



The Pendragon Legend

Antal Szerb

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At an end-of-London-season soiree, the young Hungarian scholar-dilettante Janos Batky is introduced to the Earl of Gwynedd, a reclusive eccentric who is the subject of strange rumors. Invited to the family seat--Pendragon Castle in North Wales--Batky receives a mysterious phone call warning him not to go; but he does and finds himself in a bizarre world of mysticism and romance, animal experimentation, and planned murder. His quest to solve the central mystery takes him down strange byways--old libraries and warehouse cellars, Welsh mountains, and underground tombs.

The Pendragon Legend Details

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Author : Antal Szerb

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From Reader Review The Pendragon Legend for online ebook

Chozo Tull says

Great novel, full of invisible energy, weaving pulpish library researches, shakespearean references and over-the-top gothic comedy in a high-octane narrative always offset by the scholarly aspect of the main character. Deeper than one may think at first. The humor is written in an almost sheepish way which I found quite unique, and the climax demonstrates the full scope of Szerb's talent.

Ignacio Senao f says

Lo compré debido a la buena crítica que hizo el podcast "Todo tranquilo en Dunwich" sino nunca me hubiese fijado en él, pues parece la clásica historia de investigar.

Un sorpresón, este libro no puede ser más pulp y entretenido. Mezcla todo: humor negro, protagonista con carisma que narra en primera persona, casa encantada, monstruos, fantasmas, asesinatos, caminatas por bosques...

Un joven de 30 y poco es invitado a un castillo junto a un lago por un Pendragon. Para que puede investigar en su infinita biblioteca. Ya en el castillo pasará todo tipo de cosas. Este chico investigará y enamorará.

Lo malo: el machismo del autor.

Melindam says

'Tell me,' he asked, with some embarrassment, as we strolled along: 'you're a bloody German, aren't you?'

'Oh, no. I'm Hungarian.'

'Hungarian?'

'Hungarian.'

'What's that? Is that a country? Or you are just having me on?'

'Not at all. On my word of honour, it is a country.'

'And where do you Hungarians live?'

'In Hungary. Between Austria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.'

'Come off it. Those places were made up by Shakespeare.'

The Pendragon Legend or a Hungarian scholar's very non-scholarly, tongue-in-cheek adventures with the British, the Welsh, the (possibly) Rosicrucian Order, mysticism, sexuality and hilarity, not in this particular order. And sometimes it reads like Antal Szerb is taking the piss out of the The Da Vinci Code, the only hitch being that this novel was published in 1934, almost 70 years before. Literary time travel at its best or what?

Once again, Len Rix, the translator is brilliant for -improbable as it may seem - the novel in English reads almost like in Hungarian with the same flavours, aromas, feelings, what have you. The translation is as amazingly impossible, entertaining and hilarious as the novel itself.

Please note that in whatever mood you may read this book, make sure you don't take it seriously. **Because it is no more and no less than romp through Britain and literary genres from murder mystery to adventure to parody, from ghost story to comedy. Even so the simplicity and yet complexity of the plot is quite amazing.**

The protagonist, unscholarly scholar, János Bátky (alterego of the author himself) is a cross between Dr Watson & Sherlock. Add a clumsy Indiana Jones to the mix and you are right there where you need to be. :) A British friend of mine whom I gave this book as a present told me that the book read just like it was written by a British author and for this particular book, and I guess also for Antal Szerb, you cannot give a higher praise than that.

Reinhold says

Der Philosoph und Globetrotter Dr. János Bátky wird von einem walisischen Aristokraten dem Earl of Gwynedd eingeladen, ihn in seinem Schloss zu besuchen um in seiner Bibliothek seine Studien fortzusetzen. Was der Icherzähler der Geschichte noch nicht weiß, damit wird er mitten in einen Erbschaftsstreit gerissen. Die eine Seite trachtet dem Adligen nach dem Leben - der verhinderte Mörder wird aber noch in derselben unter den seltsamsten Umständen getötet. Neben diesem Handlungsstrang beginnt gleichzeitig eine Geschichte die sich um die Rosenkreuzer dreht und die Bátky in einen unheimlichen Bann ziehen wird. Eine Geschichte zwischen Kriminalroman und Gruselgeschichte beginnt und der Leser wird erst ganz am Ende herausfinden ob sich nun alles mit Intrigen erklären lässt oder ob vielleicht doch ein Ahnherr des Earls das Geheimnis des ewigen Lebens entdeckt hat.

Sprachlich und stilistisch glänzt Antal Szerb ebenso wie die Übersetzerin Susanna Großmann-Vendrey. Das Buch ist mit feinem Humor durchzogen, ohne jemals an der Ernsthaftigkeit der Erzählung Zweifel aufkommen zu lassen. Von Anfang an wurde ich an Oscar Wilde und an Edgar Allan Poe erinnert. Das mag zu einem gewissen Teil auch an der Geschichte selbst liegen, im Wesentlichen aber stammt dieser Eindruck von dem feinen britischen Humor, den der Ungar in seinem Werk verewigt. Die Charakterisierung der Personen kann als gelungen bezeichnet werden, insbesondere der Protagonist wird in seltener Qualität dargestellt. Der durch Vorurteile verschleierte Blick des Icherzählers auf die anderen Charaktere, spricht für die Qualität der Erzählung, die sich erlaubt Klischees zu verwenden und dennoch zwischen den Zeilen durchblicken lässt, dass diese Personen komplexer sind als vom Protagonisten gesehen.

Das Buch ist eine uneingeschränkte Empfehlung, wenngleich man festhalten muss, dass Szerb am Schluss etwas schwächelt. Das Ende ist zwar durchaus gelungen erzählt, aber ich hätte etwas mehr erwartet. Vor allem ein mehr an Spott und Ironie wie über die ganze Geschichte. Nichtsdestotrotz verdient sich das Buch gelesen zu werden; es ist ein echter intellektueller Leckerbissen, der durchaus auch philosophische Aspekte beleuchtet.

Antonomasia says

"So my Lord is also a student of the subject?"

"That's a rather strong term to use, in this island of ours. You study something, we merely have hobbies. I dabble in the English mystics the way a retired general would set about exploring his family history. As it happens, those things are part of the family history."...

He seemed to embody a historical past the way no book ever could. My intuition told me that here was the

last living example - and an exceptional one at that - of the genuine student of the arcane in the guise of the aristocrat-chemist, the last descendant of Rudolph II of Prague, and one for whom, as late as 1933, Fludd had more to say than Einstein.

An expat Hungarian intellectual narrates a very British caper. (Perhaps this what I felt was missing in the Jeeves books: more ideas... and after all I'm not 100% English myself.) *The Pendragon Legend*, written after the author had spent time in England researching his serious non-fiction, is a satirical melange of many styles of popular British upper-class novel of the twenties and thirties, with a narrator somewhat less straightforwardly likeable than Bertie Wooster et al (closer to a Somerset Maugham character written in more polished prose), and it works really rather well. Had I read it before so many of its tropes were familiar - often from later stories - it might have been a five star. And the easiest way to describe it is, even more than with most books, by way of allusion.

From the long tradition of Gothic horror comes the journey to the castle with occult history (there are better books suited to the current weather...); the scientific bent of the current lord's researches recalls nineteenth century works from Mary Shelley to R.L. Stevenson to Arthur Machen. Mysteries tinged with supernatural possibilities may refer to Sherlock Holmes adventures like 'The Speckled Band' and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Twentysomething characters take matters into their own hands in a Famous Five-ish manner like they do in Ken Russell's *The Lair of the White Worm*. There are Rosicrucians, horsemen of the apocalypse, ninja-like assassins.

And romance swirls into all this like...*Cold Comfort Farm*, maybe? But it's not that simple. There are *femmes fatales* in the wings, there are more bedroom scenes than a similar English writer of the period would have dared, a couple of characters may be gay or at least bi, and our hero, like Wooster, is surrounded by strong-minded women he isn't always that keen on. (It's quite understandable in the none-too-bright Bertie, seems fair enough not to want to be intimidated by one's fiancée. But Janos Bátky admits to being that depressing creature, the intelligent man who doesn't find high intelligence in a woman terribly attractive. However we all have unfair turn-offs related to things people can't help, and the narrator often does appear to be sending himself up subtly.) An article I saw earlier this year compared Antal Szerb to Simon Raven as well as to Wodehouse; I'd meant to save this until after I'd read some Raven, but forgot; perhaps it's the racier element of these adventures that led to the Raven allusion. And the other way in which *The Pendragon Legend* isn't always as cosy as Wodehouse are the oddments of Imperial racism during scenes in London. (The Jeeves stories I've read have been so ahistorically nice in this respect that I wondered if the recent editions had been Blytoned. Although being actively rude about people in a book does involve mentioning them in the first place...)

These things are par for the course in a novel of this age though, and most of *The Pendragon Legend* is great fun. (The repeated use of the word "kind" to describe it in several blurbs is a touch misleading; this *is* a good book, simply not as twee and fwuffy as one might expect.) It has a slightly different angle on very British sorts of writing, whilst pitching the humour perfectly - an excellent translation - and it deserves many more readers among people who like similar stories of the early to mid twentieth century.

Sara Norja says

Kummallinen kirja, mutta kiehtova aihepiiriltään omista tutkimusintresseistäni johtuen. Nautin etenkin kaikista alkemian historiaan liittyvistä viittauksista.

Kirja on julkaistu vuonna 1934, ja siinä olikin muutamia aikakaudelle ehkä ominaisia piirteitä. Hätkähdin rasististen ilmausten käytöstä, ja blackfacen käyttö juonielementtinä oli vieraannuttavaa. Päähenkilöllä oli myös äärimmäisen rasittavia käsityksiä naisista: nainen ei voi olla samaan aikaan sekä kaunis että älykäs, ja

naisia ei saisi päästää kirjastojen lukuhuoneisiin, koska päähenkilö distraکتoituisi. Ahahaahaaa. Niissä kohdissa pyörittelin vain silmiäni.

Pohjois-Walesin mystiikkaa käytettiin runsaasti hyväksi - hienoja maisematunnelmia. Juoni sen sijaan ei ollut mitenkään erityisen mukaansatempaava. Luin kirjan kyllä nopeasti, mutta juoni eteni jotenkin omituisilla tavoilla.

Lorinda Taylor says

The Pendragon family has always been involved in the occult and this is what draws János Bátky, a young dilettante scholar who is studying 16th-18th century alchemy and Rosicrucianism. It's said that one of the earlier Earls of Gwynedd has risen from the dead, and the current Earl is studying the process of death and resurrection. When Bátky gets an invitation to visit Llanvyan, the seat of the Pendragons, he jumps at the chance and then finds himself entangled in a murder mystery and in occult rituals that almost cost him his life.

In fact, the book is a gentle but insightful satire on the mores of the 1920s and 1930s, spoofing the British, the Welsh, the Irish, Europeans in general, and especially the British class system. It can be characterized as a gothic fantasy detective story. This veneer of civilization overlays the dark symbolism of the primeval Welsh forest and the even darker workings of those immersed in occult practices. What really happened in that strange hut in the woods? People died, we know, but who was the perpetrator? Readers must decide for themselves.

Recommended for those who like literary fiction and want to do some chuckling in the process.

Kirsty Cabot says

I haven't ever read anything like this book. And to be honest one of the reasons I picked it up was because it looked gorgeous. I mean physically. Smaller than a "standard" book, a ribbed thick front cover, with a lovely simple illustration on it, decent quality smooth thick paper, clear typeface. I really did judge this book by its cover. I was certainly rewarded!

Written by a Hungarian, translated into English, about a Hungarian scholar who is in Wales. A strange setting. Gothic, dry, mystery, romance, intrigue - all these words I use to describe the story! Following Janos Bátky in his quest to discover the secrets of his host, the Earl of Gwynedd. Things are not as they seem in his posh country manor!

I hate talking about the content of stories too much, just read it.

Chris says

Szerb's novel is a curious hybrid, a mix of murder mystery and ghost story, romantic comedy and Gothic chiller, social commentary and humour. While the whole is never more than the sum of its parts (the resolution, for example, doesn't convincingly meld these disparate genres) this is still an impressive first novel, self-assured and wittily expressed.

According to the very helpful Afterword, Antal Szerb was a polyglot academic who diverted some of his scholarly interests, along with other more unorthodox delvings, into fiction. He was very well regarded as a scholar until his anti-fascist stance led to an untimely and brutal death in a labour camp in 1944. *The Pendragon Legend* resulted from a year he spent researching and people watching in Britain, and was published in Hungarian in 1934.

The reluctant hero, Janos Bátky, is a Hungarian researching at the British Museum in 1933 when he gets invited to the Earl of Gwynedd Owen Pendragon's 18th-century seat at Llanvygan Castle in North Wales. This furnishes him with the opportunity to look at rare manuscripts related to Rosicrucian origins. Along the way a number of chance encounters, unexplained happenings and sexual dalliances thicken the plot till it becomes a veritable potage of intrigue and confusion. Bátky, ever the bemused observer of the British (and others) in their natural environments, finds that, like it or not, he becomes involved in the action and very much out of his depth. People are not who they seem to be, truths are not self-evident and a centuries-old supernatural legend becomes reality.

There is no doubt that Szerb had great fun writing this novel. In it he is able to indulge in some of his passions as bibliophile, literary omnivore and landscape traveller: his alter ego Bátky gets to research unique manuscripts in the Earl of Gwynedd's library at Llanvygan; he happily jumps from one accomplished parodic passage to another, by turns a comedy of manners, a detective story or a horror tale; and he revels in the geography of North Wales, particularly the ancient Pendragon Castle loosely modelled on the ruined Castell Dinas Brân near Llangollen in modern-day Powys, and its successor Llanvygan Castle perhaps an amalgam of Valle Crucis Abbey and Plas Newydd in the same town. The name Llanvygan, Llanfeugan in Modern Welsh, is perhaps a memory of the church of St Meugan's at Llanrhudd in Ruthin, traditionally founded by a 6th-century saint implausibly claimed as Merlin's teacher.

Szerb then peoples these places with eccentrics, from the Earl himself (a recluse Victor Frankenstein figure), a German vamp called Lene Kretsch, an Irish adventurer called George Maloney and miscellaneous relatives of the Earl, whom he throws together in a series of confusing encounters to provide the essential red herrings of the traditional crime novel. It is tempting to see in the Earl of Gwynedd a distant echo of the real-life eccentric archaeologist Lord Carnarvon, excavator of Tutankhamun's tomb, supposed succumber to King Tut's Curse in 1922, whose tomb was placed within the ramparts of a Hampshire Iron Age hillfort.

I found this an entertaining novel, full of delightful touches to please any dilettante reader. As it drew towards its conclusion, however, I became less convinced by the supernatural elements that began to dominate. True, these were homages to Gothic models such as *The Castle of Otranto* and Szerb's contemporaries such as the Welshman Arthur Machen (whose *The Great Return*, published in 1915, was also set in North Wales). But despite the powerful passages describing Bátky's experiences in the denouement, intellectually I still felt a little cheated, though this is my only reservation. Here, too, may be a good place to mention the translation by Len Rix, easy to read, neither consciously archaic for a story written in the 1930s nor laden with obviously modern idioms, written in such a manner as to seem as though English was the original language of the novel: a fine achievement.

Curiously, for a book with Pendragon in the title, there is little overtly Arthurian about the story other than a North Walian connection and the discovery of a sleeping lord underground, like the legendary king in his cave waiting for the summons. There is lots that is suggestive: a 12th-century tale of a knight who dares to stay the night in the haunted castle of Dinas Brân before confronted the giant Gogmagog; the modern myth that the castle is the original Grail Castle; and that dubious connection between Llanvygan and St Meugan, Merlin's teacher. It's all so reminiscent of Rorschach inkblots, those symmetrical smears in which you can see whatever images you fancy. And so, not inappropriately, the 2006 edition of the Pushkin Press translation contains just such a cover illustration by the artist Luca Pagliari, setting the tone for the whole convoluted tale.

Lorenzo Berardi says

'Tell me,' he asked, with some embarrassment, as we strolled along: 'you're a bloody German, aren't you?'

'Oh, no. I'm Hungarian.'

'Hungarian?'

'Hungarian.'

'What's that? Is that a country? Or you are just having me on?'

'Not at all. On my word of honour, it is a country.'

'And where do you Hungarians live?'

'In Hungary. Between Austria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.'

'Come off it. Those places were made up by Shakespeare.'

And he roared with laughter.

(from The Pendragon Legend, page 31)

I lived with Hungarians. I worked with Hungarians. I drank with Hungarians (and no less than Hungarian homemade palinka!). Boy, I even went punting with Hungarians.

And yet, all that I recall from the fascinating Hungarian language is two words: hupikék törpikék.

Which sounds just lovely when you hear it and it's an excellent icebreaker speaking with your average beautiful Miss Polyglot, but, in fact, means 'Smurfs'. Now you know it: go and conquer parties!

How did I come across Antal Szerb? No idea.

But what I know is that 'The Pendragon Legend' turned out to be a serendipity of a book. I was looking for a decent gothic novel in the wake of Poe and Machen and, this book - to some extent - is a gothic novel, but that's not all. There is much more here and Szerb managed to mix plenty of sweet and sour ingredients with an excellent final result.

Now, how can I describe this?

There is this certain Young Frankenstein-esque mood in 'The Pendragon Legend', so much that I expected Frau Blücher to pop up, but dismissing this novel as a parody would be unjust.

There is a quintessentially British sense of humour bringing P.G. Wodehouse and the early Evelyn Waugh in mind, but nonetheless Szerb pokes fun at Englishmen, Scots, Welshmen and Irishmen from the continental point of view of Janos Batki, 'Doctor of Philosophy specialised in useless information'.

Batki is a Hungarian academic in London toying with his rather obscure research in 'English mystics of the Seventeenth century'. Having no impelling economic problems, he spends a good deal of his time in the Reading Room of the British Museum, under the very same dome that plays such an important role in 'New Grub Street' by George Gissing and 'The British Museum is Falling Down' by David Lodge.

Not so here. Batki will leave London and his vague studies at the British Museum behind in the pursuit of intellectual curiosity. An invitation from the distinguished Earl of Pendragon (a man 'with a remarkably handsome head' but charged of being 'mad as a hatter') will take the Hungarian Phd to Wales where a very funny and very creepy serie of events will happen.

A scholar of Blake and Ibsen, Antal Szerb spent only one year of his life in the UK. And yet, in such a short time he was not only able to complete a once acclaimed World History of Literature, but also to grasp a lot about Britons and their idiosyncrasies. The Hungarian author was clearly fascinated by Britons and I bet he had great fun while writing 'The Pendragon Legend' which was his first novel.

You can get that Szerb was witty and well-read as well as a man who loved to court women and being playfully seduced by a pretty face. Not your standard academic bookworm, then.

Quite surprisingly to Janos Batki - Szerb alter ego here - courtship is not an intellectual pleasure, but actually quite the opposite as he firmly believes that beautiful women are not meant to be clever. Worse: beautiful women might be imprisoned to make the world a better place. As you can see, this is a novel where the main character does have some interesting opinions.

But don't take Antal Szerb wrong, please. He was not a misogynist as the irresistible character of the rubenesque Lene Kretsch - a modern and sexually liberated intellectual - can prove in this novel.

Despite of its name 'The Pendragon Legend' has nothing of Arthurian. This is an entertaining romp with some spooky moments, mysticism, cheeky saxophone interludes (if you know what I mean), brilliant dialogues and many a good and sharp observation. Much credit to Pushkin Press and the excellent translation by Len Rix for making this book available to an English reading audience.

As a self proclaimed bookworm I couldn't help but finding 'The Pendragon Legend' extremely engaging and a pleasure to read. True, the finale sort of disappointed my expectations, but what came before was brilliant enough.

All things considered, it's high time I pay my first visit to Budapest.

'A Martian Guide to Budapest' written by Antal Szerb in the 1930s might be of use.

(if you tell me where I can buy that).

Jon says

I read this one inspired by Jenni's comments--and I liked it in very much the same way she did. It's not quite like anything else I've ever read. As I look over the Goodreads reviews, I see Szerb reminding people of many other authors, depending on whom they've liked--for me he seemed like P.G. Wodehouse, John Dickson Carr, and Umberto Eco. With maybe a little Nabokov. It's a whimsical, affectionate send-up of British mores between the wars (post-modern irony before that had been invented) and also a very fair mystery, with touches of the romantic supernatural. I laughed, but I think I would have laughed a good deal more if I could have read the original Hungarian. And at the same time there were some seriously spooky parts. I couldn't help feeling a kindred spirit, as late in the book the narrator is lost and alone in the wilds of Wales, and says "I went on 'by the uncertain light of the moon,' as Virgil puts it, and felt the magnificence of the adjective 'uncertain.'" Or earlier as he says of the girl he (sort of) loves, "Cynthia, with her blond hair in the sunshine, was silent as beautifully as a line of Theocritus." I have no idea what that even means, and yet I know exactly what it means. A wonderful writer who died in a concentration camp in 1945.

Erwin Tongeren says

3.75

Tim Pendry says

Amusing and ironic inter-war Hungarian take on occult themes - post-modern well before its time. Not quite a master piece but very interesting with some affectionate insights on how others saw the British - their class system, their literature, their national character, their empire and their 'stiff upper lip'.

Szerb has been re-introduced to London by Pushkin Press and this is recommended as a pleasant amusing read that is a cut above the conspiracy schlock that has appeared in the wake of the Da Vinci Code. It is sad to note that he died in a labour camp in 1945 and the witty irony of this book shows that a man who could laugh at himself and create a nice anti-hero also died that day

Kathrina says

I would never intentionally use the word "romp" in a review, but this book calls for it, as several other reviewers have discovered, as well. A gothic-romantic, mysterious, supernatural, thoroughly British romp written by a self-mocking, clever, witty Catholic Hungarian with Jewish ethnicity (atrociously killed in a labor camp in 1945). I enjoyed this as much as Dan Simmons' Drod for the unpredictable adventure-cum-love affairs-cum-psychedelic visions, and to realize Szerb was writing 70 years ahead of Simmons (but certainly himself influenced by Dickens and Collins, 70 years previous), it's exciting to come across such a fresh, but relatively undiscovered, talent.

Fatih EREL says

Kitabın ilk kısmı şüphesiz. Sonu net bir şekilde toparlanmasa kesinlikle puanım 1 olurdu. Neden bilmiyorum kurgu değil de daha farklı bir kitap beklilyordum.

César Carranza says

La historia de una vieja familia inglesa se ve llena de sucesos sobrenaturales, nuestro héroe, un filólogo húngaro, se me involucrado en esta extraña historia. En momentos me pareció que se trataba de una novela juvenil, aunque avanzando algunas páginas me pareció un poco más complicado, aunque siempre fue un libro divertido y sencillo de leer, al final estamos frente a una novela gótica con un misterio detectivesco, pasé un momento muy agradable con este libro.

Rob says

Hugely enjoyable: an intelligent, ironic, playful, wistful, multi-layered Welsh-Gothic literary thriller. If you like Carlos Ruiz Zafon and Scooby Doo, you'll love this almost forgotten 1930s gem from Hungarian writer Antal Szerb.

Mladen says

Neočekivano dobro provedeno vreme uz fantastiku sa detektivskom potkom, zdravom dozom humora i krimi zapletom.
Tek na pola knjige sam skontao kada je napisana - po senzibilitetu pre pripada drugoj polovini veka.

Michael Cayley says

A highly original, hilarious and virtuosic novel about an academic who finds himself caught up in an unlikely sequence of events involving attempted assassinations of an Earl, Rosicrucian lore, biological experiments, ghostly happenings, love affairs and a fortune. If you can imagine a blend of P G Wodehouse, Conan Doyle, Gothic novels and esotericism, you will have some feel for what the novel is like. A hugely enjoyable jeu d'esprit.

Alex Sarll says

A delightfully ridiculous country house burlesque of early 20th century occult thrillers. Szerb was on my vague list of authors to investigate at some point, but a friend's review made clear that this was definitely the first of his books I should read - and just to seal the deal, she then kindly sent me her copy. I can say little that she hasn't already covered, except to quibble with the Simon Raven comparison she quotes; at their most devious, the characters here still have a childlike charm which even Raven's comparative innocents lack. Still, it's no bad thing for a book to be *Foucault's Pendulum* recast with a bunch of Wodehouse characters who've picked up bad habits behind the master's back.
