



Parallel Stories

Péter Nádas, Imre Goldstein (Translator)

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A New York Times Notable Book for 2011

In 1989, the year the Wall came down, a university student in Berlin on his morning run finds a corpse on a park bench and alerts the authorities. This scene opens a novel of extraordinary scope and depth, a masterwork that traces the fate of myriad Europeans?Hungarians, Jews, Germans, Gypsies?across the treacherous years of the mid-twentieth century.

Three unusual men are at the heart of Parallel Stories: Hans von Wolkenstein, whose German mother is linked to secrets of fascist-Nazi collaboration during the 1940s; Ágost Lippay Lehr, whose influential father has served Hungary's different political regimes for decades; and András Rott, who has his own dark record of mysterious activities abroad. The web of extended and interconnected dramas reaches from 1989 back to the spring of 1939, when Europe trembled on the edge of war, and extends to the bestial times of 1944–45, when Budapest was besieged, the Final Solution devastated Hungary's Jews, and the war came to an end, and on to the cataclysmic Hungarian Revolution of October 1956. We follow these men from Berlin and Moscow to Switzerland and Holland, from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, and of course, from village to city in Hungary. The social and political circumstances of their lives may vary greatly, their sexual and spiritual longings may seem to each of them entirely unique, yet Péter Nádas's magnificent tapestry unveils uncanny reverberating parallels that link them across time and space. This is Péter Nádas's masterpiece?eighteen years in the writing, a sensation in Hungary even before it was published, and almost four years in the translating. Parallel Stories is the first foreign translation of this daring, demanding, and momentous novel, and it confirms for an even larger audience what Hungary already knows: that it is the author's greatest work.

Parallel Stories Details

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Author : Péter Nádas , Imre Goldstein (Translator)

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From Reader Review Parallel Stories for online ebook

Liviu says

after several weeks of reading, rereading, going back and forth and extensively using the search button on my epub version which i alternated with the print version, I finished (at least temporarily and tentatively since this is a book to be reread quite a few times) the novel.

I plan to have a full review on FBC soon so again several points for now;

- the book is extremely dense and jumps between pov's, narrative forms, tenses, characters, so it is best read as a collection of vignettes; some shorter, some longer as in the (in)famous seventy page sex scene that is like most of this novel not for the easily offended (did not count the pages though it seemed to be 50 pages at least but others did and it sounds right)

- some haunting descriptions from war to sex to death

- bodily fluids left and right

- very deep and subtle connections between characters that are easy to miss

- the parallel stories of the title have rarely any finality and characters jump in and out though there are several mainstays in the sort of bedrock part of the novel that takes place in Budapest 1961 and revolves around several late middle aged women with troubled past, their sons, nephews, husbands... and especially the Lippay-Fehr household

- but there is much more that it is really hard to convey what the novel is about unless you start reading

- worth all the money and time i spent on it, no question about it

on the other hand the scathing review of Tibor Fischer in the Guardian has a kernel truth and the novel may turn readers off easily, but I am in the "masterpiece camp"

- as for comparisons with something like 2666, i would say that the Bolano novel reads like a page turner thriller against this one, but I also think that Bolano is a very readable author and in 2666 the ultra-dark middle part with its repetitions of murders is the reason the novel got the reputation of a "hard read" as otherwise it really flows very well and is quite entertaining

all in all Parallel Stories is a truly impressive achievement and while for sheer entertainment and readability 1q84 is still my favorite, this one will easily be my #2 novel of the year if not a co-#1

Edward says

What you get with Nádas is a candid, unrestrained portrayal of the seedier aspects of life. His depictions are not glamorous. He is obsessed with bodily functions, and with the mechanics of sex. The fluids, the friction, and all the nasty odours and secretions are described in sensory detail. He has a particular penchant for

describing the attributes of the foreskin: its present position as being either relaxed or painfully retracted behind the bulb, its state of cleanliness, its odour, the colour and composition of the substances that inhabit it or emanate from its vicinity; his characters' preoccupation with the above, and its effect on their cognitive and emotional state. If you have ever wondered about such things, this is the book for you.

Though the writing can be uncomfortably descriptive, the unabashed honesty with which he writes is refreshing. Indeed, these are aspects of life which are rarely written about, but which do frequently occupy our thoughts, and are in fact an important part of our experience. For the extent that they figure in our minds – in our memories and imaginations – they are seldom committed to print. For this unique examination of these hidden elements of life, Nádas must be commended.

But unfortunately Nádas has a tendency to overindulge these proclivities. The descriptions of sex are often drawn-out, tedious and unnecessary (though to be fair, much of this is limited to the earlier parts of the novel). Indeed a similar criticism can be applied to the totality of Nádas's writing: even when not depicting sex it is excessive and indulgent. Much of the time he appears to be writing without purpose, with no real narrative direction. His scenes are over-described, and go nowhere. He creates elaborate histories for his characters that have little bearing on their actions or relationships. A novel does not need to have a plot, but it does need to be written with a purpose that is not purely to indulge the author.

Nádas's prose is a mixed bag. It is sometimes elegant, but more often it is awkward and clichéd (however it's difficult to know how much of this should be blamed on the author, and how much on the translation and quirks of the original language). His scenes are deeply introspective. He regularly wanders away from the narrative into history, memory and imagination. This has the effect of distending time, and causing scenes to take on a strange, still, static quality. I'm not certain that this is an intentional or particularly desirable feature, but the effect is unique and memorable nonetheless.

Nádas's style is characterised by frequent, sudden and unexplained shifts in time and perspective. These are often difficult to follow, and this lends the novel a puzzle-like quality. Whereas I generally enjoy this kind of invitation to active participation, in this case I did not feel compelled to play along. I simply did not trust that Nádas was doing anything particularly creative or clever. It felt like a trick, like he was attempting to use these techniques to as a proxy for profundity, to imply layers that were simply not there. As I began reading *Parallel Stories*, I would keep a note of characters' names, settings and relationships, in order to help follow the convolutions and draw connections between the various stories. But eventually I abandoned this practice as it became apparent that Nádas was not driving towards any sort of strong unification of the narrative.

Parallel Stories is characterised by a succession of minutely detailed scenes, which do capture something profound yet fleeting about the human experience, but which often lack any wider purpose in the context of the novel. Eventually, I began reading the chapters simply as vignettes, and allowed the connections to fall where they may. I will concede that there is every chance that my own cynicism and impatience was at play here, and it's possible that I have not given Nádas sufficient credit for his narrative style and structure.

Parallel Stories, is difficult to read without a detailed knowledge of Hungarian culture, history and politics. So much of the novel is about capturing the Hungarian condition and experience. Nádas has clearly written for a Hungarian audience, and though some context has been added in the translation footnotes, there remains a lot of history and lived experience that is assumed of the reader, which most non-Hungarians would not possess. I suspect that the novel is filled with countless points of resonance that would be implicitly understood and felt by Hungarian readers, but lacking this context I personally had difficulty connecting with many of its foundational themes. This was perhaps the biggest difficulty for me to overcome.

When reviewing a novel of this size and complexity, one simply cannot encapsulate it entirely, and therefore I must stress that my comments in this review are generalities, which cannot be applied uniformly to the whole work. I say this only because I feel that I am being unfair in some of my criticisms, in that they absolutely do not apply in all cases. Indeed, there are several sections of the novel that I felt were outstanding. Péter Nádas has much to recommend him as a writer, and perhaps *Parallel Stories* is a better novel than I am giving it credit for. However I can only provide my own opinions and impressions, constrained as they are by my own context and preferences, and the time I've allowed myself to write this review. My overall impression of the novel is positive, but on balance, not overwhelmingly so. You may disagree.

Geoff says

I'm setting this one aside for now. Gave it 150 pages, but I see no reason to continue on for another thousand. It's an utterly bleak, humorless 19th-century-style Realist novel, told in fairly conventional prose (yes, the book's chronology is fragmented and scattered, but really that's not particularly inventive or difficult, you write 6 small novels and shuffle the chapters like a deck of cards...) - not that Nadas can't write, there are some startling descriptions here, nicely made images - but when the book is not focused on the disgusting aspects of the human body, its filth, its excretions, its pain, its antagonism and betrayal of life, it takes to describing rather uninteresting buildings and characters in minute detail. And then to break that up there is more violence or disgust inserted everywhere. This may very well be a masterpiece, as other goodreaders, whose taste I respect and whose recommendations I take seriously, declare. But this is not for me, not right now. I do hope that if the history of Hungary in the 20th century is to be told in novelistic form, it does not have to be entirely sunk in descriptions of pain and shitting. Doesn't Hungary deserve better than that? Again, I only read 11% of a very long novel, so do not take my word for it. Here are a few positive reviews from good people:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

Clinton Smith says

In my continuing fascination with lengthy novels by non-US authors, here's *Parallel Stories*.

It would be most accurate to say that, while there are tenuous links between the different stories in this book, there are several different sort of "parallel novels" working within the longer novel. The sleeve description of the book, to a large extent, is inaccurate as to whom the principal characters are, and seems to provide the inaccurate presumption that the book is primarily about the political movements in Hungary (both the collaboration with the Nazis, and the 1956 Hungarian revolution). Accordingly, the sleeve names the 3 primary characters as being three men (Hans Wolkenstein, Andras Rott, and Agost Lippay) whom each have ties with different elements of the various political factions within Hungary during different periods of this history. However, large portions of the book have very little to do with these characters, with the exception of Agost; but the most memorable sections having to do with Lippay involve a lengthy (75 pages) 4 days of sex type of episode with his girlfriend, Gyongyver (whom may, or may not, be a gypsy)...to say that the book

in general is about the political I think misses out on the intensely personal aspects of the book. If it has a center, it can be said to be an apartment building that each of the major characters has some sort of interest in (renting, ownership, know someone who lives there, etc). The book's first half is intensely personal, and its best moments are the aforementioned chapters with Agost and Gyongyver in one of the apartment flats; the depiction of Kristof's gay cruising on Margit Island (another 20-30 page section...Kristof also lives in this same apartment flat)...the second half is more political and shows in particular detail the Nazis' racial/eugenic theories (the primary appearance of Von Wolkenstein in the book is at a school for those with questionable racial/hereditary traits in the eyes of the Nazis); the extent to which the Hungarians cooperated with the Nazis during the war, and so forth. The non-linear nature of the plot will no doubt frustrate many; certain incidents are revisited from different points of view hundreds of pages apart, and characters reappear whom one may not even remember. But the best 300 pages of this 1100 page book are truly unmissable, as Nadas writes with a fervor for detail and an observation of emotion that is so closely broken down into the smallest constituents that anyone could draw a deeper understanding of sexual desire, of madness...it does, however, take some patience.

Hadrian says

"Parallel straight lines are straight lines which, being in the same plane and being produced indefinitely in both directions, do not meet one another in either direction."

-Euclid, The Elements

A fitting title, Parallel Stories. This myriad of characters endures through the same torrents of history, somehow, but they never really meet. This big brick is already getting comparisons to War and Peace, and I felt compelled to see for myself.

Adorno is famous for saying there can be no art after the Holocaust. Some are tempted to say he was right. Old style visions of beauty and form and the old-Burke 'sublime and beautiful' definitions are sidelined, or far distant from our present reality they are unrecognizable (Lem, etc.). But that's not for me to say.

Instead, we see many distorted, mournful, shrieking works, from the angry screechings of Russian parallel cinema, to the discordant compositions of Ligeti, Penderecki, and Xenakis, the bloodlands of Eastern Europe after the Nazis and the Soviets have produced a frightening and tragic corpus.

So to the actual book. It starts with a murder, and wanders and traces a sticky path through the 20th century, moving from character to character, with some of the most tenuous links between them, and the backdrop of history rages on, from the Arrow Cross to the Hammer and Sickle.

The other backdrop to the novel, apart from history is the stench. Let me clarify for a minute here. The author does not hesitate nor shy away from history, nor does he shy away from the disgusting, the sticky, the intimate scenes of the characters' lives, from homosexual liaisons to lovers to the one part where a prisoner is covered in shit on a train car. Not too much of the other body functions, but there is a large, perhaps uncomfortable amount of sex. Is it obscene? Perhaps, as much as the history is. It does serve as a very thorough and intimate-as-close-as-possible view of the characters heads.

The psychology of the novel is amazing, and too dense for some. The filtering of tragedy and love through these characters' heads is astonishing. Make sure to keep a list handy, to keep track of them all.

This is an astonishing and inimitable read. Those with soft stomachs need not apply. The damn thing is haunting my dreams.

Edward Rathke says

--And it was for me, and I love it, and even five months since finishing it, I'm still talking about it, thinking about it, pushing it at people, trying to get them to just read even a few pages, trying to figure out how he did the things he does in this novel. He does so many things, and so many of them shouldn't work, shouldn't even be possible for a book so large with so many characters. But he does and I truly believe *Parallel Stories* is the most impressive novel I've ever read, more than *Ulysses* or *The Waves* or *The Magus* or *Moby Dick* or even — and it almost hurts to say — *The Brothers Karamazov*---

Full review at [The Lit Pub](#)

Jonfaith says

The flammable human colloid gathered in the ditches, fat and marrow arranged in fine layers according to their relative density; the religion teach or the retired banker watched as fires burst to life with fat and flames flaring up from the depths.

This particular scene is not indicative of the spiralling core of *Parallel Stories*. The novel's soul is of a softer vice, one more suggestive, dispiriting and, often, spermic.

The action occurs largely in Budapest and Berlin, though other destinations in Hungary and Germany are featured. There are three timelines: 1) both before and during the Second World War, 2) 1956 and 3) 1989. The prose floats from scene to scene, often returning to an earlier situation but from a different perspective, gradually something else occurs. Associations are made. Narratives are linked. Accounts unravel and are dispelled. Sins are not confessed. Doubts linger. A Cubist gestalt doesn't quite triumph, but a sense-making (to paraphrase Herr H) stains as it signifies.

I read most of this while in Berlin, most of which over a single weekend as I was recovering from a classic case of cobble-hobbled knee. I was asked about the book by my mother-in-law. She asked with a smile. I had just read an account of a shadowy orgy in a filthy public restroom. I sensed she KNEW. I blushed and felt dirty.

There are a host of disorders swimming through the protagonists. Despite the grotesque trappings, none of those afflictions appeared contrived, nor entirely foreign. Péter Nádas has penned an ugly work, one which may be one of the most important novels of the last 20 years.

James Murphy says

Well, it's a difficult sprawl. It's not a casual read. It's more like a project. I believe Peter Nadas may be telling us something about his designs when on p 253 he writes, "Stories about the soul and about social relations scarcely touch each other; rarely is there a direct connection between them; they are two different categories

written side by side. At every moment they must be peeled apart. Which is what everybody does, all the time." This can serve as a mini-description of the novel, even though I think there are many direct connections in it. I did find the "stories" of the title to be misleading. While not expecting short stories, I did think I was going to read stories which run parallel in time but are disconnected from each other while at the same time forming a narrative, a little like the works of the great Spanish novelist Camilo Jose Cela's points of dialogue form a novel. Parallel Stories is a little like that. Some stories are paralleled in creating a narrative in the Cela way. Other stories are paralleled by time or by character. Some chapters carry more than one narrative progressing simultaneously, even if separated by 20 years. Perhaps the correspondence could be to scifi films depicting vast armadas of starships aligned side by side on the same course, here moving through the cosmos of Nadas's novel. The stories are parallel but they're not. They move parallel in time or theme or character, but they also swerve and juke so that they touch. They're all connected in a myriad of ways but usually by character. I wrote down the names of 71 characters to be able to keep up with them. Every one is connected to another character in another of the novel's threads.

Did I mention this is a difficult novel? In addition to a more extensive character list than I usually make, I had to keep notes about the chapters because a narrative may be dropped to be picked up many pages later. The end of the chapter at p179 isn't continued, for instance, until p822. Many of the chapters are novella-length. "The Quiet Reasons of the Mind" at the end of Volume I is 100 pages long and consisting of 2 threads, one of which is an act of sexual intercourse so long and detailed it left even me jaded. Another chapter 3d from the novel's end is 97 pages long. There are no line breaks or other divisions in the chapters, either, though Nadas was good enough to write paragraphs. Other difficulties include stream of consciousness breaking into the middle of a narrative and leaving just as abruptly. Shifting points of view are tricky, too. They come without a warning, from one paragraph to the next. Characters go by different names or titles with no apparent pattern to their different usages. It's such a long and complicated read that it's hard to contain the essentials of story and character until you need them again. And so my fairly detailed notes. Perhaps it's best to think of it as parts, even as they slip from side to side out of their expected tracks to collide with other parts. But then the difficulty is to contain the sum of its parts in your head.

I was impressed. I think it well-written and interesting from beginning to end. This is one of those novels you hear about in which there's a story on every page. One thinks of Proust; Proustian is another description for this novel. Within a chapter's progression each page offers its own currents adding colors and scents and angles which expand without distracting. Each page is a satisfying read. And if you think of each as a story, well, in these 1100+ pages there may well be that many stories, or at least the opportunity to think about each page in that way. Parallel Stories is that rich. This isn't the world. It's Hungary, and mostly Budapest, and while Nadas doesn't make it easy by telling us when, clues indicate 1938 to the early 1960s. The last chapter alone is set in 1945 and sometime after 1961.

The picture Nadas gives us is a panoramic one. There's much history touched on. These characters have much on their minds darting this way and that across politics and personal rivalries, crimes major and petty, romance, espionage, family memories. It's an impressive novel and yet, I think, I didn't enjoy it. Not quite. It's a dark novel. Not parts of it, this part or that thread--all of it. Every character is unhappy in some way, as if they're under some oppressive force angering and scaring them. This is a novel in which, as I'm remembering now, every character is having his or her dark night of the soul. Every character agonizes. Many have been touched by the war or the Holocaust. All of them have been touched by the 1956 Revolution. Not all of an 1100+-page novel can take place at night. At least the character Gyula Balter walked beside his pond in gorgeous sunsets. Yet my impression was of a novel taking place at night or, worse, at the bottom of a dark pit. I read somewhere that in Hungary Peter Nadas is a kind of hero and his novels revered. That must be because he captures the essence of the Hungarian people to their satisfaction, the shell of their character cracked open to reveal their meaty souls. Well, this is certainly a meaty novel. Not

exactly enjoying it, unable to find much joy in the many characters--unless it's the hopeful Gyongyver Mozes--I'm still glad I read it, this novel become project.

Susan says

This obsessively observed narrative is a novel of ideas. The first idea that comes to mind, when a cyclist reports his discovery of a corpse, is whether lack of connection to human beings is tantamount to murder or simply urban self absorption, weirdness, and petty malice.

The second question is what post-Holocaust art looks like. This is another aspect of the city, where people are too close, stifled, with obscene relations in public baths, for example, visible and audible, and worst all, pervasive and wretched human odors from sex, perfume, and burning flesh. To the protruding nose this stench is intolerable,

And third, what is it to be human after the Holocaust? People are psychotically divided, in and out of nightmare worlds, unable to choose a gender preference let alone make a permanent commitment. These consequences of living with the constant reminders of the Holocaust (and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) are insufferable.

Finally, what is an appropriate reading strategy for this sprawling Kafkaesque work? I suggest bleeping over the many parts that are offensive, just getting the general idea of why they are there. Read at night, think in the morning.

Josh says

I like big books. The breadth of the story, the intricate plots and characters, and even the sheer physical size of the book are all daunting. But it's the challenge I love. Truth be told, I majored in English because I wanted to be able to really read Gravity's Rainbow (I still can't). House of Leaves, Underworld, Wings of the Dove, Infinite Jest, and my-all-time favorite, The Recognitions, were not easy reads, and many times I slammed the books shut, frustrated, confused, and completely lost, not even aware what was happening or had happened in the last hundred pages.

Parallel Stories may be the book to beat them all. The actual book is 1100 pages but on my iPad it reads to 1556 pages with endnotes. I'm 500 pages into it and so far with the slew of characters that may or may not be related and time shifts, dream sequences and flashbacks, I am utterly lost. The book's setting is communist Hungary between 1937 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It tells the tale of two families, one Hungarian, the other German and their interactions and stories during that time. It is an incredibly ambitious book that took Nadas 18 years to write. It is gruesome, horrific, disturbing, Philosophical with a capital P, and sexual.

One critic says that "it feels as if the reader's head is shoved into the author's crotch." At least it feels that way for nearly 150 pages in a sex scene described in vivid, nightmarish detail. In one dream sequence, a pathetic character dreams of him murdering an old man and awakens to realize he has shit himself. Nadas does not fail us in describing the detail of the man's shit.

But I can't stop reading. There is something about the book that draws me to it. I think it's because I've never

read such a book. The stories are seemingly unrelenting but they have a point to each one individually, which may contribute to the entire story or not (I'm willing to find out if they do) but I believe that if they don't, that is Nada's point. History connects us and it disconnects us. My story, your story, their story, might criss-cross and might not. That might be why we keep living. And that is why I will keep reading.

Paul Bryant says

ABSURDLY LONG NOVELS : MY 2016 PROJECT

You can't help but notice that some novels are stupefyingly long, so long that they put you right off. This one is 1,133 pages! Really! I mean, who are they kidding? If you come to that part of your life when you have the time for such a novel you will probably no longer have enough bodily strength to pick it up. A robot or a nurse will have to help.

This kind of annoyed me. Because I thought – wait. Someone – quite a few someones – thought that this novel had to be this long, it couldn't be any shorter. The author, yes, but he also managed to convince his agent and editor and publisher at the very least. All fairly serious people, not the type who'd say heh, let's just publish a 1,133 page novel which no one will read for the sheer fun of it. What a laugh.

So this made me think that I am missing what might be some great books just because they are insanely long. I therefore conceived a cunning plan – I would choose ten of these behemoths and I would read one hundred pages, and if I wasn't hooked, I would say – "faugh upon you, you bloated wedge of wood pulp, begone to Oxfam" and to the author I would say "May the lamb of God stir his hoof through the roof of heaven and kick you in the arse down to hell. May you have the runs on your wedding night and may you be imprisoned in a library containing only Dan Brown novels and railway timetables from 1931."

So then I checked on a well known online book retailer's site and found to my great surprise that many of these vast novels were being sold at amazing bargain prices, like a quid or two quid. On reflection, this did not bode well, but shoving aside any trepidations I have been buying these tomes like a one armed sailor on a three day pass. The postman has probably muttered the Lamb of God curse at me several times, come to think of it.

Anyway, Parallel Stories is Experimental Long Novel Number One. We shall see what we shall see.

Christopher says

Vital Statistics

Number of pages: 1133

Length of audio version: 1 day, 18 hours, 48 minutes

Weight of hardcover edition: 3.3 pounds

Number of significant characters: 34+

Longest chapter title: Through the Entrance to His Secret Life

Number of instances of the word "foreskin": 34

Number of instances of the word "Nazi": 25

Words most commonly appearing in context with "frenum": "taut", "sensitive", "torn"

Level of necessity to construct an ongoing *dramatis personae*: utmost

Link to a great article about this book: World Literature Today

Many readers may find this book rather bloated, as it is more than a thousand pages long but lacks a plotline even remotely related to that of the latest bestselling thriller. Plot is not a reason to read this book. What Nádas does best is to draw out moments to an extreme degree. A few seconds inside the mind of a character may take up the space of five large and dense pages. Inversely, the few, spare action sequences pass in a flurry of words and the reader may miss them if she blinks.

And while there is not a plotline that demands the reader's attention, this is a very intense book and demands unflagging attention for other reasons. Foremost among these reasons is its structure, which resembles most closely that of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Like *Infinite Jest*, *Parallel Stories* is a fractured, neurotic, and erudite behemoth (and for these qualities, each will attract readers of the other). As Wallace's reader must continually replace herself in shifting time and space, so it also goes within this volume. The story vacillates between Budapest to Berlin and jumps in temporal space from the interwar period to the late twentieth century. And it does this without warning, sometimes within the same paragraph. At the beginning of each chapter, the reader must diligently investigate where and when she has been placed—a question which cannot always be answered straightforwardly.

These are not its only challenging or peculiar characteristics. Like Cormac McCarthy, Nádas neglects certain punctuation, particularly quotation marks. Thus, each sentence becomes a game of *who is speaking now?, the narrator or a character?*, which can be frustrating or delightful, depending on the reader (this reader finds it delightful).

The title "Parallel Stories" is something of a misnomer. Lines (or stories, for that matter) that are parallel are ones that run side by side in either direction infinitely that never intersect with each other. The stories and subplots and characters of this book do nothing if they don't intersect with each other. They interweave to form an exceedingly intricate tapestry depicting Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. One of the major joys of this book is to see a character resurrected from the text after 700 or more pages of absence, in a context with one of the other characters the reader has come to know intimately.

"Intimate" is one of this book's buzzwords. It is to Nádas's credit that he can make such a huge book feel so intimate. He does this with his masterful use of the third-person subjective narrative, with focal characters constantly changing. And there are a lot of characters the reader is introduced to and made friendly with; as a rough count, there are at least thirty-four significant characters. Thirty-four characters that seem unmistakably real, no less, with all the foibles and eccentricities of real people. We are made privy to the innermost thoughts of these characters as well as their most intimate physical moments, something that Nádas is obsessed with. There is a sexual encounter that lasts for more than 100 pages, for instance, that goes into excruciating detail, both of the physical act and the thoughts of its participants.

This neurotic focus on detail may wear on the reader, but the persistent is sure to find *Parallel Stories* an incredibly rewarding book. It is surely a candidate for the future canon, one that, if it can find its appropriate readers, will not be forgotten anytime soon.

christopher says

My god, what a monster. 1,133 pages of hundreds of characters, dense prose, bodily fluids, and dark Eastern European angst. Was it worth it? Yes! I feel like Peter Nadas was trying to do two things here. The first is to detail how people affect each other even if they don't know each other or actually interact directly and the second is to illustrate how the body and bodily needs (sex, food) affect the social and political sphere. About halfway through the book it starts resembling a giant kinetic sculpture with hundreds of characters bashing into and bouncing off each other and you just kind of have to take a step back and marvel at the scale and depth of this novel. Also, the prose is exquisite. The story follows three families from the years of 1939 through 1989 in Hungary and Germany. At its core, the book is kind of a espionage spy novel, but the details can be hard to parse out and there is just so much else going on top of that with all the different characters that it really isn't just a drawn out spy novel, and also tight plotting isn't a reason to read this book anyway. At some points some of the various stories going on in the book converge and interact, but sometimes they don't since they really are parallel stories. I kind of want to listen to the audio book to tease out more connections. One of the things I really liked about this book is how slow moving it is. Time moves at a glacial pace and the internal dialogue of a character will go on for 80 pages or so while in the "real time" of the novel only 5 minutes has gone by. This aspect of the book is really beautiful and is a reminder to revel in the beauty of life's small moments. I feel like big difficult books like this are mostly released to negative/baffled reviews because book reviewers don't have time to actually read the books. Then these books either make a return about a decade later after people have time for them to really sink in, or they just fall into literary obscurity. I'm hoping this is one of the giant difficult novels that makes a come back, because if you are willing to put in the work, Parallel Stories' rewards are great.

Armin Hennig says

Schweren Herzens und voller Überdruss drei Sterne, markiere mir die bemerkenswerten 40% dieses in jeder Hinsicht maßlosen Buches für ein sicherlich erfreuliches Wiederlesen, ausführliche Begründung für dieses Urteil folgt, sobald ich die Zeit und Energie dazu finde.

Proustitute says

For a more detailed review of *Parallel Stories*, I'll insist that you read Tod's review here on Goodreads and Scott Esposito's wonderful review—and one with which I agree wholeheartedly—in the *Barnes & Noble Review*.

Nádas has certainly written a monumental exploration of time, history, belonging, estrangement, and how the personal and the political affect individuals and their relationships with others. Roughly speaking, *Parallel Stories* centralizes the Lippy-Lehr and the Dohring families, exploring main members of each family, their lovers and more distant relations, their friends, and even the friends of their friends.

While such a project, especially one of this length, could easily have been labeled a group of short stories with a loose theme tying them all together, Nádas does indeed succeed at making *Parallel Stories* a novel. However, if his claim—as he has stated—was to create "a monument to incompleteness," the length of this novel is a problem: there is nothing that warrants such a lengthy examination (which results, at some points in iterative narrative arcs and redundant—because they are repeated so often—flashbacks in history), and

this novel would have greatly benefited from a more concise and less broad structure.

There are some Proustian moments here, an author with whom Nádas is often compared; but whereas Proust's project actually solicits the volumes it takes for his narrator to reach the end of the *Recherche*, nothing in *Parallel Stories* does. The philosophical investigations here on time, history, individuality, isolation, desire, and self-annihilation do have their moments of brave insight and often prophetic assessments of our relation to our histories and to history itself, but Nádas often loses track quickly and focuses (almost solely) on the body, defecation, fluids, and sex. I agree with Scott Esposito's review to which I've linked above in that these Proustian moments are mixed with a kind of nineteenth-century realism which seems at odds with Nádas's project entirely, and so this works to make *Parallel Stories* a less effective work—mixing experimental, nonlinear writing with more clichéd and hackneyed plot lines—than had Nádas stayed within the medium of memory and shifting temporalities.

David says

Impressive in its scope and enjoyable in the wonderful writing, but I still found this to be a confusing book to read. Though I do think it is a skill that some writers can help readers to understand complexity, I do not think writing is flawed simply because a writer does not do that. Nádas definitely doesn't. There are so many threads, characters, switches in time, that it is a struggle to understand what is going on and why. I never did get a complete handle on the book, but perhaps I didn't pick up on a key reference I needed to in order to comprehend. This is a masterful book, but I didn't pick up enough to appreciate it fully on my first time through.

Paul Bryant says

My first experiment with absurdly long novels ends in abject failure. I crawl away into a corner, mumbling and drooling.

Okay you have to say that the central of Europe in the 20th Century was no cakewalk in the park on a lovely spring day with friendly poodles and ickle girls in pinafore dresses turning handsprings and bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover tweeting oh what a beautiful morning. Corrupt aristocracies were replaced by fascism which was replaced by Stalinism. So we get miseryfests like *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell (984 pages), Krzysztof Kieslowski's ten hour *Dekalog*, and this 1100 page beast, of which I could not even manage 120 pages.

Other GR reviewers sound ominous notes in their excellent and recommended reviews

Christopher :

Plot is not a reason to read this book. What Nádas does best is to draw out moments to an extreme degree. A few seconds inside the mind of a character may take up the space of five large and dense pages. Inversely, the few, spare action sequences pass in a flurry of words and the reader may miss them if she blinks.

Josh:

I'm 500 pages into it and so far with the slew of characters that may or may not be related and time shifts, dream sequences and flashbacks, I am utterly lost.

Uh oh.

There were reasons why I was groaning along with many of the characters who also groan for their own private reasons.

1. I got an apartment block with a concierge and I began to get introduced at glacially slow pace to each character. And not interestingly. It was exposition exposition exposition.. Tell don't show. Man alive, this big house with many rooms device is so overused, e.g. *London Belongs to Me*, *Life : A User's Guide*, and, hell yes, *Gormenghast*. You can think of many examples yourself.

2. I got a headache from the awkward, cackhanded translation and its hackneyed phrases –

The attack laid her low – page 56

He was shooting the breeze with his friends – p59

She had an aversion to unpleasant scenes – p61

And the stilted use of the impersonal pronoun “one”, as in “one had to be careful otherwise one could bump one’s head on the low ceiling”. The last time English writers used “one” like that was Agatha Christie in 1852 but this is a translation so I dunno.

3. One also gets awful sentences like :

Neither her body nor her soul had any appropriate sense organs with which to comprehend what she was failing to comprehend with her mind.

Ugh. That’s horrible. It just lies on the page and writhes. Somebody put it out of its misery with a spade.

4. There are no quotation marks for dialogue. Even bloody James Joyce used a dash, but for Peter Nadas that would be frivolous. This makes a stodgy book even more of an effort. I understand that later it shifts from third to first person narration on a whim inside a paragraph, but I did not get far enough to find that out. All this shite makes this book very literary.

Other reviewers liked this monster a lot so don't take my word for it but I believe some of them were suffering from literary Stockholm Syndrome, which is where very long books are wildly overpraised because the reader has become convinced that the terrorists have a valid case.

Lawks a-mercy.

Tod Wodicka says

REVIEW published in The National, November 4th, 2011.

Henry James famously referred to the spate of unwieldy, enormous, world-engulfing 19th century novels that once flooded the literary world, and Tolstoy's War and Peace specifically, as "loose, baggy monsters". Such monsters are now pretty much a genre. Perhaps it's simply that word - monster - but what critic can resist giving the giant novel that kind of label? And, let's face it, books featuring hundreds of characters, squirrelly plot lines (or no discernible plot lines at all), can be threatening. If the 19th century gave us this species, the 20th century literary canon was arguably ruled by such beasts. Joyce, Gaddis, Proust, Pynchon, Mann, DeLillo, Musil, David Foster Wallace; almost every novelist, it seems, had at least one monster in them. Some even had two or three.

With the publication of Parallel Stories, Peter Nádas, the Hungarian novelist, playwright and essayist, has unleashed yet another such 1,000-plus pages into the world. But don't let that scare you. Parallel Stories is, quite simply, the finest literary monster that our young century has produced; it's both a bloated high-modernist anachronism and one of the most fully formed arguments for what the novel is still capable of. Here, finally, is a new way forward.

On its English release in 1997, Susan Sontag called Nádas's previous novel, *A Book of Memories*, which had been published in Hungary 11 years earlier, "one of the great books of the century". Well, this one is better.

Born in Budapest in 1942, Nádas has lived his life inside the maw of his country's more monstrous years. Eighteen years in the writing, Parallel Stories is the first novel that Nádas has published since the collapse of communism (he began writing it in the late 1980s), and the first, by his own admission, to be written without any kind of oppositional political intent. Unlike many so-called eastern bloc authors who struggled to find a voice to fit the post-communist world, literary and political "freedom" suits Nádas. Unfettered by both state censorship and the need to oppose the same state, Nádas has burrowed deeper into the human condition, one compromised not only by history but by the body itself.

Loosely, baggily, the novel concerns dozens of intertwined characters and nearly 75 years of European history. Hungarians and Germans and Jews and Gypsies; Nazis, communists and secret associations of nationalists and spies, among many others. To attempt an untangling of the threads and stories here would be both impossible and a great disservice to the novel. The very structure of Parallel Stories is in itself a refutation of the linear mode of storytelling and, at times, the novel feels like a film hijacked by its extras.

Parallel Stories is divided into three volumes and twists itself around two families, the Lippy-Lehers and the Dohrings, and the untold dozens of connected - or possibly unconnected - characters that orbit them. There is family drama, a kinky murder-mystery and some of the best writing on war this side of WG Sebald's *The Natural History of Destruction*. The themes and historical periods touched upon are as eccentric as they are brilliant: Nazi eugenics, opera singing, pre-war architecture and Bauhaus furniture building, the trenches of the First World War, the Eichmann papers, epileptic bath attendants, Jewish lumber-merchants, Hungarian aristocracy, undergarment fetishism in post-Wall Berlin, the Holocaust, criminology, perfume, academic politics and even a chapter that reads like communist Hungary's answer to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Not to be crass, but Parallel Stories has an almost Facebook-like approach to character plotting. We have primary and often reoccurring characters - yes, our friends - but then we have our friends of friends, too; and then, scrolling deeper into the work, our friends of friends of friends.

From chapter to chapter, the reader jumps not only between epochs but between the parallel stories of characters that we struggle to place in relation to other characters. From a woman practising her piano to the story of the man who built the furniture with which her flat had once been furnished before the Nazi's defenestrated it; from an unsolved murder in post-Wall Berlin, to a character dreaming of killing his own

grandfather, a Nazi prison guard, after the collapse of a German death-camp on the Dutch border.

You surf the novel as if it were a high-modernist social network, stalking through photographs or memorabilia of people you are vaguely familiar with, or who your friends know, getting detailed, immoderate personal snippets of stories that, by their design, can't ever be resolved or expanded on. Just that one click or peak in: everything hyperlinked to everything else. The novel itself an example of chat-speak's TMI (too much information) but, like a fractal, the whole picture seems somehow contained inside these disparate fragments. Or, as one character puts it: "There were secret passages, then, among individual lives. Which she has now uncovered, found the trial of, but should not tell anyone about lest they think she's gone mad."

Make no mistake, there is something maddening about 1,000 pages of this, though reading a well-tempered novel after Parallel Stories can feel a bit like switching from the blazing colour of a cinema to an old black and white television.

Most of the characters in Parallel Stories, like the author himself, whose mother died of cancer when he was 13 and whose father committed suicide when Nádas was 16, are orphans. Absent parents haunt the novel, a theme that glues many of the narratives together and shines a light onto Europe itself. The powerlessness of Hungary, for so long washed-up against the shores of its more powerful neighbours, is a major theme here; a country always searching, often with terrible results, for that one parent to finally raise it into self-sufficient adulthood.

The novel is mostly told in third person, except when it isn't. For instance, suddenly and almost imperceptibly, the narration of one character, the sexually confused Kristof Demen, switches from third to first person.

Why? Hard to say, except that it works on an intuitive level. Nádas's prose is full of such hairpin bends, except there are no signposts here. Instead, he seems to have absorbed high-modernistic modes until they feel less like experiments and more like the only way these stories could possibly be told. Parallel Stories is built from long paragraphs interspersed with single-sentence, almost poetic bumps or jabs, giving the reader a delicious sense of movement and rhythm, as in this quote relating to a character's experiences during the First World War:

"He could never tell whether he saw, imagined, or only envisioned in his memory the impact of the bomb that had lifted the torso of his machine-gunner, along with muddy clumps of earth spraying the sky, high into the air from a spot now emptied and exuding only heat, and, while the torn-off arms flew off in different directions, the gunner's trunk, pared down to its bare frame but still alive, was skewered on a tree branch. Had this really happened; had he in fact seen it."

But central and most revolutionary about Nádas's work is how he engages with and expands the role of corporeality in literature. The human body with all its savage and mute needs, stenches and grace. He writes in a way that makes one uncomfortably aware of one's own physicality while reading. More than any novel I can think of, Parallel Stories is an exploration of what it means to be a human animal. Characters defecate, copulate, twitch and bleed and sweat, and they do this in almost monomaniacal detail.

Parallel Stories charts out a new kind of humanism, one that boldly explores every last breath and belly rumble of the body's consciousness. Not one movement, it seems, goes without being remarked upon. This can be both repellent and exasperating, and there isn't much humour in the book, it must be said. But, ultimately, it does what so little contemporary fiction has the courage to do: it unsettles us and encourages

new modes of thinking.

When was the last time a novel made you painfully more aware of your physical body? For too long in fiction the subconscious has been a vassal of the mind; here, the body itself steps up to demand its own consciousness, its own place in the fractured tableau of memory and history. For what else is history, it seems to ask, but those finite, fleshy vessels that contain it?

Peter Nádas's Parallel Stories is an intensely private exploration of the maintenance and demands of the body set against the public backdrop of modern European history. In the end, it's all one and the same. We create our own monsters. Henry James would not have approved.

Tod Wodicka is the author of the novel, *All Shall Be Well; And All Shall Be Well; And All Manner of Things Shall Be Well*. He lives in Berlin where he is at work on his second novel, *The Household Spirit*.

David M says

I'm firmly convinced Mr. Nadas is the greatest living novelist in the western world... This book is, like, really intense. I first read it when it came out in '11, and then stopped reading novels for the next year or so. Everything else seemed sort of... inadequate. Petty, insignificant...

Peace time. Relative prosperity and comfort. A cultured woman has to run to the toilet with a bad case of diarrhea, all the while trying to keep up bourgeois appearances; the discomfort in her body brings her back to that time she was riding in a cattle car to Treblinka and everyone lost control of their bowels...

Scenes like this happen over and over, for more than 1,000 pages. There are dozens and dozens of characters, and every single one of them has to fart, scratch his ball, leak menstrual fluid, or some such variation. Then, as often as not, something really terrible happens. Trauma is held in the body; that's where history takes place.

This might not sound all that appealing to a lot of readers. And indeed, back in '11, a lot of the reviews were not favorable. I particularly remember one in the UK *Guardian* where the critic just seemed PISSED at having to endure this. To some degree I guess I can sympathize; I mean, if you were assigned to read it for your job, if you'd been compelled, I can see that it might not be much fun.

I'd recommend first trying *A Book of Memories*, Nadas's earlier novel. It's about 30% shorter, and far more tender, romantic even. The narrator is constantly trying to escape history, looking for refuge in the warmth of others' bodies - and occasionally finding it... In *Parallel Stories* this doesn't ever seem to be a real possibility. History is inescapable, and we're all of us trapped in our own bodies. A totally uncompromising vision of evil, not like anything else in literature. Surely Nadas towers far above all contemporaries.

*

A teenage boy contemplating suicide soon after having had his first sexual experience with men - a *lot* of men, it so happens:

He was taking with him the taste and smell of strange men's lips, gums, teeth, saliva, and cocks; her cherished this, as he did his own imminent death, for which he had to take only a

few more, possibly painful steps. He will take everything with him - pp 626

Even more than Jean Genet, perhaps, Nádas is the ultimate writer of trans-historic faggotry. No one will ever write better or more accurate scenes of gay cruising than the ones found in this book. This makes it all the more remarkable that he's able to create such compelling, fully embodied woman characters.

*

(possibly I'm exaggerating the bleakness a little, a whole long section almost resembles a nouvelle vague film ... oh Kristóf, my north star; am I getting too old to still romanticize walking away?)

*

6/18/16 (actually, already 6/19 here in les Cerq). Third reading. I remain in awe, perplexed, shaken. Nádas is my favorite writer. I think Parallel Stories and Book of Memories are equally great, but BoM is definitely easier to love. I'd say I have more of a tumultuous relationship with PS. Stuck in my craw, I couldn't give it up if I wanted to. As the doctor in Nightwood says of Nora and Robin, *though they may sleep in separate graves, one dog will unbury them both*

Silence is what awakens him. In a book of around half a million words, the author finally has to bow before the unspeakable. A novel this violent and sexually explicit, yet in the end it simply can't be represented or described.

'The point at which parallel line meet is infinity' - Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

Nádas appears to be no Euclidean. These stories do not follow the civilized rules of classical geometry. And the modern Enlightenment fares little better in these pages.

'The meaning of so many things in this world is simply incomprehensible, and very little can be comprehended with the help of knowledge' - pp 284

Encyclopedic in scope, not for nothing has it been compared to War & Peace. The reader might also be reminded of Underworld or 2666. At the same time, for all the different scenes and characters, the books possesses an intensely focused, relentless quality. Nádas is happy to make use of all his research and erudition, but that's not the point. Over and over he pursues darkness, obscurity, unknowing.

Sini says

Al jaren wordt de Hongaard Peter Nádas als Nobelprijskandidaat beschouwd, zeker sinds hij de wereld verbaasde met het omvangrijke en complexe meesterwerk "Het boek der herinneringen". Ik dacht dat hij na dit ook door mij bewonderde prachtboek op zijn lauweren was gaan rusten. Maar hij bleek na achttien jaar noeste arbeid een nieuw, nog veel complexer en omvangrijker boek te hebben geschreven: in het Engels vertaald als "Parallel Stories" (en in het Duits als "Parallelgeschichten"), 1750 volkomen unieke en plotloze bladzijden dik. Deze bizarre omvang, de te verwachten moeilijkheidsgraad en de zeer wisselende kritieken

schrikten mij een tijd lang af, maar in de kerstvakantie besloot ik het toch maar te wagen. En wat een vreugde leverde dat op, mensen. Ongeveer een maand heb ik mij ondergedompeld in dit qua stijl en structuur uiterst ongewone boek, elke dag en in al mijn vrije uren liet ik mij meeziigen door dit intens zinnelijke en tegelijk ongehoord analytische proza. Toen ik het uit had herlas ik hele delen opnieuw, puur uit euforische herhalingsdrang, en daarnaast ook het boekje "Peter Nadas lesen. Bilder un Texte zu den Parallelgeschichten" met mooie en zeer verhelderende toelichtingen van literatuurwetenschappers en van Nadas zelf. Daarna las ik nog weer andere delen uit de "Parallel Stories" opnieuw. En ik werd euforischer en euforischer. Ja, ik jubel graag en vaak over boeken, maar bij dit boek voel ik die neiging nog sterker dan anders. Want dit is het beste boek dat ik in jaren las, en voor mij is Nadas echt de evenknie van giganten als Proust, Mann en Musil. Vooral liefhebbers van Musil raad ik aan om direct ook "Parallel Stories" te gaan lezen, want voor hen is dit boek ongetwijfeld een alleen door Musil te evenaren genot. Mensen die niet van Musil houden, en sowieso niet houden van honderden bladzijden traag en plotloos proza, kunnen Nadas beter mijden. Maar ik genoot. Uitbundig.

"Parallel Stories" begint met een lijk, in een Berlijns park, in het jaar 1989, het jaar dat de Berlijnse muur viel. Maar ook bij tweede lezing kan de lezer alleen maar onzekere vermoedens hebben over wie het lijk is en hoe hij aan zijn einde is gekomen. "Parallel Stories" eindigt met een zeer raadselachtig beeld van licht- en schaduwspel, ergens in Hongarije: een beeld van raadselachtige schoonheid, dat naar mijn smaak vooral een zinnebeeld is van het zijn dat voortdurend stroomt en verandert, zonder reden en zonder kenbaar doel. De structuur van het boek als geheel is bovendien van een even intrigerende als uitdagende openheid: alle hoofdstukken zijn vol raadsels, geen enkel hoofdstuk hangt strak samen met het voorgaande, en in de hoofdstukken worden steeds andere personages, ruimtes, periodes en stemmingen beschreven. Wel worden sommige verhaallijnen of wederwaardigheden van bepaalde personages in meerdere hoofdstukken uitgewerkt, maar steeds discontinu en door andere hoofdstukken afgewisseld. Soms leest deze roman eerder als een reeks van afzonderlijke verhalen of vignetten dan als een roman. Ook al omdat sommige verhalen spelen in Duitsland, andere in Hongarije, sommige in 1989, andere in 1956 of 1961, nog weer andere in 1944.

Wel zijn er resonanties en associative verbanden tussen de hoofdstukken: herinneringen aan het Nazisme, de angstige herbeleving van de Jodenvervolging in zowel Duitsland als Hongarije, de bijna tot onbewuste reflex geworden paranoïde angst ten gevolge van repressie en dictatuur, de schrijnende worsteling met nippende gevoelens van totale zinloosheid, de al even schrijnende worsteling met al even nippende gevoelens van verweesdheid en ontbrekende ankers en oorsprong, de soms bijna ondraaglijk intense verlangens naar vrijheid en nieuwe vormen van erotisch genot, en zo meer. Ook komen sommige personages in meer verhalen terug dan andere personages. Maar een echte hoofdpersoon is er niet, en geen enkel verhaal van een enkel personage wordt met een conclusie afgerond. Bovendien worden tot en met het laatste hoofdstuk steeds nieuwe raadselachtige personages en verhaallijnen geïntroduceerd, die ook weer niet worden afgerond.

Het boek is dus doordeweeds van pluraliteit, discontinuitéit, chaos, gapende openheid en onbepaaldheid. "Parallel Stories" is immers een enorm veelvoud van parallel lopende, verknoopte, maar nauwelijks samenhangende verhalen, en elk verhaal is uit aporieën en breuken opgetrokken. Dat past naar mijn smaak werkelijk naadloos bij de chaotische tijden die beschreven worden, en bij de door dictatuur en repressie volkomen ontspoorde levens die je in dit boek meebeleeft. En daardoor vond ik die chaotische sfeer en structuur echt prachtig, hoe naargeestig hij ook is. Bovendien vond ik die discontinue structuur enorm inspirerend, euforiserend zelfs: geen enkel verhaal is afgerond, geen enkel personage is definitief in woorden en beelden vastgelegd, geen enkel gevoel is exact gedefinieerd, alles is in wording. Niets in deze roman is kortom verstold of gefixeerd of vastgelegd of onder controle. Dat maakt deze romanstructuur bij uitstek open en anti-hiërarchisch. Veel van de personages zuchten onder de naweeën van de Holocaust, of de

gewelddadige onderdrukking, of de hypocrisie en versimpeling van de burgerlijke conventies, of de graue eenduidigheid en geforceerde geslotenheid van het Hongaarse leven. Maar "Parallel Stories" ontsnapt daaraan door zijn open, discontinue structuur, waarin elke verhaallijn oneindig wordt vertakt en waarin elke hoofdlijn in talloze zijlijnen wordt afgebogen. Deze roman fixeert niets, streeft niet naar geslotenheid, maar stroomt. Dat vind ik prachtig, inspirerend, enorm bevrijdend. En geniaal gedaan bovendien

Nog genialer zelfs vind ik de stijl van het boek, die mij sterk aan Musil doet denken. Want Nadas munt in even sterke mate als Musil uit door de werkelijk extreem minutieuze uitwerking van op elkaar inwerkende gedachten, gevoelens, zintuiglijke gewaarwordingen, voorbewuste of zelfs onbewuste impulsen, en op uiterst subtile verschuivingen in dat alles. Het lijkt wel alsof er een microscoop in zijn pen zit, of een camera die alles vertraagd opneemt zodat je als lezer beeld voor beeld alles registreert. Aan het woord is meestal een verteller, die op koel-analytische en soms ironische wijze parafraseert wat het personage denkt, zegt, voelt, ruikt en proeft. Elke zin is daardoor prachtig meerstemmig, want je hoort steeds de verteller en het personage, of het personage zoals geïnterpreteerd door de verteller. Waarbij die verteller, op analytische en niet-oordelende wijze, ook maximale aandacht heeft voor onbewuste gemoedsverschuivingen die het personage zelf niet in woorden kan vatten, of ongekend heftige affecten en - vaak seksuele- aandriften die voor het personage zelf onbevattelijk zijn, temeer omdat ze soms zo haaks staan op zijn ratio en zijn innerlijke taboes dat hij ze direct verdringt. Maar de verteller bespeurt ze, vermoedt er althans de contouren en de sporen van te zien, en die vermoedens vat hij in woorden.

In het eerder genoemde boekje "Peter Nadas lezen" wordt dit "microrealistisch" genoemd, wat ik een prachtige term vind: elk personage bij Nadas is een oneindig raadsel, juist omdat elke veranderende stemming, gedachte, affect en gewaarwording tot op de millimeter wordt bekeken. En in datzelfde boekje wordt de verteller trefzeker omschreven als een "Zeuge": niet als een rechter of alwetende verteller die een definitief oordeel heeft, maar als een onbevooroordeelde waarnemer die met maximale inzet en nauwkeurigheid elk detail poogt waar te nemen en te interpreteren. Zoals ook wij soms doen in het dagelijks leven, door alert te zijn op minieme veranderingen in gelaatsuitdrukking of intonatie van een persoon, of op zoiets ongrijpbaars als de sfeer, de stemming in een ruimte, of de chemie tussen twee personen. Alleen, Nadas' verteller doet dat met meer aandacht en intensiteit dan wij dat kunnen, en met meer microrealistische aandacht dan welke verteller in welk ander mij bekend boek dan ook.

Met als gevolg dat de lezer bijvoorbeeld een copulatie-scene van zo'n zeventig bladzijden lang krijgt voorgesloteld, waarin naar mijn smaak geen woord te veel staat: elk fysiek en mentaal detail doet er toe in deze scène, elk subtiel verschijnsel van afstotning en aantrekking is fascinerend, elke subtile gemoedsverschuiving is prachtig, het bijna microscopische niveau van de interacties en wisselwerkingen tussen de personages is verbluffend, en het heen- en - weer van totale geilheid (met alle schakeringen daarin) naar volstrekte wanhoop en eenzaamheid (met alle schakeringen daarin) liet mij werkelijk paf staan. Ook wordt de lezer vele bladzijden lang ondergedompeld in het hoofd van een Von der Schuer: in de vele ook voor dit personage onbegrijpelijke vormen van ontzetting en desillusie ten gevolge van redeloos oorlogsgeweld in WO I, in de enorme innerlijke leegte die daaruit ontstaat, en in de bijzonder abiecte opvulling van die leegte met een illusoir waanbeeld: het waanbeeld van de rassenleer. Volkomen stuitend, dat wereldbeeld van die Von der Schuer, maar fascinerend door de gedetailleerdheid ervan, en vol opmerkelijk ontroerende en fraaie details. En zo trekken hele stoeten fascinerende personages aan de lezer voorbij, soms antipathiek, soms sympathiek, vaak antipathiek en sympathiek tegelijk, maar altijd met binnenwereld die mij door zijn micro-realistische beschrijving helemaal verrukt. Prachtig is bijvoorbeeld hoe het personage Döhring gestalte krijgt: een verwarde, onherroepelijk eenzame jongeling, vol hallucinatoire dromen waarin hij zich op adembenemende wijze met zowel daders als slachtoffers van de holocaust identificeert. Zodanig dat het verdrongen Nazistische verleden van zijn eigen familie de gestalte krijgt van een groteske, surrealistische gruwelendroom. Schitterend zijn de hoofdstukken over de dolende wees Kristof:

een vat vol voor hemzelf onbegrijpelijke contrastrijke spanningen, en vooral van buitenissige erotische verlangens, vooral homo-erotisch maar ook hetero-erotisch. De micro-realistische beschrijving van die verlangens, en van de daaruit voortkomende extreme seksuele activiteiten, zijn van een geweldige rijkdom. En, ondanks hun brute en anti-conventionele karakter, van een bijzonder grote ontroerende, diepe schoonheid. Vooral omdat het niet gaat om seks alleen, maar om een intense zoektocht naar nieuwe ervaringen, nieuwe manieren van kennen en voelen en weten. Een zoektocht die zich niet voor niets begeeft op de verboden terreinen van extreme homo-erotiek en geabberreerde hetero-liefde: op terreinen dus die nog niet zijn dichtgesmeerd of geknecht door de leugens, de conventies of de wetten. Bovendien, juist seksuele extase, vooral in zijn wat extremere en taboedoornbrekende vormen, lijkt bij Nadas een toegang tot ervaringen waarin de grenzen van de ratio en het ik voor even helemaal doorbroken worden. In dat opzicht doen de scenes over Kristof sterk denken aan de fascinerende wereld van Genet.

Eerder zei ik al dat ik de structuur door zijn openheid inspirerend anti-hiérarchisch vind, en bevrijdend bovendien. Dat geldt eveneens voor zijn micro-realistische stijl: door die stijl krijg je van geen enkel personage één homogeen beeld, omdat elke beschrijving van elk personage ontaardt in een veelheid van veranderlijke op elkaar inwerkende details. De roman als geheel vertakt in een hele reeks van parallelle of onduidelijk zich verknopende geschiedenissen; elk personage ervaart zichzelf als een hele reeks van parallelle of zich onduidelijk verknopende ikken die grote raadsels zijn voor elkaar. Die veelvormigheid wordt nog versterkt door de vertelwijze: elke keer wordt wat het personage bewust of onbewust denkt of voelt geparafraseerd door de verteller, zodat je dus elke keer tegelijk de meerduidige stem van het personage hoort en die van de verteller. Soms is ook de stem van de verteller meerduidig, door zijn ironie. Bovendien zijn de uitspraken van de verteller steeds parafrases van de innerlijke en uiterlijke roerselen van de personages: de verteller ontvouwt dus niet één samenhangend wereldbeeld (zoals vertellers in een traditionele roman vaak doen), maar een veelheid van mogelijke wereldbeelden, die steeds zowel uit hemzelf als uit de personages afkomstig zijn. Pluriformiteit, vertakking en chaotische verandering winnen het in deze roman dus nadrukkelijk van eenduidigheid. In "Verraden testamenten" zegt Kundera o.a. dit: "Het denken dat de roman eigen is [...], is altijd onsystematisch; ongedisciplineerd; het is experimenteel; het slaat bressen in alle systemen van ideeën die ons omringen: het onderzoekt (met name door middel van de personages) alle denkwegen door te proberen elk daarvan tot het einde te gaan". Welnu, precies dat doet Nadas in "Parallel Stories", door een verteller in te zetten die alle personages volgt en duidt tot in de meest verborgen microscopische uithoeken van hun innerlijk, zodat er een rijk gefacetteerde pluraliteit ontstaat die zich onttrekt aan alle systemen die wij menen te kennen.

Zeker zijn ook repressie, dictatuur en verstikkende conventies sterk vervlochten in het micro-realisme van deze roman. We leren bijvoorbeeld personages kennen die prachtige dromen van harmonische architectuur combineren met een soort halfbewust antisemitisme, en we zien hoe personages bekneld raken door vooroordelen en conventies of anderen beknellen door opportunisme of verholen repressieve neigingen. Briljant trouwens hoe Nadas dat doet. Maar dat micro-realisme belichaamt naar mijn gevoel steeds ook een anti-hiérarchisch en anti-repressief beginsel, omdat ook de beschrijving van de grootste schoften bij Nadas nog steeds vol gedetailleerde en rijke nuancingen is. Zelfs in ogenschijnlijk totaal gesloten wereldbeelden vindt Nadas dus de openheid. Bovendien zoeken diverse personages naar grensoverschrijdende, zich van de conventies bevrijdende ervaringen: Kristof zoekt dat zoals gezegd in extreme vormen van de erotiek, de architect Mazdar zoekt dat in bijna utopische nieuwe harmonieën van zijn architectonische ontwerpen, de totaal verbitterde Erna Demén voelt dat in een verdrongen scandaleuze lebisch-erotische ervaring die ze voor even intens herbeleeft maar meteen uit haar geheugen verdringt, de even dubieuze als innemende Bellardi voelt dat, ondanks zijn verbittering en verlies, voor even in de herinnering aan een naakte zwemtocht met zijn naakte jeugdvriend in een bijna mythisch duister rivierenlandschap. En steeds wordt dat grensoverschrijdende karakter van de betreffende ervaring verhevigd door de enorm vertakte stijl, die alle

details in al hun grilligheid naar voren haalt en die alle in de ervaringen aanwezige meerduidigheid op grandioze wijze verder ontplooit.

"Parallel Stories" is zoals ik zei een aanrader voor liefhebbers van Musil, zoals ik. Musils "De man zonder eigenschappen" vond ik een triomf van essayisme, van minutieus schrijven en reflecteren over mogelijkheden, waarbij het nog ongedefinieerde mogelijke steeds verre wordt verkozen boven de verstoldheid en eenduidigheid van het zogenaamd werkelijke. Musil verdedigde daarbij nadrukkelijk de verbinding tussen de rationele en de niet-rationele belevingswereld, en naar een "tagheller Mystiek" waarin het rationele en niet-rationele werd verbonden. Ook zocht hij naar nieuwe buiten-conventionele en bijna utopische vormen van extatisch enthousiasme, wat vooral gestalte krijgt in de nieuwe 'unio mystica' die Ulrich en zijn zuster Agathe in een deels incestueuze verhouding proberen te bereiken. Altijd dacht ik dat alleen Musil dit soort dingen kon, en dat alleen Musil zo minutieus kon schrijven over mogelijke werkelijkheidsbelevingen en over het rusteloze zoeken naar extatische bevrijding. Maar tot mijn stomme verbazing kan Nadas dit alles dus ook.

Ik dacht altijd dat ik Nadas wel aardig kende, want jaren geleden heb ik met veel plezier veel van hem gelezen. Maar "Parallel Stories" sloeg echt in als een bom. Het is duidelijk: die man is meesterlijker dan ik altijd dacht, dus ga ik alles van hem weer herlezen. Ook "Parallel Stories", over een paar jaar. Maar eerst moet ik even bijkomen van dit ronduit verpletterende boek!
