



Portraits of a Marriage (Vintage International)

By Sandor Marai

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A rediscovered masterwork from famed Hungarian novelist Sándor Márai, *Portraits of a Marriage* tracks the lifelong entanglement of a man and two women haunted by class differences and misdirected longings.

Peter and Ilonka are a wealthy couple whose outwardly perfect marriage is undone by secrets. The insecure Ilonka believes she can never be elegant and refined enough for her husband, while Peter has long been tormented by his forbidden love for Judit, a peasant and servant in his childhood home. What Judit longs for most, however, is freedom from the constraints of the society that has ensnared all three in a vortex of love and loss. Set against the backdrop of Hungary between the wars, in a world on the verge of dramatic change, this exquisite novel offers further posthumous evidence of Marai's brilliance.

Translated from the Hungarian by George Szirtes

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. This autopsy of a failed marriage shows a virtuosic control of character and tone meaningfully set against the ossification of the fin de siècle Austro-Hungarian empire. It starts with Ilonka, whose middle-class husband, Peter, is in love with his mother-in-law's maid, Judit. Ilonka's bitter tale of a fight to win her husband back, only to be outdone by the other woman, gives way to the same story told by Peter, itself followed by Judit's take. What emerges is a cubist portrait of a harsh love and a dying society, elegantly paced and delightfully contradictory. Ilonka, Peter, and Judit each possess strong philosophies on life and love, and Márai successfully probes the blind spots and conflicting assumptions in their varied points of view. With each new voice, each very much its own thanks to Szirtes's faultless new translation, Márai (1900–1989) builds suspense and reveals new layers and twists to this tale. Suffused with nostalgia and regret, the book evokes and examines both the nature of longing and the decline of a great empire. (Feb.)
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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Three interior monologues stand as a triptych in the latest novel to be translated into English by a Hungarian writer who flourished in the 1930s. With this phenomenal novel, our conviction, based on the Márai novels already translated, including *Embers* (2001) and *The Rebels* (2007), is confirmed: he ranks as one of the twentieth century's greatest novelists. The book's title is apt; the three sections focus on the conditions of one particular marriage: that between a Budapest industrial magnate and his beautiful wife in the deceptively peaceful years between the world wars, when the "world had not been boarded over yet; for a moment everything—Europe, life itself—was bathed in intense light." In seeking definitions of love, and in exercising his obviously abiding interest in the theme of loneliness in marriage, the author, in a glorious demonstration of psychological acuity, offers his powerful findings from three perspectives: from the husband and from the wife, naturally, but also from the servant girl in the man's parents' household who becomes his second wife. The idea that marriage partners keep information about themselves from each other is the outwardly simple, even ordinary, premise upon which the narrative rests; it is the author's brilliant dissection of that situation that makes this novel so exceptional. The ultimate factor in deciding if the novel works is whether the three segments mesh well enough to give the reader a smoothly integrated whole picture, and *Portraits of a Marriage* is the last word on the effectiveness of the triple-voice technique. -
-Brad Hooper

Review

"*Portraits of a Marriage* is brilliant in the acuity of its observations, its unremitting intelligence. . . . Marai gives voice to a vanished world in a chorus that is both eulogy and manifesto." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"Superbly readable. . . . Deeply satisfying. . . . Like Tolstoy, he has a kind of genius for the small touches that define a marriage, and also like Tolstoy, he is brilliant at dissecting the tiny differences that separate one layer of society from another." —*The Daily Beast*

"With this phenomenal novel, our conviction is confirmed: he ranks as one of the twentieth century's greatest novelists." —*Booklist*

"A cubist portrait of a harsh love and a dying society, elegantly paced and delightfully contradictory. . . .

With each new voice [Márai] builds suspense and reveals new layers and twists to this tale. Suffused with nostalgia and regret, the book evokes and examines both the nature of longing and the decline of a great empire." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Users Review

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