant length, significant tension, is absent denouement since this is not a book of simple explanations and resolutions. It is told in the travails of philosophic exploration and heartbreak. The mystery is the snake-sliver of time.

Patient serene prose allows the shifts in time to flow in silence. Each word smoothed into the spare precise waiting space. How many years did it take Sándor Márai to set the perfected alignment? Or did it come flowing from a well of born genius of craft? Something regarding craft happened here both mysterious and significant. Within the simple spare prose an unsparing, deep dive into the darkened fathoms of life takes place. On the tip of the surface balances the efforts to survive and live a life. The disparity makes this eloquently, spare, short novel, a surprising adventure not advertised in the style or in the next word to come. How Márai does it is a mystery to me. Maybe further readings of his work may help.

In the end it is the atmosphere that is difficult to leave in this book. The light-muted colors of candlelit waiting, the world aging, turning in time. Is it possible there are some books one never leaves. Another place also to live and question.

Dolors says

“All that is left in the embers is ash, black ash, with the sheen of a mourning veil of watered silk.”

“Embers” is the ideal title to summon up the melancholic decadence that soaks the pages of this intense but short novella. Candles burn until they are totally consumed by the flickering nature of their essence, as it happens with life when confronted with its impending mortality.

Two old men, General Henrik and Kondrád, meet after forty years in a secluded castle in the heart of

Hungary, where the splendorous music of Chopin and flourishing soirees with elegantly attired guests that once crowded its saloons are now replaced by the stale odor of ageing and the heavy weight of secrets. What initially looked like a nostalgic encounter between close friends, gradually acquires shades of darker colors that escalate in intrigue and dramatic tension until the facts that ruined the lives of these two gentlemen are brought into full light by the ruthless evidence of words. A duel without weapons is about to take place, and the enduring memory of a woman will be the point into which both men's destinies will converge.

But are facts or words for that matter enough to condemn a friend, almost a brother, for betrayal?

Does loyalty disable the unselfish love that should come with true friendship?

Is revenge satisfactory in front of a wasted life, overcast with doubt, guilt and rancor?

Márai's characters emerge from the intrigue he dexterously surrounds them with rather than the convoluted tapestry of their psychological portraits. rscHenrik's interrogation reads more like a philosophical monologue than a real conversation, and his guest remains a shadowy presence who listens passively to Henrik's accusations. But a handicap in Márai's hands becomes a valuable asset.

The counterpoint of the ghostly female characters, Kristina and Nini, presented in extreme roles; one as irresistible goddess that triggers wild passions, the other as the saintly figure of devoted surrogate mother, adds to the essence of the otherwise unoriginal tonality of the plotline.

Márai's style is captivating and uniquely intimate. His fresh prose brims over with aching beautiful passages that invoke the glory of old times drenched with woe and wonder, not exempt of nostalgia. Henrik's discourse is paced and calmly delivered, with incisive meditations on the meaning of love, jealousy and duty, but the relentless pressure of his carefully selected words trap you and keep you turning pages with increasing frenzy until his past becomes your present and his mental landscape becomes your own. Márai uses the word as a liberating force, as the ethic pillar on which the burden of a life that nears extinction can finally rest. Passion might be the real motor of existence, but Márai's tale reminds us that reconciliation, and words, are required to give way to the future, regardless of how dark that future might be.

Willow says

In our modern age, I think we tend to glamorize the turn-of-the-century upper classes. It's probably because of Art Nouveau and the Gibson Girl. I always imagine men dressed in their fashionable tweed suits with stiff collars and ladies in long, lacey skirts with big flouncy hats. And there's always some garden party somewhere with lots of flowers.

Funny thing though, authors who lived through this period don't write about it that way. To them the period was filled with pretense, hypocrisy and passive aggression. Nobody talked, but everybody knew what the rules were, and they were rigid. Edith Wharton made New York sound so stultifying and oppressive, that careless Lily Bart was squashed like a bug in *The House of Mirth*. And Sándor Márai writes about characters who never speak, holding their emotions in (for decades) letting their hurt and disillusionment bleed the life out of them. It's tragic, but also quite fascinating, because it's so different from whom we are today.

Today we talk about EVERYTHING. We post transgressions online for the world to see. We candidly talk about our horrible childhoods and our messy lives. We admit we drank too much last night, and we trash talk other people, politicians, the monarchy and celebrities. To think of waiting forty years to confront somebody seems absolutely batshit crazy when you can just post it on Twitter. Yet this is how people used to live their lives.

Embers is about the General, a powerful and aristocratic Magyar lord during the Austro-Hungarian empire who's been nursing a grudge for decades. He's an old man now, still living in the past, refusing to allow modern conveniences intrude on his solitude at his ancestral, wooded estate.

The tale is told slowly, almost too slowly probably for most modern readers (including me). The General has had a lot of time to think about what has happened and he has dwelled on it, rationalized it and philosophized about it (which also seems to be a big turn-of-the-century pastime). And at the end he finally talks about it.

I think the story is beautifully told. The description is rich and lush. The audio book I listened to was wonderfully melodious. It's a little slow though. I'm probably too impatient, and the ending didn't completely satisfy me.

I give four stars. :D

Carol says

Embers presents some of the loveliest, most elegant writing I have encountered this year. At its core, however, it is an overlong ramble of a soliloquy that should have been reduced to a stunning short story. It's an easy enough read, full of the philosophical queries and conclusions of its aged General about the meaning of life, love, honor, killing, obligation, M-M friendship. But the guest is permitted only 5-8 lines. He can't get a word in edgewise. And Krisztina? She has no voice.

I would like to read the novel Marai might have written about the ninety-one year old Nini. She captured my interest as none of the other characters did. Early on, it seemed as if Marai intended to make her more central to the plot, but alas, he chose otherwise.

I am glad I read *Embers* and will look for others of Marai's novels as they become available in English translations; however, I will not press this one into friends' hands and insist that they do so.

Seemita says

My fingers were interlocked around my Baba's arm and my head was resting on his shoulders. I was stealing a glimpse of his face every now and then, convinced that the lines of exhaustion were going to creep up to his tongue any moment, tendering me an apology to relieve him of our evening chatter for the day. However, my apprehensions were misplaced. The exhaustion stood defeated in the face of the radiance that slowly, ever so gradually, filled his visage, displacing the fatigue like a magic potion, as he reached for the cassette player and put one of his most favorite songs in loop. He also fondly went on to explain me its meaning. 'Smruti Tume', originally composed in Oriya language, is an ode to '*memories*'; in Oriya, the two words literally translate to 'Memory, You'. The translated lyrics go like this:

Memory, You are the indiscernible breeze of a spring evening;
Memory, You are the seething ember beneath the ash;
Memory, You are the dancer's teasing frill at a temple's entrance;
Memory, You are the glimpse of tender moon from the mane of Casuarina trees;
Memory, You are the passionate note left behind in a traveller's lodge;
Memory, You are the departed lover's village...
Memory, You are the red stain on the stone guarding shoreline;
Memory, You are the dusk's glow that lights up a dull widow's countenance;
Memory, You are the paper boat on the river that won't reappear;
Memory, are you not my treasured Beloved?

As I read Embers, this song hung heavily on my psyche due to its similar metaphorical luminosity:

With age, memory enlarges every detail and presents it in the sharpest outline.

When the rhapsody of those evening lyrics dissolved into the heartbeat of these present words, I heard a tremor that wasn't a simulacrum of a faint earthquake but the obstreperous throbbing of a vein - a matter of delicate urgency where an inflammation not arrested in time leaves a spot defunct; worse, violated. Such violated lumps of memory hover around a life like the spirit - unseen, unlit, frequently uncouth but always undone.

In Embers, two boys forge the best kind of friendship, two young men test the toughest kind of friendship and two old men relive the only kind of friendship.

Their friendship was deep and wordless, as are all the emotions that will last a lifetime. And like all great emotions, this one contained within itself both shame and a sense of guilt, for no one may isolate one of his fellows from the rest of humanity with impunity.

Over a period of seventy-five years, the birth, maturity and death of every emotion is held between the tender palms of decision and indecision, truth and cowardice, fate and loss, and is flannelled against life filters. A single deed, thus crushed and sieved, comes to haunt one for forty-one years, enmeshing him in the web his exploring fingers had unsuspectingly sewn around his own house. Did the deed trickle down in the same abnegating, granular texture beneath the pillow of the other too, robbing his sleep for those very forty-one years? Márai invites us to find out over a course of a cold, dark night; lit exquisitely by one's questions, suspended excruciatingly by another's abstinence and held inadvertently by a few embers, standing witness to a debilitating relationship, slowly meeting her fate.

In an all-encompassing, surreal, lyrical, almost devastating monologue, Márai trounces everything supercilious, including answers, for a man at his twilight doesn't require answers; he seeks peace. Words become mere instruments of wrapping time into bearable currents, getting their echoes despatched to silent death in the confines of a mind engaged in altering memories, if not erasing them. When a sigh can expel the biggest burden off the chest and impart purpose to one's living, hypothesis await no longer the stamp of verification. Endurance of a life-time denudes all justifications and arguments, leaving a residue that intends to simply burn and become smoke.

Smoke they did become, the memories. But the vestiges persisted, like the embers; silent, hidden, simmering and expectant of revelation on yet another cold night, subjugating the breeze of words and emerging triumphant.

[Note: My apologies for any mistakes I might have committed in translating the Oriya song. My memories of

it are a decade old and I might have faltered at few places in comprehension or recollection.]

Samadrita says

Embers is a tale of heart-breaking beauty. The kind of beauty which is not apparent right at the onset but which makes its omnipresence felt as you keep turning the pages and reach that state of involvement with the narrative, where you cannot wait to feast your eyes and senses on another delicately structured sentence. It lies in the pall of gloom cast by the shadow of some tragedy unspoken of, lurking in the dark, cobwebbed nooks and corners of a secluded castle, the relentless flow of time the sense of which the book tries to capture quite successfully and in the hollowness of life itself.

There is no worthwhile story to be found at its core since a reflection on love, betrayal and the consequences of human folly is nothing new. But it is the handling of these themes which is.

Sándor Márai has a way of creating a mood consistent with the dreariness of the story within and it is this mood which metamorphoses into an important character itself. Like an invisible, guiding force, this mood becomes the reader's constant companion as he/she slowly navigates his/her way around the imperfect lives of Márai's characters.

He ends up imparting a restrained elegance even to the meanest of human tendencies like the insane urge to kill another and to the chilling finality in a man's feelings of disillusionment with life and the people he held dear to his heart.

It is as if Márai's aim from the beginning had been not to bestow significance on numerous life events of a handful of people but instead on an acute analysis of human actions and how individual acts of indiscretion feature in the greater scheme of things. How eventually everything dies out and ceases to matter, after creating a few evanescent ripples on the surface of the placid lake of human existence.

A few irritants have kept me from placing this book on my personal, metaphysical pedestal of absolute literary perfection - the objectification of women, a subtle nod of approval to medieval values like the appreciation of gender specific character traits, the seemingly endless and tedious monologue in the latter half of the book and a sense of perverse vanity the central characters seem to derive out of their European ancestry caused me to take away that 1 star.

Barring these minor causes of botheration, *Embers* is near perfect. It glows powerfully with the spirit of all actions and emotions so distinctly characteristic of life itself, before burning out and surrendering itself to the inevitability of an ending.

Cat says

I just didn't get this one.

This book is full of philosophical nonsense that fails to make an impact.

The main character is an uninteresting aristocrat with a victim mentality. He spends the entire book finding new and clumsy ways to say, "Woe is me."

The book is 213 pages long. It takes Sandor Marai 133 pages to pose his question, and another 70 pages to say that he doesn't need to hear the answer.

The real failure of this book is that Marai creates the background of a few other characters who are far more appealing than the silver spoon fed Henrik, but these take such a backseat to the bourgeois baby that I wondered why Marai bothered to go into such detail of them. I would much rather hear the story of Nini, Henrik's lifelong nurse, or Konrad, his conflicted best friend.

Orsolya says

Let me begin by being frank: I'm full-blooded Hungarian and the daughter of a deceased, well-known Hungarian non-fiction author so I'm slightly biased toward Hungarian literature. Not too mention that Sandor Marai, the author of *Embers*, shares striking resemblances to my father (escaping from communism holds, fleeing first to Italy before ever touching the US, and death in 1989). Despite these blatant favoritism, *Embers* is a pure masterpiece and in realm with the classics.

The reader is instantly transported on page one into an emotion-packed and highly sensitive land. Although easy to read in the realm of word choice; the descriptive language in *Embers* is nothing short of gorgeous and poetic with heavy depth. Oftentimes, one won't even care what Marai is writing about (although trust me, that you DO care); you just want him to keep writing. Marai's style is comparable to Tolstoy in the philosophical aspect and to Thomas Hardy in his depth of understanding human emotion. *Embers* begins with elements of dark and sinister essences looming over the plot, but this is what makes it so captivating and tragic: a pure classic.

Aside from the beautiful literary language, *Embers* also encompasses phrases which will result in the reader uttering a, "Wow" out loud and being taken aback (in a good way). For example, "One day we lose the person we love. Anyone who is unable to sustain that loss fails as a human being and does not deserve our sympathy". I will not get into my interpretation of this phrase but this is an example of the resonating value of *Embers* which will certainly cause you to re-evaluate some of your own values, thoughts, actions, and experiences. I found myself re-reading certain passages to make sure I gathered the lesson clearly in my mind. Simply, *Embers* is a classic book which will affect you but differently at various points of your life, thus, making it ideal for multiple reads.

Underlying the story are philosophical and psychological theories and ideals on friendship, love, relationships, war, and life. These are presented in a non-boring way as dialogue between the General (Henrik) and Konrad. Similar to Kafka in the expressionism, but better; as Marai's high use of allusions drives the story. The buildup to the climax is heavy but as clear as a sunny day, never letting you loose from Marai's grasp. A smooth and simple plot and yet, so deep. *Embers* is one of those novels which says a lot with few words. It doesn't take much to feel like you know the General and Konrad intimately, with a uniquely well-developed character arc.

Plain and simply: THIS is a novel, ladies and gentlemen. If *Embers* was a play, the audience would be silenced and then would erupt in a standing ovation. You just have to read it for yourself to understand.

Mariel says

Blah blah blah put on a puffed up high horse pedestal. I really hate this book. Pseudo "and this was happening cause that's how it happens" styling itself as meaning of shit you could read on a quote of the day site. I HATE books that think telling you this is the same as actually having any meaning. You don't get to just say it and tell me you said it, you awful book. Please, stop coming into my life if you are one of these books!

Or it is a greeting card. The greeting card is to give to the spineless seventy something year old man in your life to avoid coming over and listening to him beat about the bush until you feel as old as his ninety-one year old nursemaid. I don't want to wipe the spit off his weak chin because he's too much of a pussy to have a thought! He can wipe his own ass, I hope it goes without saying.

It's Of Human Bondage if it sucked, pretty much. OHB was essentially a series of conversations to tell the protagonist about life issues that mattered to the author. But they were good conversations! This was shoehorning into meaningless pontifications for... I have no idea. He probably loved to hear himself talk. I didn't need to be miserable to know that people talk up stuff to the point it resembles a bad soap opera with themselves as the lead (with looks and charm enough to rescue them from the fast paced world of fashion modeling for K-Mart fashions). I don't need to be bored into a black hole to know that there are people who are as boring as a black hole.

Ok, here's an example.

"From the first moment, they lived together like twins in their mother's womb. For this they had no need of one of those pacts of the kind that is common among boys their age, who swear friendship with comical solemn rituals and the sort of portentous intensity invoked by people when for the first time they experience, in unconscious and distorted forms, the need to remove another human being from the world, body and soul, and make him uniquely theirs. For that is the hidden force within both friendship and love, Their friendship was deep and wordless, as are all the emotions that will last a lifetime. And like all great emotions, this one contained within itself both shame and a sense of guilt, for no one may isolate one of his fellows from the rest of humanity with impunity."

It all reads like that. Nothing happens. Just that kind of happening which is shit. Don't think for yourself here.

I read on amazon that this was a translation from German (from Hungarian). Maybe the original was good. I'm not going to lose sleep over it. If I were a better reviewer I could be more graphic in my hate levels. I would need my own chin and ass wiped. Alas.

Emilio Berra says

L'ultimo duello

Siamo nel 1940, quando già divampa la Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Due uomini di 75 anni si fronteggiano nella sala del castello di uno di loro (il Generale). Sono ben 41 anni che i due non si vedono. Eppure erano intimi amici fin dall'adolescenza benché, o forse proprio perché, tanto diversi : uno ricco, razionale, militaresco; l'altro di famiglia non abbiente, di temperamento artistico, amante della musica. Perché dunque un così lungo periodo di voluto allontanamento ?

Fra di loro c'è l'impalpabile presenza di una donna, ormai defunta da decenni : un 'bel fantasma' che ha segnato la vita dei due.

Ora il Generale ha delle questioni da porre, le quali da strettamente private diventano esistenziali. Ed è proprio la presenza di questo 'afflato cosmico' a collocare il celebre scrittore ungherese Sandor Marai fra i Grandi della letteratura.

In quel freddo salone del castello, le braci non ardono solo nel caminetto, ove pure sono presenze non solo metaforiche, pronte a divampare in fiamme che annientano.

Il ritmo incalzante della scrittura inchioda il lettore in un clima di progressiva tensione fino all'ultima pagina. L'atmosfera, benché inquisitoria, potrebbe essere definita di sontuosa seduta analitica, dove la ragione non è sufficiente : le sue ragioni schiudono piuttosto nuovi interrogativi sullo scatenarsi delle passioni, sull'esile confine tra odio e amore...

C'è però un' altra figura femminile, nel contempo reale e simbolica, ad essere punto fermo e rifugio affettivo nella vita del Generale : una donna ancora viva; la vecchissima balia di età si direbbe leggendaria, ancora capace di accogliere, assicurare, consolare : lei gli fa il Segno della Croce; lui le dà un bacio: "come tutti i baci umani, anche questo (...) è la risposta a una domanda che non è possibile affidare alle parole".

Mary says

"We will talk these things through once more, try to establish the truth and then go to our deaths, I in this house, you somewhere else..."

My impression of Hungarian authors so far has been that they really know how to write dark and depressing gems. **Embers** is just that, and possibly the saddest and loneliest little book I've read in a while.

What's lonelier than an elderly recluse brooding for decades in an isolated castle?

Familiar themes abound here: love, betrayal, regret. But it's done in such an almost perfect way that you're right there in front of the fireplace, drenched in melancholy, as the dialogue backs you into a corner of nostalgia, fear, and oppression. This was a claustrophobic, beautiful-sad reading experience.

Interestingly, this was the first time that I recall reading something that made me understand, at least a little, what it must feel like for those who love a tortured soul. The strained, fruitless effort of it. I almost felt like apologizing.

Diane S ? says

Beautiful words that form sentences that makes one stop and think. A exquisitely written story, very descriptive, one can picture the scenes down to the minutest of detail.

Friendship, the most expressive definition of a friendship between two men from different backgrounds that I have ever read. Betrayal, love, pride and at the last a definition of aging that is searing.

I cannot say enough about the experience of reading this book except to say it is one that I will long remember and that I must seek out more of this amazing author's work.

One quote from the book had me thinking about it on and off all day,
"It is not true that fate slips silently into our lives. It steps in through the door that we have opened, and we invite it to enter"

Tea Jovanovi? says

Fenomenalan roman ma?arskog modernog klasika... MUST READ!

Nidhi Singh says

Do you also believe that what gives our lives their meaning is the passion that suddenly invades us heart, soul, and body, and burns in us forever, no matter what else happens in our lives? And that if we have experienced this much, then perhaps we haven't lived in vain? Is passion so deep and terrible and magnificent and inhuman?

Embers reads as a memoir with all the strength, verve, and emotions that a solitary perspective can bring. The incertitude of the narrator's voice, the lack of defensiveness for a long awaited revenge which questions the necessity of the same revenge; it is all embedded in a prose which is conchoidal with its philosophical reminiscences, its exquisitely structured beauty. Like a beautifully flowing melody that touches, caresses and burnishes every thought, every memory, and every vision with a sheen that lights up the pinkish twilight darkness of life. I like that tone of incertitude of the narrator. With his long winded, jerky and disjointed narrative, he never puts across something he has not inferred without a great deal of pensive reflection. A thought condenses as a bundle of seasoned doubts, convictions and revisions. And he lets go of the self-righteous sureness about things. It is for the other to take it or fling it down the window. Nothing really matters to him at this stage. And maybe that is the reason behind the sparkling honesty of all his statements.

In the isolation of a forest, in the forlornness of a castle, someone can shut himself off for years, can shun the sight of a particular face, can make the bygone time recede behind silken covers and mildewed chambers. Faces and voices are remembered with the gentleness of a slowly burning candle. Darkness diffuses in the vestiges of a space and existence, in which memories are stranded; questions are detained only to be brought out at the fated moment in which the elapsed time is recreated with distilled precision. And the howling desolateness of the landscape supplements this way of life, this stubbornness, this isolation which could feed upon, energize and concern itself with one passion, guilt, loss and sadness and in the end an unanswered question.

And there is such fixity with a single idea, a single passion, a single question. Everything rests on that, hanging tremulously, seeking for balance, for meaning. And yet it ends up unsought/unresolved as nothing would really transform its essence. The conclusions drawn, the truth discovered would remain the same, unbothered. The pain wouldn't ease. The idea that what consumes everything doesn't really matter in the end

is unsettling. Secrets might be passed across with a greater zeal among two companions because there might be the need to preserve something fundamental, some essential part of the self to oneself, unshared with anyone. And then there is that frightful state in which communication is feared because of what unpardonable, unbearable truths it might uncover.

It takes a long time, many lonely hours, to teach myself that it is always and exclusively about the fact that between men and women, friends and acquaintances, there is this question of otherness, and that the human race is divided into two camps. Sometimes I think these two camps are what define the entire world, and all these class variations in power relations are simply variants of this otherness

Marai in this book talks about how there exists a dichotomy between people who are eternally divided by a difference of temperament and inclinations. There is probably no end to the permutations of discord, unbridled yearning, incomprehensibility, hopeless longing that can be unleashed with such a union. I always thought there had to be a more plausible way to talk about differences among human beings, something other than the divisions of race, class, education, nationality.

One can achieve everything in life, wrestle everything around one to the ground, life can offer up every gift, or one can seize them all for oneself, but one cannot change another's tastes or inclinations or rhythms, the essential otherness, no matter how close or how important the bond.

The conflict is in the form of a discord in their natures at the deepest level. They seek each other out. But amidst the duality, its nature itself that prevents a harmony.

Aubrey says

This book grew and accustomed itself to my senses as an oblong piece of grit would first irritate, then slowly become smoothly subsumed by the oyster surrounding it. The final result was just as beautiful and deceptively complex as a perfectly round pearl would be, a piece of wonderful simplicity with a surprisingly sordid history of formation. Fortunately, the world at large did not feel the need to wrest this slowly wrought jewel from its protective nest, unlike its more physically cohesive counterpart.

The writing grasped at beauty in form as often as some books grasp at plot or characters. This did not go so well at the beginning, and for the most part the imagery was a patronizing mess of shoddy similes. Constantly telling the reader how to picture something, think about something, rather than showing them.

Yet another author that could have done better in cultivating their skill with metaphor. Needless to say, during the first half of the story my attention was not drawn into the story enough to pass by instances of misogyny and racism without feeling perturbed.

However, as the book continued, so did the development of the writing. The beauty lessened its forceful display, and slipped more comfortably into subtly delighting my point of view. The truths that the author wanted to convey to the reader became less of a lesson, and more of a confession. The author even grew to gift their female characters with a complexity that consisted of more than a pretty face and relationships to men. This augmentation could have been better, but in this old world setting that had yet to be scarred by WWII, it would be a waste to depreciate the successes of the book with standards that at that time were not the norm. The past is a foreign country, after all.

In addition to the moments of visual beauty, there are long passages of metaphysics to be found within these pages. While it is true that other authors have done it better, I had not yet run across one who have devoted as much of their mental capacities to the thought of old age, and come up with conclusions that are utterly heartbreaking in their beauty. I with my youth cannot claim to innately relate with all of these conclusions, but I do know something about the slow death that passion dies over the long passage of time, and I can say that the book captured that mental state, that whirling chaos of wasted dreams and futile existence, with a pain bordering on the exquisite.

To reiterate, this book is a pearl. A single event filled with high emotion and murderous impulses, layered over with more than twoscore years of thought and solitude, enough for the fires of passion and youth to die and glaze over with the weight of accumulated smoothness wrought by time. There is a beauty here that cannot exist without implicit awareness of the closeness of death, as well as the unanswerable question of why this death has not yet come. The glowing gold of embers sinking into the dark of a once roaring fire, a last glimpse of the barest trace of light before the all encompassing night. They linger on, and that is all.
