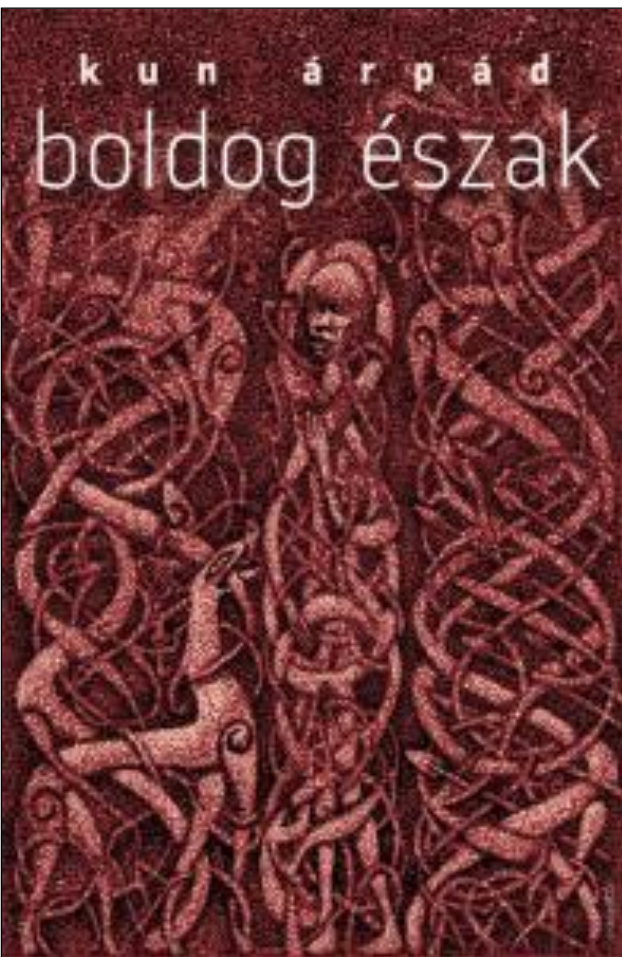


“...the miracle of thought may only be used cautiously and humbly.
Like all power, it tempts one to abuse it.”

The story of one man, two civilisations...

A tale of family, travels and self-discovery

A novel about identity



Árpád Kun: Happy North

(Boldog észak, novel, 440 pages)

2013, **Magvető Publishing, Hungary**

The hero of this novel, Aimé Billion, is a real outsider, who feels as a stranger not only in Africa or Europe, but even in his own body.

While he is of Yoruba, Vietnamese and French descent, Africans consider him as a white man, while white people see him as an African.

The grandson of an African sorcerer, he spends the first thirty-eight years of his life in Benin, where he works as a nursing assistant in the French hospital of the most populated city of the country. He also helps the missionaries of the Norwegian Lutheran Church, among others by translating religious texts, prayers, even though he himself does not believe in God. Leaving Benin, after a short detour in Bordeaux, he arrives in the faraway country of Norway, where the people know so much about being a stranger, about isolation, and it is among these reserved people, the Norwegians, that he will try to find happiness in a very special love relationship. Being a home care aide, he meets a physically challenged woman and they will gradually grow closer and closer.

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Árpád Kun

Árpád Kun was born in 1965 in the west-Hungarian town of Sopron. He is now living in Norway.

He had planned on moving overseas to switch languages and become an English-language writer, but he only got as far as the Faculty of Arts of Budapest University, where he graduated with a degree in Hungarian Literature and History in 1991. For two years, he organised a weekend secondary school in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania). He graduated in Paris with a university degree in French Literature in 1996. He attended half-heartedly a PhD training in Aesthetics at the end of the 90s, but did not become a doctor, he taught – quite more than half-, but not really whole-heartedly – the history of painting at a French university, he wrote – quarter-heartedly – scripts for a TV series, he was a university lecturer in Bordeaux between 2003 and 2005 – this time with three quarters of his heart in it.



Since 2006, he has been living in Norway with his wife and his four children. He works in a village near a fjord as a home care aide for the elderly. Family and literature are his life, but he also likes making strudel, picking mushrooms, and many other things.

He has written four volumes of poetry, a novel in short stories (Esőkönyv – Rain Book). Happy North is his first novel published with Magvető.

On the one hand, the novel, in **a very enjoyable, sensitive style, presents the West African country of Benin, and its traditions, among other voodoo, magic, the beliefs anchored in folklore and the healing activities;** on the other hand, **it paints a picture of the welfare society of Norway.**

The primary aim of Árpád Kun's important, emotionally uplifting novel is not, however, to compare the two countries – **while these two civilisations are, of course, protagonists of the novel in their own right, the book is more than that: it is the story of Aimé Billion, a tale of family and travels; it is a Bildungsroman, a novel about identity.**

It is original and outstanding in its **portrayal of the human condition**, which is here neither black-and-white, nor apocalyptic like it so often appears in books, but rather perplexing and inscrutable in its complexity, the mirror of a real world described with deep empathy.

Happy North is beautiful fiction – a story which brings strange worlds to the reader and makes them seem familiar... and even heart-achingly homelike.

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Excerpt from the novel

Our main topic of conversation in class before the maturity exam was who would study at which university, college or cramming courses in France. Even the stupidest planned to do this, and even those whose parents planned to stay in Benin for years. I wanted to go to medical school in Bordeaux, because I believed my father was working as a doctor in Bordeaux.

My father replied encouragingly quickly to the letter in which I explained my plan to him. He typed reams on headed paper from Bordeaux central hospital. He urged me not to try to sort things out myself at the cultural division of the French Embassy in Benin: he'd already had the chance to find out how bureaucratically they handled papers there, with what carelessness, and if it was up to them I would never be a medical student in Bordeaux. He would sort it out there in Bordeaux, and I should leave my application to him.

His next letter came months later, again typed on headed paper, but it was shorter. He wrote regretting that because the offices were so slow there was now no way he would be able to arrange for me to study in France for the coming academic year, which was imminent, but perhaps that didn't matter because he had fixed things so that I could get a taste of hospital life before I applied, and could experience something barely any different to a regular day in the French health service, and for which I didn't even need to travel, I could stay at home in Cotonou.

The French head doctor of the surgery where my father had worked when doing medical practice was still living in Benin, running the same surgery, which had since been expanded, with alterations, and turned into a hospital. By then the head doctor was in charge not just of the Cotonou Hospital, but smaller surgeries in the countryside, in Abomey, Parakou, and Kandi, and he had the task of supervising and coordinating the money from the French state that supported the Benin health service, as far as allowed by the revolutionary sensitivities of the Benin version of Marxist-Leninist dictatorship and the human tendency to fleece.

The head doctor had remained a good paternal friend to my father when he returned home from Cotonou, and was happy to take me on when I asked. I became a hospital attendant, lifting the helpless patients from the beds onto the stretchers, carrying the deceased in and out of the mortuary

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and medical instruments from one ward to another, pushing food and dirty washing on a trolley, and mopping up all manner of bodily fluids. Later I did a course and was promoted to nursing assistant. I could administer medicines, take temperatures, change poultices and bandages, treat minor wounds, and prepare syringes under supervision by the nurses from Europe.

Dad started to brush me off with promises, as he had done to mum. Because of some unexpected obstacle my registration at university in a year had again been put off to the following year. When I got this letter, I was furious.

When I was still small my mother sometimes used to take me to see my grandfather, then when I was a boarding student I looked him up once every leap year. By that time I hadn't seen him for years. Beside myself with rage, I nevertheless thought of going to see him and asking him to curse my father.

Dantokpa, the Cotonou market, didn't yet stretch as far as his hut. The cries of the sellers, the dying gasps of the animals slaughtered on the spot, were nothing more than a distant clamour. You couldn't smell the rotting fruit and vegetables, or the stink of the puddles of blood; only the smell of marshy sea wafted over from the nearby lagoon. Next to the entrance of the hut stood Osanyin's sparkling staff, made of metal rods and resembling an inside-out umbrella, with pendants on the branches, and on the top a perched bird cut out from a metal sheet; it tinkled quietly when brushed by the hem of the hospital gown I wore even outside in the city.

My grandfather said that on the Path of Creation you spend time in many different animals before being born, and these animals influence you during your life. Which one influences you was for the medicine man to work out, and he had to win the animal's goodwill, because only then could he help people who came to him with their problems. So that they would be close at hand, a whole jungle-full of stuffed animals was crowded into my grandfather's hut. Several kinds of owl sat on the beam, under it bats swung with their wings spread out, hyena, leopard, wart-hog and antelope heads were nailed on the wall, and several shrivelled chameleons hung there too, lion's teeth threaded onto leather as an amulet, and parrot wings in various colours. On the floor lay a strange crocodile, whose mouth gaped open but in vain: it was a sorry sight. It was hardly half a metre long, with short, fragile limbs, and its skin was so thin and transparent that when alive its inner organs were visible, just like the palm fibres crammed into it now it was stuffed. Grandfather had brought it from the Sahara, from an underground cave with a lake, when he had been to look for my missing grandmother.

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When I entered, my wrinkled shrivelled grandfather in the midst of this host of animals gave the impression of being stuffed himself. But he was just having a siesta. He sat stretched out in the old ornamented armchair, the only object he had retained from his former life as deputy governor.

I thrust the shameful letter under his nose, as a sign of the crime. I pleaded with him to curse my father. With heavy eyelids, Grandfather stared into the empty space behind me, and didn't move. He stayed as still as though he were stuffed, only his face was filled with some expressionless smile, which momentarily made me want to curse him too together with my father. But several times as a child I had heard him say, and I'd noted it well even if I didn't consciously remember, that this was the smile of the spirit of thought, which sits continuously on Legba's lips. It can appear in a person's face too, to reflect the small splinter of the created world which for a time comes into perfect harmony. I knew that now I was the small splinter coming into perfect harmony and reflected in my grandfather's expressionless smile. And this was because in my helpless rage I perfectly filled out the shape of my irascible self. Meanwhile, a prisoner of my situation, all I sensed was that anger would blow me apart.

Legba's expressionless smile was long, but it finally came to an end. Grandfather's brow darkened. He sat up, making a noise as if not just the armchair was creaking under him, but his own skin, which had dried out during the long siesta. He moved his gaze back from nothingness to look at me. He explained indifferently but patiently that he could not curse anyone. People who say they can, perhaps they know a law, or can invoke a spirit, that he doesn't know about, or abuse a law or a spirit he too knows. Perhaps they abuse the fathomless power inherent in the spoken word, which truly can be devastating even from afar, though, he counselled me, most who are willing to pronounce a curse are nothing but frauds.

While he spoke, my initial anger subsided. I sat down on the beaten floor beside the transparent-skinned crocodile. I tried to bargain with him. If he wouldn't curse my father, he could work a miracle, something really small, but effective.

He cast his gaze once more into emptiness, Legba's expressionless smile returned to his face, though more faintly. He asked exactly what I was thinking of.

'Well, for instance,' I said, letting on an idea I'd cooked up on the way there 'suddenly my name could appear on the GCL, the Great Combined List of French citizens, and I would be free to fly to Bordeaux and submit my enrolment papers at the university in person.'

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'You do know that there is no GCL' he said dispassionately. 'Many various details of reality would have to interlink differently in order for you to be a French citizen.'

'So you can't work a miracle?' I asked, to force him to come clean.

'Of the kind you're thinking of, no, I cannot,' replied Grandfather proudly, with fastidious disdain in his voice, then didactically he continued: 'Nobody can work one. For the same reason nobody should utter a curse. That would mean putting oneself and one's deeds beyond the created world, beyond the realm of the Laws. That is wholly impossible, and to even consider it is sacrilege. Only the Inaccessible God can be beyond the world he created; he is the only one to whom the Laws do not apply.'

I was nineteen, and as a pupil at the elite school I reckoned myself to be highly rational. With teenage zeal I scorned the tales of Grimm and Perrault just as I did the African superstitions. Theoretically I was on the same wavelength as Grandfather's common sense, even if that did spring from voodooism. But his mini-lecture, there in the hut where I had nevertheless gone hoping for a miracle, was disappointing. The stuffed animals which until now had been ready to spring back into resurrected life, now sank into motionless destitution around me.

'Only thought,' grandfather preached on, 'is able to make happen that which people in their ignorance inaccurately call a miracle. When the impossible, by some amazing twist, becomes possible. Thought, if it is persistent and consistent, uncovers the hidden connections behind the working of the world; it offers power to people who then change things they previously believed immutable. But the miracle of thought may only be used cautiously and humbly. Like all power, it tempts one to abuse it.'

He paused, then concluded unctuously:

'Let us then day and night extol the mighty Legba, the spirit of thought, by honouring his dwelling place, our head, and thinking.'

While my grandfather stretched out once more in his armchair to resume his siesta as if I were no longer there, I bitterly realized that I did not honour Legba's dwelling place. My head felt absolutely empty, there was nothing in me but anger and disappointment. In spite of all my French rationality I began to worry that the curse, the one I had wished on my father, would fly back into my head, into Legba's dwelling place, and I would become one of the stuffed bric-a-brac around me. I ran out of the hut, and resolved never to set foot in it again in my life.

Translated by Richard Robinson