

BIOGRAPHY

Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) was born in Subotica, located in present-day Serbia. He worked throughout his life as a journalist and wrote poetry and fiction. He also translated titles including *A Winter's Tale* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Kosztolányi's first novel, *Nero, the Bloody Poet*, won him the admiration of Thomas Mann.

Péter Esterházy is one of the most widely known contemporary Hungarian writers. His award-winning works have been published in more than twenty languages.

Richard Aczel teaches English literature at the University of Cologne, Germany. He is a playwright and founding director of the theater company Port in Air. His translations from the Hungarian include Ádám Bodor's *The Euphrates* at Babylon and Péter Esterházy's *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn: Down the Danube*.

SYLARK

by Dezső Kosztolányi

Translated from the Hungarian by Richard Aczel

Introduction by Péter Esterházy

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"This short, perfect novel seems to encapsulate all the world's pain in a soap bubble. Its surface is as smooth as a fable, its setting and characters are unremarkable, its tone is blithe, and its effect is shattering."

—Deborah Eisenberg, *The New York Review of Books*

"Dezső Kosztolányi belonged to a remarkable generation of Central European writers. This novel is a masterpiece. From the opening sentences, he is drawing on nuance and subtle detail; comedy and pathos. Every gesture speaks volumes...for all the humour and the easy comedy this lively study of small life is as profound as a prayer, as subtle as a lament." —*The Irish Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

At first glance, the story of *Skylark* is a simple one. It is the turn of the twentieth century in the small Hungarian town of Sárszeg, and Mother and Father Vajkay's daughter Skylark—homely, thirty-five, never married—is going on a trip to visit her uncle, Béla Bozsó. She'll only be gone a week, but Mother and Father have never been away from her for that long; how will they pass the time?

At first, Mother and Father are at a loss for what to do without Skylark, and a week seems unbearably long. But gradually, the two begin to rediscover all the things they haven't experienced in years: eating in restaurants (which Skylark hates), going to the theater, spending money on themselves, indulging in the fun of playing cards and the piano. As the week goes on, Mother and Father find themselves living the kind of life they had all but forgotten—and enjoying it.

But what can that mean about their life with Skylark? After one very long night out, a drunk Ákos Vajkay offers an answer—an answer that surprises both his wife and himself. Father's blunt revelation forces them both to reexamine the life they have built; and when Skylark returns, the themes that have been building throughout the novel reach their devastating conclusion. Though its plot may be simple, *Skylark* is anything but—it is a complex, piercing novel that subtly peels away the layers of even the most seemingly ordinary small-town existences.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Dezső Kosztolányi began work on *Skylark* in 1923, but chose to set the novel in 1899—nearly a quarter-century earlier. What role does Hungarian history play in the narrative? Would it be a different novel if Kosztolányi had set it in the present? Did you get a sense, when reading *Skylark*, of what is described with reference to Miklós Ijas as "deeply rooted *fin-de-siècle* melancholy" [p. 206]?
2. Kosztolányi writes, "Géza Cifra was the one person in all the world they could never forgive and would never cease to resent. What sin, what crime had he committed? None, to be sure" [p. 20]. Why, then, do Mother and Father dislike him so much? What, in their eyes, should Cifra have done differently? When Father says of Cifra, "He hasn't long to live" [p. 177], do you get the sense that this prediction is true? Would Mother and Father be able to forgive him if he died?
3. After their first meal there [p.p. 43-45], why are Mother and Father initially reluctant to admit that they've enjoyed eating at the King of Hungary?
4. What is your impression of the Panthers' Table? Did its members seem to you like real people? Kosztolányi writes that Ákos was once a member, but "had suddenly grown old, 'soured,' as the others complained, and no longer paid them any attention" [p. 49]. Why did he quit the club?

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Niki: The Story of a Dog,

Tibor Déry (Translated from the Hungarian by Edward Hyams, Introduction by George Szirtes)

Contempt,

Alberto Moravia (Translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson, Introduction by Tim Parks)

Mouchette,

Georges Bernanos (Translated from the French by J. C. Whitehouse, Introduction by Fanny Howe)

Wish Her Safe at Home,

Stephen Benatar (Introduction by John Carey)

Corrigan,

Caroline Blackwood (Afterword by Andrew Solomon)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Charlotte Brontë,
Villette

Arthur Koestler,
Darkness at Noon

Emily Dickinson,
Final Harvest

Edgar W. Howe,
The Story of a Country Town

Dezso Kosztolányi,
Anna Édes

Elizabeth Gaskell,
Wives and Daughters

5. We know that Father's name is Ákos, but the author never refers to Mother by name; rather, he just calls her "the woman." Why do you think this is?
6. The first night that Skylark was gone, Mother and Father "looked at each other as if something had suddenly occurred to them. But they didn't say a word." Exactly what has occurred? What does the author mean when he writes, "they came alive in this flood of common human hopes and fears" [p. 58]?
7. Skylark's long letter, which divides the novel in half, has quite an effect on her father: "its every word cut him to the quick" [p. 124]. What can the reader learn about Skylark from the contents of her letter? Does its tone seem sincere? What is the significance of Father's losing the letter?
8. Why is it important that Ákos leaves the Panther Club without saying goodbye? Why do the Panthers view this as a betrayal? Do you think he will ever return? Why or why not?
9. Did Father's drunken outburst about Skylark surprise you? Do you think he really believes the things he says? Mother tries to reason with Father, insisting that he is wrong, but the narrator tells us that she secretly "couldn't help wondering if her husband's outrageous suggestion might be true" [p. 166]. What do you think Mother's true feelings about Skylark are? Does the fight reveal as much about their feelings about each other as it does their feelings about Skylark?
10. After her fight with Father, Mother finds comfort in a crucifix hanging on their wall and tells Father they must appeal to God to resolve their feelings about Skylark. What was your sense of the tone of this section—is Kosztolányi sincere and respectful of religion, or ironic and critical of it? Do you think anyone in the novel is meant to represent a Christ figure?
11. When Skylark's train is late, both Mother and Father automatically assume something bad has happened. Why is this? Does their behavior while waiting for the train suggest something different about their attitudes about Skylark than their fight did?
12. Why do you think the author chose to include headings at the beginning of each chapter? What do they add to the novel? How did it orient your reading experience to know what was coming in each chapter—particularly Chapter 12, when the tension has been building as to whether Skylark's train will ever arrive, and the heading reveals the answer before the text does?
13. Though the novel is called *Skylark*, she is absent throughout the large majority of the text. The narrative ends, however, with the author relating Skylark's most intimate thoughts. Has the novel really been about Skylark—or about her parents?
14. Where do you think the characters will go from here? Will the Vajkays reflect on what they have learned during the past week and change their lives, or will they settle back into their old routine? Will they be happier or less happy?

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