**Magda Szabó (October 5, 1917 – November 19, 2007)**

Magda Szabó (October 5, 1917 – November 19, 2007) was a major [Hungarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarians) novelist. She also wrote dramas, essays, studies, memories and poetry.

Born in [Debrecen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debrecen), Szabó graduated at the [University of Debrecen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Debrecen) as a teacher of Latin and of Hungarian. She started working as a teacher in a Calvinist all-girl school in Debrecen and [Hódmezővásárhely](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%B3dmez%C5%91v%C3%A1s%C3%A1rhely). Between 1945 and 1949 she was working in the Ministry of Religion and Education. She married the writer and translator Tibor Szobotka in 1947.

She began her writing career as a poet, publishing her first book *Bárány* ("Lamb") in 1947, which was followed by *Vissza az emberig* ("Back to the Human") in 1949. In 1949 she was awarded the [Baumgarten Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baumgarten_Prize), which was − for political reasons − withdrawn from her on the very day it was given. She was dismissed from the Ministry in the same year.

During the Stalinist rule from 1949 to 1956, the government did not allow her works to be published. Since her unemployed husband was also stigmatized by the communist regime, she was forced to teach in an elementary school within this period.

Her first novel, *Freskó* ("Fresco"), written in these years was published in 1958 and achieved overwhelming success among readers. Her most widely read novel *Abigél* ("Abigail", 1970) is an adventure story about a schoolgirl boarding in eastern Hungary during the war.

She wrote novels, short stories, children's and juvenile literature, plays, film scripts and essays; translates from English and Spanish. She has completed more than forty works and was translated into thirty languages. Her style is analytical yet passionate; she opposes in her novels the clash between old and new value systems and describes with a great psychological insight the powers that formed the fate of her characters, often centering on women trying to keep their independence and dignity through historical and domestic difficulties.

She received several prizes in Hungary and her works have been published in 42 countries. In 2003 she was the winner of the [French](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language) [literary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary) [prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prize) [Prix Femina Étranger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prix_Femina) for the best foreign novel.

Her novel *Abigél* was popularised through a much-loved television series in 1978. *Abigél* was also chosen as the sixth most popular novel at the Hungarian version of [Big Read](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Read#Hungarian_version). Her three other novels which were in the top 100 are *Für Elise, An Old-fashioned Story* and *The Door*.

**Works in English**

* [*The Door*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Door_%28novel%29)
* *The Fawn*
* *The Night of the Pig-Killing* or *Night of the Pigkilling*
* *Tell Sally*
* *Sziget-kék* (*Island Blue* in English)
* *An Old-fashioned Story*
* *Katalin Street*
* *The Gift of the Wondrous Fig Tree*
* *Iza's Ballad*

**The Door**

1987

Magda Szabo, who died in 2007, was one of Hungary’s most important 20th-­century writers. “The Door,” her best-known novel, which appeared in Hungary in 1987, was initially translated by Stefan Draughon and brought out here by an academic publisher in 1995. Subsequently translated into French, the book won the Prix Femina Étranger in 2003 and was beautifully retranslated by Len Rix for British publication in 2005. In 2006 its second English translation was short-listed for the Independent newspaper’s Foreign Fiction Prize in the UK. It has been selected among the “The 10 Best Books of 2015” by New York Times.

The first-person narrator, a successful female author who is very similar to Szabó herself, advertises for a housekeeper and meets Emerence Szeredás. From the start, it is clear that the housekeeper turns the tables on the writer and her husband. Emerence thoroughly examines her potential employers to make sure that she is dealing with a respectable married couple before finally accepting the post. She then puts her considerable energies into keeping the house running smoothly over the next twenty years. Like the female characters in other works by Szabó, the main protagonist of The Door is boldly portrayed as an almost mythical figure. She lives according to her own strict set of rules, to which she sticks to the end of her life, and those people with whom she comes into regular contact adapt to her without too much effort. She does not let them get close to herself, whereas their lives, including their most intimate secrets, are unintentionally open to her scrutiny; it is Emerence who decides where the boundaries lie, just as she decides what jobs she will take on, and when, in the households that are entrusted to her.

The accustomed routine of Emerence’s life begins to take a new turn as she gradually finds herself growing closer to the writer. The two eye one another suspiciously from a distance, and at times clash in heated rows, but the special love and concern they have for one another become evident at the darkest and loneliest moments of their lives. When the narrator’s husband undergoes life-threatening surgery, Emerence stands by her and, in her own way, helps her through the difficult period, while also confiding to her the grim ordeals of her childhood, the poverty and her mother’s helplessness. When Emerence left the two younger children on their own for a moment, a flash of lightning struck them; her mother then committed suicide. The resulting lifelong guilt feelings have made the housekeeper eternally ready to help others, and particularly fond of animals. A dog that both women care for draws the growing bond between the author and Emerence even tighter, to the point that the housekeeper reveals more details about her life and her love.

In the end, she reveals her most closely guarded secret: in her own home, to which no visitors are admitted, the otherwise so immaculately house-proud Emerence keeps nine cats. She does not like the thought that after her death these animals, which have become so habituated to their room, will be sent away, and she requests that a doctor should be asked to help put them down painlessly. When Emerence becomes seriously ill, however, not opening her door to anybody for weeks on end, the narrator goes against the promise she has made to the housekeeper, by getting a locksmith to open it and let a doctor into the dwelling. The intruders are met by an indescribable filth and stench, and while the writer hastens to bring TV reporters to record the scene, the seriously ill woman is rushed to hospital and her home is disinfected. Though the woman author acted out of concern, Emerence regards these actions as a betrayal. The bond between the two is irreparably shattered, and the housekeeper dies knowing that the secret of her intimate world has been laid open by the very women she trusted. The most dramatic moment in the relationship between the two occurs when the writer is preparing to accept the Kossuth Prize, the Hungarian state’s highest recognition for artistic achievement. She sets off for the ceremony practically from the bedside, unsure whether she will see the old woman alive again.

Years later, the narrator still looks back on her decision with a shudder. The metaphor that gives the book its title is presented to the reader in the first chapter. In a dream the narrator is standing before a door that, she alone has the power to open and yet she cannot unlock it to help her loved ones. The story of The Door is thus an allegorical fable, door signifying the way to love, the capacity for love, the key to which Emerence has offered the writer-narrator in vain. The book testifies to an understanding of that tragic failure.

A recent English translation of The Door, which appeared in the UK in October 2005, received great reviews from critics. For The Scotsman Allan Massie wrote: “ No brief summary can do justice to the intelligence and moral complexity of this novel. I picked it up without expectation or enthusiasm. I read it with gathering intensity, and a swelling admiration. I finished it, and straightaway started to read it again. It is unusual, original, and utterly compelling.” Paul Bailey, for the Independent newspaper, noted that the book tells a great deal about the sufferings of 20th-century Hungary through the heart and mind of a single fearless woman , while Tibor Fischer in the Daily Telegraph noted: On the one hand The Door is about a writer's difficulties with her charlady, hardly promising material for a novel, and yet Szabó manages to conjure up as many cliff-hangers as an Indiana Jones film. Translator Len Rix, on winning the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize in July 2006, was congratulated by the jury for “A timely and quite brilliantly echoing achievement, one that, when we read it, makes us larger than ourselves.”

It was turned into a film in 2012 by István Szabó, the academy-winner Hungarian director. The main actors and actresses - among many others- are Helen Mirren, Martina Gedeck, Károly Eperjes

The trailer of the film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU5fgaWhfqQ>

Quote:

### **The door (English)**

I rarely dream. But when I do, I wake up bathed in sweat. Then I lie back down again and wait till my heart quiets down, and I brood over the invincible, magical power of night. As a child or in my youth, I had neither good dreams nor bad; but time after time my old age lines up compressed balls of pain for me from its stockpile, which are so disquieting because they're more dense, more tragic than anything I could ever have lived through; in fact, not once has anything happened to me like what wakes me, screaming in the night.

My dreams are recurrent visions, identical to a hair; I always dream exactly the same thing. I'm standing in our entryway at the bottom of the stairwell, on the inner side of the street door's ironrimmed, wire-reinforced, unbreakable glass window, and I try to unlock the door. Outside on the street there's an ambulance; the silhouette of the medical corps shimmers through the glass as if their unnaturally large, swollen faces have halos, just like the moon. The key turns, but I struggle in vain; I can't open the door, although I'm the one who must let in the medical crew, otherwise it'll be too late for my patient. The lock won't budge at all; the door is stuck as if it had been welded into its iron frame. I yell for help, but not one of the residents of the threestory building pays any attention to me; nor can they because, I now realize, I'm only gasping vacuously like a fish; the horror of my dream culminates in awareness that not only can't I open the door to get help, but I've become mute. At these times, my own scream awakens me; I turn on the light; I try to get over the breathlessness that always grabs hold of me after the dream. Our familiar bedroom furniture is all around me, and above our bed, the family icons: my all-seeing, all-knowing ancestors - in stiff collars and braided, broadly-cut Hungarian-coats or Biedermeiers - are my sole witness to how many nights I've run to open the door for the rescuers, for the ambulance - how many times I've gone on imagining the scene, as the noise of moving branches and the racket of scurrying cats streamed in from the other side of the wide-open street door, replacing the dream's familiar daytime sound of the silenced streets - what would happen if once, no matter how hard I struggled with it, the key actually wouldn't turn.

The portraits know everything, especially what I try hardest to forget, what is no dream. That once, only once in my life - not in sleep with its cerebral anemia, but in reality - there was a door in front of me which was opened up by someone guarding against revealing helplessness and need, who wouldn't have opened up even if a burning roof was crackling overhead. Only I had the power to move the latch: the one who turned the key believed more in me than in God, and, in that fatal moment, I myself believed I was divine, wise, considerate, good, and rational. We were both wrong: the one who trusted me and I who thought too much of myself. Now, as a matter of fact, it doesn't make any difference, since what happened can't be remedied.

5o, just let them enter my dreams from time to time on their cothurnus-like platformed medical shoes, Furies wearing medical caps on masks of tragedy; let them line up around my bed with sharpened double-edged swords in their hands. Every night I turn out the lights to wait for the bell of this nameless dread to ring in my sleeping ear, as its sound transports me toward the door in my dream that will not open.

My religion doesn't recognize personal confession in which we acknowledge, through the priest's mouth, that we're sinners worthy of damnation for violating the commandments in every way. We get absolution from God without demands for either explanation or details.

I now provide them.

This book is not composed for God, who knows my insides, nor for the spirits who witness all and observe my waking and dreaming hours, but rather for other people. I've lived bravely till now, and I hope I'll die bravely, too, without lies; but to do that I must speak out: I killed Emerence. It doesn't change anything that I wanted not to destroy her but to save her.

[Stephan Draughon](http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu-all/Stephan_Draughon)