Karinthy Frigyes

(Budapest, June 25 1887 - Siófok, August 29 1938)

Frigyes Karinthy (25 June 1887 in Budapest – 29 August 1938 in Siófok) was a Hungarian author, playwright, poet, journalist, and translator. Karinthy remains one of the most popular Hungarian writers. He was the father of poet Gábor Karinthy and writer Ferenc Karinthy. Karinthy was born into a bourgeois family in Budapest. Losing her mother at an early age, the vivid spiritual environment and Budapest becoming a metropolis all played a very significant role in his childhood. Two of his sisters, Etelka and Elza learnt painting, the third one, Emilia was very talented at learning languages. His father was an educated officer; Karinthy was brought up in the atmosphere of discussions concerning philosophy, literature and art. His parents were obsessed with positivism and French culture, thus Karinthy had had the view on the whole culture of Europe, instead of only learning German.

During his secondary education in the Marko Street High School, the natural sciences played a principal role. His sense of humour and criticism has already appeared in his early diaries, and in his parodistic book "Honeymoon through the Center of the Earth", written at the age of 15, as well. After he graduated, his works were published in several newspapers from 1906 onwards.

In 1912, his articles also appeared in the Nyugat (the most famous Hungarian literary periodical); he entered the world of cabaret in Endre Nagy's show. He made friends with Kosztolányi and Géza Csáth (important Hungarian writers) , who later introduced him to freudism. He started his writing career as a journalist and remained a writer of short, humorous blurbs until his death. He rose to instant fame in 1912 with the publication of his literary parodies called That's How YOU Write (Így írtok ti).

The scientific life in Hungary was flourishing at the time when Karinthy's career started. Karinthy entered the intellectual life of Pest very enthusiastically. "Art cannot exist without science" - he argued. He gathered his knowledge not only from books, but also from his scientist friends. He tried flight with the help of Viktor Wittmann. His view of women in his short stories was dominated by Freud's, Strindberg's and Weininger's philosophies. Apart from concentrating on French enlightened writers, he also devoted his attention to contemporary philosophers. He wrote satirical critics; he created a uniquely comical set of words and phrases, and thus revolutionalised the art of humour and satire.

Among his early works, his collection of short stories from school life, Please Sir! (Tanár úr, kérem) stands out for its grasp of the trials and tribulations of the average schoolboy. Another popular highlight is his translation of A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh, that made it a cult book in Hungary.

After the First World War, his writing became more serious and engaged, though never leaving a satirical bent.Many of his novels and stories also deal with the difficulties of relationships between men and women, partly due to his unhappy second marriage. Karinthy had a brain tumor for which he was operated upon in Stockholm in 1936. He describes this experience in his autobiographical novel, Journey Round my Skull, (Utazás a koponyám körül), originally published in 1939; a reissue appeared as a NYRB Classic in 2008. He died two years later, during a holiday at Lake Balaton.

Karinthy was married twice. He married the actress Etel Judik in 1913. The marriage was serene and happy and they had a son called Gábor. Tragically, Etel died very young during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1919. In 1920, he married the psychiatrist Aranka Böhm, with whom he had another son, the writer Ferenc Karinthy.

Although he did not speak the language, Karinthy was an ardent supporter of Esperanto, attending Esperanto congresses, and even became president of the Hungarian Esperanto Society in 1932.He is well known for his dry sense of humor, as he himself noted: "In humor I know no jokes." Just one example of it was his advertising slogan for his book Journey Round my Skull Works in English translation Drama:A Farce-Satire in One Act (1925) Refund : a farce in one act adapted, from the Hungarian, by Percival Wilde. A Journey Round My Skull (1939) Voyage to Faremido & Capillaria (1966) Please Sir! (1968) Grave and gay : selections from his work (1973)

**Works in English translation:**

* *Drama:A Farce-Satire in One Act* (1925)
* *Refund : a farce in one act* adapted, from the Hungarian, by [Percival Wilde](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percival_Wilde).
* *A Journey Round My Skull* (1939) translated from the Hungarian by Vernon Duckworth Barker.
* *Voyage to Faremido & Capillaria* (1966) Introduced and translated by Paul Tabori.
* *Please Sir!* (1968) Translated by István Farkas. The foreword translated by Mary Kuttna.
* *Grave and gay : selections from his work* (1973) Frigyes Karinthy ; selected by István Kerékgyártó ; afterword by Károly Szalay.

**Karinthy's writings on the Internet (in English):**

[Please Sir!](http://mek.oszk.hu/00700/00770/00770.htm)

Frigyes Karinthy is known as the best and most popular humorous writer in Hungarian literature. In reality, however, he was a philosopher, a follower of 18th century Enlightenment and 20th century scientific humanism, who was excited by and interested in everything. He expressed his views through novels, short stories and humorous writings. His extraordinary sense of parody first became apparent with the publication of *That’s How You Write!* (1912), a collection of short literary caricatures on most of his contemporaries, which was an instant success and won him the lasting affection of the public.

Some of Karinthy's notebooks were found after his death. In these he jotted down his first ideas, whenever he used one, he crossed it out at once. One such jotting reads: "Humour is the whole truth."

This might have served as the motto for Please Sir!, one of the world's unforgettable, unfading books. Please Sir! (1916) is a collection of short stories and sketches written at the beginning of his career, a recollection of school day memories. It was originally written for a newspaper. In it he successfully evokes the authentic atmosphere of the classroom by humorously overdrawing the tiny joys and sorrows, the lies and anxieties of those unforgettable years at school.

Karinthy went to secondary school at the turn of 19th and 20th century, and he was 27 years old when he wrote this book. The book shows the typical features of school life of the turn of the century, and reflects the mind of its age: the teachers have great air of authority, the students are eager about the new natural sciences and are deeply influenced by Verne as the boys want to become either soldiers or sailors. The main characters of the book (Steinmann,Walch, Eglmayer, Deckner, Kelemen ) were mainly based on the writer’s ex classmates but some parts were also fictional.

There were 16 sketches in the first edition of the book, which was expanded with another four later on.

None of the sketches contain material enough for a short story – they are brilliant snapshots recording the anxiety of being late; the deadly fear caused by a looming question period; the wild fantasies about explaining away a particularly bad school-report; giggling girls seen through the eyes of timid schoolboys at the most awkward age – feather-brained creatures, yet at the same time unaccountably fascinating; or the occasion when, after a long inner struggle, our young hero decides to sell his history textbook in order to supplement his pocket money to buy some candy he fancies in the shop-window.

Generations grew up reading it, laughing about the answers of the bad pupil, about the musing of the latecomer, the daydreams of the pupil in the terrible sports lesson. Throughout generations, common phrases from the book became maxims e.g. „I sell my book”, „hanging from the apparatus”, „we split our sides with laughing”. Please Sir is rather known as entertaining literature for young people, though it has a serious message as well.

Please, Sir! has been translated to many languages and adapted to the screen by Frigyes Mamcserov in 1956, starring some of the best actors of the time.

This book is appealing to everyone for is there anyone who has never crept along silent, deserted school corridors, when classes had already begun, who had never been struck by the dark terror of being fatally late? And is there anyone who does not recall the deadly, frozen silence before opening an exam paper, when the one subject not properly covered turned out to be the compulsory question? And who did not, especially in Hungarian schools where examination is carried out by oral tests, try to shrink behind his desk, become invisible, step out from life just this once, while the teacher was rustling his notebook to call the next to be examined? And who has never tried to explain a school report at home, and who has never been tempted to sell a textbook second-hand, at a time when pocket-money seemed far more desirable than a grammar?

**PREFACE**



I sneak in through the yard. It is shortly after half past ten in the morning, and all the corridors are empty. I can hear people talking whenever I pass a closed door and every time I hear this noise my heart wrenches. I open the door carefully, turn my head toward the teacher’s desk, and I retreat to my seat with silent tread. There is an empty seat in the last row by the heater. The teacher did not look at me; he just dismissed me with a wave of his hand. He thought I was the boy who left five minutes ago. I sit down. There is a reddish-blond, freckled boy sitting next to me and I almost shout out with joy in my surprise: “Well, this is Büchner!” I have not seen him in ages. Where have I been? Goodness, I’ve been having some horrible dreams. It is so good to be home, back here in good old reality, in my real life which I hated leaving. I am home; this is me, Frigyes Karinthy from sixth grade. Oh, it was all just a bad, stupid dream. All of a sudden all the smells are familiar, I’m shaking as I reach into the desk and pull out a notebook. For a moment I cannot believe my own eyes but there it is, written in precise letters on the cover: my name, sixth grade, literature compositions.

Büchner, my sweet Büchner, how are you, my dear fellow? He looks at me surprised, he does not seem to understand why I’m overjoyed to see him, but how could he understand it? He shushes and nudges me, looks at me angrily. Of course, here I am fussing about when somebody is standing at the front of the class answering the teacher’s questions. But my dear Büchner, you must understand that I can hardly contain my joy.

Well, listen here, dear Büchner, I had such a silly dream and now I am happy that it was all just a dream. You know, in my dream I was already over my school-leaving exams, and was twenty-seven years old. In this dream I was actually sitting in a café, I was a real writer as I had planned. I published a number of books, and people were asking for my autograph. But you know what? It just did not feel good. Isn’t it weird? As it turned out, things weren’t quite as good as I hoped they would be after school. And while I was sitting in that café, it started raining and I remembered my class, my sixth-grade class. I remembered that I had so much to do; I had to complete my geometrical drawing, go over history and think about my future that would be wonderful because I was still sixteen.

So I thought it all over and I figured out that the best thing to do would be to force myself awake, and review geometry and come into class. I pushed my head to the rainy window and decided that I would wake up now and look at my real life here, at secondary school, differently. I will not think it boring and tiring and depressing, but rather pay attention to all that is fun and memorable, things that I can see clearly now from afar. This way I can show you, my dear friends, secondary school students, how all this life is full of colour, strangeness, memories and hope.

**The Bad Student Tested**

No, he couldn't possibly have guessed that it was coming today. Ah well, he did have it coming to him, of course, he did. What's more, he even dreamed of something like this last night - but in his dream he was tested in Hungarian. True, it seemed as though Mr. Fröhlich was in charge of Hungarian too. In his dream he dispatched the whole matter promptly - he answered questions about parallel lines and was awarded an Alpha Minus.

When his name is called, he cannot believe his ears. He looks round: some miracle may yet come to pass; maybe it was just hallucination, a nightmare, that he heard *his* name called, and presently he will awake from this dream. He now scoops up a lot of exercise-books from his desk and, while walking down the short lane between the rows of desks, is turning over in his head: "Ayplusbeebyayminusbee equals aysquareminusbee-square." He's going to be asked that. He feels sure that's what he's going to be asked. "If he asks anything else, I'll change schools and pass a supplementary exam and then take up a military career."

Meanwhile he stumbles and drops his exercise-books. While he is busy picking them off the floor, the usual laughter - this time unbanned, for the Bad Student is beyond the social pale and may therefore be sneered at freely - rings out behind his back.

**The teacher sits down and puts his notebook on his table. He looks at the boy. Convulsively, the Bad Student keeps repeating in his mind, "Ayplusbee..." He picks up the chalk. The teacher looks at him.**

**"Have you prepared anything?" he asks him.**

**"Sir, yes, sir, I have."**

**Oh, yes. Why, of course he has. Even the convict who's been sentenced to death prepares himself for what is to come: he receives the extreme unction and has his hair cut off.**

**"If so, then write."**

**The Bad Student turns to face the blackboard.**

**"Beesquare minus plusminus secondroot beeminusfourayceebytwoay."**

**Submissively the Bad Student begins to write, echoing the figures. He keeps writing, and sees the proposition just as he saw it at home when he fell asleep over it without gathering the faintest idea of what the whole thing was supposed to mean. Yes, he has some vague idea that this is a quadratic equation. But as to how it'll work out... Well...**

**He writes at a leisurely pace, a fine calligraphic hand. He thickens the stem of the figure 4. He carefully wipes off a bit from the fraction line - for this, he makes a special trip to the window to get the sponge. You gain time, with this. The bell may ring in the meantime. Or something may happen. His performance on the platform isn't going to be a protracted affair, anyway. Now he'll just chalk up this one thing more, and then lay on the sign of equality, taking his time. Yes, so far he's been doing it like other, better, beings; like any good student. Now he still adds "a2". In the military school (the thought flashes across his mind) you have to get up awfully early in the morning. But then they may make you a lieutenant in the end. You may get posted to Fiume.**

All this while he has been writing in a leisurely manner, and he's not through with it yet. An outsider who might happen to be watching the performance might be led to suppose that this is a good student proving his mettle at the blackboard. For one who is in the know, however, to see a fellow taking such infinite care in delineating the tail-piece of the figure 2 is significant enough. Deadly silence reigns. The teacher sits stock still. Now one simply has to say something.

"The equation of the second degree..." the Bad Student begins intelligently, narrowing his eyes and watching the blackboard intently.

"The equation of the second degree..." he repeats, in the manner of one who repeats his words not because he doesn't know what he's going to say but rather because from the vast storehouse of things he has to say he wishes to select and weigh that which is most correct.

The teacher, however - oh, he is only too well aware of the meaning of all this.

"Call that being ready?" he snaps, harshly and dryly.

"Sir, please, sir, I *have* prepared the lesson."

Now *that* he did get out with lightning speed, in a voice that was trembling with murderous defiance, with desperate rebellion.

The teacher (with sweeping gesture): "Well, let's have it, then."

The Bad Student draws a deep breath.

"The equation of the second degree is derived from that of the first degree by multiplying the equation as a whole..."

Now he's talking. He is saying something. He was expecting to be interrupted in the middle of his second sentence - and steals a glance at the teacher. The latter, however, stares, his face set, neither approving nor denying him. He does not speak. Yet the Bad Student knows very well that what he is saying cannot possibly be right. Why on earth doesn't the teacher say something, then? This is terrible. His voice begins to falter. Suddenly, he perceives that the teacher is picking up his notebook. At this, he turns pale and rattles away at a dizzying clip:

"The equation of the second degree is derived from that of the first by... Sir, please, sir, I *have* done the homework."

"Ernő Polgár," the teacher announces in a loud voice.

What's that?

Is someone else already being called? Is he himself finished and done for? What's this? Is it just a dream?

"The equation of the second degree..." he begins anew, menacingly.

Ernő Polgár climbs briskly the platform and has already picked up the other piece of chalk at the other end of the board.

"The equation... Sir, please, sir, I *have* done my homework."

He receives no reply. He now stands there, alone in the crowded classroom, on an island. He doesn't go back to his place yet, for no one has told him so far to get back to his place. He feels hollow and disreputable, a social outcast. He hasn't been told, no, not a word. His oral hasn't ended yet. Should he now walk back all the way between the rows of desks? No, he prefers to hang on here, looking silly, his faltering hands messing about with the wreck of the unfinished equation like an aviator who has crash-landed going over the cracked cylinders of his engine. Meanwhile the other boy has begun to speak. He is talking about some parallel lines. That too sounds so odd, so strange... like everything else they have been studying here for years... studying cheerfully and buoyantly and boisterously... and of which he has never understood anything, having coasted along on the few detached sentences he has managed to pick up.

And so he stands and stands, hoping against hope and politely listening to what the other boy is saying. Now and then he nods approval so as to indicate, in this way at least, that he *has* done his homework, that he "knows his stuff." At times, he even timidly chimes in, indulging in the self-deception that the question has been addressed to *him*, but only in a low voice so he won't be sent back to his place. Now he discreetly stops, looks and listens. He leans forward. He takes part in the show, passes the chalk, and dances attendance in general on the other boy. He even prompts the fellow, loudly, with the design, not of helping, but of showing the teacher that he prompts and therefore knows his stuff. In a word, he refuses to give up.

Suddenly, his strength ebbs away. He stops short and once again thinks of the military school. Like distant words the noises around him reverberate in his gloomy mind... the crackling of chalk... Faces become blurred, and, for a moment, a clear vision of the Infinite looms before him, just as the other boy has stated that it is the place where parallels meet. He sees the Infinite... Big, bluish thing... a small house bearing, on one side, at the top, the inscription "Entrance to the Fourth Infinite." Inside the building there are clothes-horses and on these the Parallel Lines hang up their hats, after which they enter the room, sit down in their forms and cheerfully greet one another. The Parallel Lines, yes. *They* meet in the Class of the Infinite, of Understanding and Kindness and Brotherly Love - the class he will never reach. That "upper form" which, owing to "unsatisfactory progress," he will never achieve.