



# Fogság

*György Spiró*

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## Fogság Details

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Author : György Spiró

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## Hadrian says

Historical fiction novel set in the Roman Empire from the later reign of Tiberius to the rise of Nero.

I have to admit that my experiences reading other Hungarian fiction toyed with my expectations for this one. I was thinking of Satantango or some experimental Modernist work with page-long sentences. Instead, I found a straightforward and well-researched story about a young Jewish Roman citizen and his adventures throughout the eastern parts of the Empire.

The protagonist, Gaius Theodoros, or Uri, is a passive, scrawny young man with bad eyesight who for the first parts of the book really is a vessel for the reader to experience the setting. Spiró is given to long infodumps about trade routes, religious practices, philosophy, and reconstructing the life of the Jewish minority in an empire that is at times ambivalent, given to casual violence, structured to benefit the grotesque wealth of those at the top.

Because our Uri is a figure on the margins, we follow him around the lower segments of society - farmers, craftspeople, slaves, women. Historical events are mentioned in passing, or happen *to* him, and throw him about like the slave galleys in a storm. But this isn't always the case - he does rub shoulders with the prominent and the mighty - Philo of Alexandria, Pontius Pilate, and -- of course -- Jesus of Nazarea. I won't spoil what happens with him. The figure of Jesus is one of many in this story, not at all the center.

And while this is a historical novel, there is the nagging tendency to compare the present to the past, as is the case in reading historical fiction and cautioned against in writing it. Take, for example, Uri's bewilderment at visiting Roman Judea, and seeing the poverty of the rest of his people - was this really it? Was this the homeland everyone romanticized? Or of his time in Alexandria, a wealthy cosmopolitan city, which descends into the horrors of a pogrom. How could such a thing happen? Or, think of the early years of Christianity, which Spiró presents as an attempt to reconcile Greek and Jew and as a salve against further conflict. Well, we know how that went.

Spiró's book is at first a tourist's guide to an ancient world. But after that, as you grow more familiar with the place, you see more than just the tourist does, and the forces and motivations behind this world. It draws you in to think and wonder.

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## Jamie McMahan says

What a fantastic read! This novel is dense and complex, and at times difficult to read but in spite of that, or perhaps in part because of it, it is also a fantastic piece of literature. Following the story of a young Jewish boy named Uri, who leaves his home in Ancient Rome during the reign of Emperor Tiberus, and heads on a journey to Jerusalem and from there all around the Mediterranean before returning to Rome during the revolt of the Alexandrian Jews, this novel is more than a coming of age story or an extremely detailed piece of historical fiction. It is a brilliant piece of satire on the intersection of politics and religion, both in the ancient world and in the modern one. The author's prose is brilliant, extremely witty. At times the story is humorous, absurdly so, as hilarious as the best Monty Python episodes. At other times, the story is stark and violent, told in such blunt, and graphically descriptive language that it seems like a Cormac McCarthy novel. Yet

even when the story is difficult to read, it is so fascinating that you continue to plow through it, through all 800 pages of it to be precise. And what a masterful job the English translator has done with this epic novel. If you love humor, satire, political or historical fiction, or just plain good, well written, serious literature, if you're patient enough to dedicate the time to plow through an 800-page novel, I highly recommend this one.

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### **Kata says**

Másodjára olvasom a megjelenése óta, és lenyűgöz a regény, még ha (vagy épp azért), mert szívem szerint sokszor vitatkoznék a szerzővel. Épp ahogy Kainisz mondja Urinak, amikor, már öregen, találkozik a szerelmével, egy egymástól távol, külön leélt élet végén: "Szoktam veled beszélgetni képzeletben... és te szépen válaszolgatsz... gúnyolódsz, csipkelődsz..."

Ajánlom a szerzővel három éve készült interjút: <http://www.origo.hu/kultura/20090525-...>

Egy kritikus azt írta, hogy ez alatt a regény alatt bármely irodalmi asztal beszakad.

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### **Brenda Tipper says**

At times difficult to work through for a couple of reasons, but in the end a very rewarding read. The difficulties were some of the historical trivia. While fascinating in places (the descriptions of the tithes and taxes that the villages in Judea paid and how), they overwhelmed my reading of the "story" in other places (the architecture and layout of Caesarea). All the same, it was for the most part an interesting read and to my (somewhat limited) historical knowledge, a reasonably accurate description of life (and death). And that was the second reason. Uri's life had amazing highs and incredible lows. Near death, starvation, difficult family situation that pulled him down and kept him under, and losing in different ways the two people most important to him - his father while he was traveling, but not knowing it until he returned, and his eldest son to slavery. But Uri kept going all the way through his faith in the Eternal One changing and adjusting to the situation. He (or more precisely György Spiró also gives excellent witness to the first pogroms and manifestations of anti-semitism in the ancient world. Not much different that today. And the descriptions of the attitudes of Jews and non-Jews is still the same today.

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### **Zoltán says**

Spiró könyve nehéz. Nem mintha nem lenne kellően olvasmányos (az!), de mégiscsak 770 sűrűn telerótt oldal, nem éppen bibliapapírra nyomott, kemény táblás, sokkilós alkotás. Buszon, villamoson, trolin állva, kapaszkodás közben olvasni esélytelen. Mindez érthető, elvégre Spiró egy teljes emberélet történéseit, sőt azon is túl - egy kedves ismerősöm szavait idézve - "a gyölköslet születésének" kortól független univerzáléit sűrítette egyetlen regény keretei közé. Tökéletesen megértem, hogy a zsidó identitásukat mai napig őrzi és ápoló olvasók számára ez a könyv páratlan élményt nyújt. A történet főhőse, Uri, a vaksi, rút és csenevész római zsidó fiú Krisztus és első követőinek korában, a császárkori, belviszályoktól és mértéktelen kicsapongásoktól gyötört, dekadens Római Birodalom idején vetődik el az ókori Mediterráneumnak a zsidó (és nem zsidó) történelem szempontjából kulcsfontosságú helyeire, miközben éppúgy megjárja az emberi lét magasságait, mint mélységeit; hányattatásai közepette erőtlen, kór sújtotta gyenge hajtásból erős, a heves szélviharban is csak meghajló, de ketté nem roppanó ággá fejlődik. Észintén meglepett, mekkora érzékkel lehel életet Spiró a korra vonatkozó történeti adatokba, milyen tehetséggel és hozzáértéssel idézi meg az első század társadalmi viszonyait, és mennyire eldolgozottak a tények és a fikció közötti határok. Nem vitás,

ebben a tekintetben a Fogság leginkább a Passuth-féle történelmi regények legsikerültebb példáival vetekedik. És mivel a történészek krédója szerint a múlt tanulmányozásának célja a jelen megértése és ezen keresztül a jövő bölcsebb megtervezése, Spiró m?ve, még csak nem is leplezett módon, a 20. század vészkorszakának miértjeit segít testközelbe hozni. Senki ne gondolja azonban, hogy az író a zsidók szenvedései felett siránkozik; a maga kíméletlen és szókimondó realizmusával, a helyenként kifejezetten közönséges, vulgáris fogalmazásával Spiró olyannak festi le az antikvitást, köztük a zsidóságot, amilyen az valójában volt: idealizált, fennkölt, már-már romantikus mázától megfosztottan, az emberi volt minden b?nével és gyarlóságával egyetemben, a kiválasztott néppel szemben gyakorolt metsz? gúnnyal és éles kritikával. Rítusokba merevedett hitetlenség, hideg számítás, képmutatás és köpönyegforgatás, konformizmus, a vagyon és a hatalom hajhászása, a lélek feláldozása Mammon oltárán - Spiró bátran nyúl ezen motívumokhoz, melyek kortól és etnikai hovatartozástól függetlenül minden közösségben felütik fejüket, és nem csekély szerepet játszanak abban, hogy az emberiség sok évezredes írott történelmében sokan egyfajta ciklikusságot vélnek felfedezni. (Hogy ez az id?szakos ismétl?dés miért látszati csupán, azt most teljességgel mellékes.) A képet néhány gondosan elrejtett, ám annál találhatóbb, örök érvény? bon mot teszi teljessé; ezek ízlelgetése további élvezetet jelent a fogékony olvasók számára.

Spiró regényér?l sokan sokféleképpen írtak, elemezték szelvében s hosszában, készült hozzá dokumentumfilm a historikus és m?vészettörténeti háttér alapos bemutatása és megvilágítása céljából, így magam csupán két végs?, személyes megjegyzésre szorítkoznék.

Egyrészt, a regény annak a folyamatnak az egyik legszebb irodalmi megfogalmazásával zárul, mely során az elaggott elme lassan elveszíti racionális kapcsolatát a külvilág valóságával, és fokozatosan magába fordul, önmagába zárkózik.

Másrészt, a "Fogság", noha a szó talán egyszer sem kerül említésre a m?ben, a lehet? legkifejez?bb cím a regény számára. Bár az asszociatív kapcsolat, mely a zsidóság történetéhez f?zi, eléggé nyilvánvaló, Spiró jelen esetben nem feltétlenül erre a viszonyra kívánt utalni (gondolom én), sokkal inkább két olyan kötelékre, melyek velünk születnek és gyakorlatilag a szabadulás legcsekélyebb reménye nélkül életünk végéig gúzsba kötve tartanak: Uri esetében ez zsidó volta és testi korlátai (mindenekel?tt rossz látása). Történetük bármi, higgyenek rólunk mások bármit, tartsanak ennek vagy annak, változzék bár id?vel hitünk és magunkról vallott nézeteink, nincs menekvés ezen kötelékek közül. Hasznos volna ezt minden kor emberének észben tartania, hogy többé ne ismétl?dhessék meg mindaz, ami id?r?l id?re mégis megismétl?dik.

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## David says

My review appears in New York Journal of Books. Read that review first. Additional remarks that appeared in a different and now defunct publication begin with the next paragraph.

Jewish books: Gyorgy Spiro's *Captivity* portrays First Century Roman Jewry

Was there ever an era like the current one when Jews simultaneously participated in their own and a global culture both in the land where their people and civilization originated and in a large diaspora? There was indeed in the Roman Empire during the decades preceding the First Jewish Revolt. That time and place are brought to life through the nearly blind eyes of Uri, a Roman Jew and the central character in György Spiró's suspenseful 860 page novel *Captivity*, which is now available to English readers in Tim Wilkinson's fine translation. In my *New York Journal of Books* review I praise the book as a "novel that educates and entertains."

Uri, whose Roman name is Gaius Theodorus, is a polyglot and polymath who lives in two cultures and doesn't feel completely at home in either. He finds few aspiring scholars among his fellow Roman Jews of

the working and mercantile class, and he is not always welcome among his polytheist fellow Roman citizens. Other reviewers have noted Uri's misogyny, but that may be the result of both his cultural elitism and the fact that most women in his acquaintance are illiterate.

Uri's adventures take him from his native Rome to Jerusalem, Alexandria, and back to Rome again. Alexandria is far wealthier and culturally more sophisticated than Rome, but the anti-Semitism Uri experiences in Rome is casual compared to the virulent form he experiences at the hands of Alexandria's Greeks who, incited by a lame duck praefect, herd their Jewish neighbors into a ghetto and murder them in a manner that calls to mind Eastern Europe in the 1940s. Roman soldiers rescue Alexandria's Jews in 38 c.e., which is ironic considering that during three revolts starting three decades later Roman legions would kill millions of Jews.

Alexandria's Jewish community of 300,000 (out of a total one million Egyptian Jews) was centuries older than Rome's Jewish community which numbered 40,000 in 35 c.e. and grew to 200,000 after the defeat of the First Jewish Revolt. Uri learns that Alexandria's Jews were Sadducees who followed the laws of the Torah literally and did not believe in an afterlife unlike Rome's Pharisee Jews whose interpretation of the Torah was arrived at through exegesis and who believed in the future resurrection of the dead coincident with the arrival of the messiah. Spiró's portrayal of religiously conservative First Century Judaea appears to invite a comparison with ideologically conservative contemporary Israel.

Spiró has said that he chose to write historical fiction rather than a history book to give himself the freedom to make things up. In my NYJB review I mention several historical inaccuracies and anachronisms. In addition to those, others include his indicating that the first day of the Jewish month of Tishri is the day before Rosh Hashanah when it is indeed the first day of the Jewish New Year. Another is at a funeral where eight Jews only two of whom are adult males recite Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer that readers of Leon Wieseltier's book *Kaddish* know did not yet exist in the First Century, and when it did emerge centuries later would require a quorum of ten Jewish men.

Spiró also writes that the First Jewish Revolt resulted in two million Jewish deaths, but that sounds more like the total of that revolt and the Bar Kochba revolt six decades later. Prior to those revolts the world Jewish population was five and a half million of whom one million lived in Babylonia and Persia in the Parthian Empire with the remaining four and a half million in the Roman Empire the majority of whom lived in the diaspora. That means that the Jewish population of Judaea and Galilee could not have exceeded two million. Since we know that the casualties of the Third Jewish Revolt (the Bar Kochba revolt) exceeded those of the First Jewish Revolt (the Second Jewish Revolt took place in the Diaspora), the total number of Jews killed in the First Jewish Revolt could not have equalled the entire Jewish population of the country.

I close my NYJB review by advising readers not to let such inaccuracies (which only a history nerd such as I would notice) or the book's length prevent them from enjoying this enlightening, engrossing and accessible page turner.

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## **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

The last time I read a novel like this was Gore Vidal's *Creation*. I hope never again to do so. Pure unadulterated Historical Fiction, unsullied by neither style naught story (but you'll learn a lot!). What you get is information; and no telling really of course when it's fictional information and when factual and when fictionalized fact. But that's no matter when the style is this bland and the narrative events are fully

uneventful--fictionally uneventful because indeed we must say that *historically* these events were incredibly eventful. As The Untranslated puts it, "[T]he reader will get an extensive and meticulously researched overview of the culture, economy, warfare, politics and everyday life of Ancient Rome and Judea." Also a tiring and exhausting and unenthusiastic overview from this tiny little perspective--Uri, our protag--who has the personality of concrete. And despite having the famous Philo (of Alexandria) feature in large sections of the novel (and a name drop or two of Aristotle etc) there is nought of a filip nor iota of philosophy or anything such to even get hinted at here. Not a jot. Nor a tiddle. How this is possible still baffles me.

Of course, if you go for that kind of thing, please do dig in. The more of you are reading Spiró, the more likely his Kingfisher might get English'd (for which see=below).

Oh and too one more thing that eats at my craw. A dull boring Lit=Fic(kindof)Genre novel like this one (and city on fire and night film and jerusalem) gets a beautiful hd with lovely binding, paper, etc whilst truly wonderful fictions like Prae get a meager pb edition.

And finally, a shout out to Translator Tim Wilkinson. It's like he can translate both Joyce and Michener!

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the complete review was much more tolerant of this novel than I ; giving it an "A-" -- "it rarely feels like simple information-dumping, as instead he weaves even obscure details about (especially Jewish) life in those times into the narrative in a way that doesn't feel forced." Felt like a lot of info=dumping to me, even if done adroitly and not quite feeling 'forced' :: "well=oil'd info=dump"? "Captivity is a superior, well-researched historical novel, but history aside it's also simply a very good story, with a compelling protagonist" ; eh, it's not my thing at all.  
<http://www.complete-review.com/review...>

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Yes. It is being Englished. But his other one, *Kingfisher*, would've been the prefer'd?  
<https://theuntranslated.wordpress.com...>

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## **The Jewish Book Council says**

Review by Jack Hatchett for the Jewish Book Council.

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## **Juli says**

Awesomely wonderful.

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## Greg says

"All The Chains We Cannot See" is the title I'm thankful wasn't used. So, thank you Mr. Spiro for respecting your readers and selecting just one word instead of an "oh-so-important-I-must-be-read" telegraph. I found most of this fascinating but parts of this felt a bit dry, as if too much historical research was left within the book. UPDATE: In hindsight, this felt like a James Michener novel, but in a good way, like "Hawaii", which I felt was Michener's best.

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## Jonathan Karstadt says

At 860 pages of densely packed text, *Captivity* is a hefty read, but one that pays out richly. It is at once a Bildungsroman that gives a deeply personal narration of the life of Gaius Theodorus (known mainly by his Jewish name Uri), a Roman Jew who lives through the upheaval of the Roman Empire in the first century, and a grand historical novel featuring all of the great figures of that era, from Caligula, Claudius and Philo of Alexandria to Jesus Christ himself.

The seamless interplay between Uri's personal tale and the great historical manoeuvres taking place around him is masterful, bringing to mind great historical novels like *War and Peace* (It was no surprise to discover that the author is an expert in Slavic literature). The richness of the historical detail is breathtaking, with Spiro's description of commerce, social structures and legal systems in first century Rome feeling almost contemporary in their complexity. Readers with knowledge of modern Judaism will be particularly intrigued by the portrayal of religious and cultural life among the Jews of classical Rome, Judea and Alexandria, as well as Uri's double identity as both a Jew and a Roman citizen.

But what struck me most about the book was its depiction of a society on the brink of great upheaval. Thrown into the action towards the end of the reign of Tiberius, we see a society softened by years of peace and relative stability, and watch as it descends into madness and bloodshed. Despite being highly intelligent and able to see many of the foreboding signs that his superiors are blinded to, Uri's low social status means that he is powerless to influence the course of events unfolding around him, a prisoner to his fate despite his many talents. Considering the feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness that grip us today, this is a timely novel despite its historical setting.

The translation is excellent, with Spiro's acerbic humour rendered perfectly - however I have one major gripe about this book that is the reason I've only given it 4 stars: the book is littered with typos and grammatical errors. Missing articles, misplaced pronouns, tenses changing half-way through clauses, even paragraphs beginning with lower-case letters. Over such a lengthy tome it would be understandable if there were a few such errors over the course of the book, but at points in this translation of *Captivity* it seems as if there is one on every page. There is even an error in the penultimate sentence. It seems as if the publisher printed the translator's text without so much as a cursory proofread. This assumption is also backed up by the blurb printed on the inside cover, which doesn't bare much semblance to the book itself. It's a real shame that the English translation of such a wonderful novel has been so woefully mistreated by its publisher.

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## Mike says

?ycie to podró?. Dlatego, drogie dzieci, czytajcie jak najwi?cej, ?eby jak najmniej dosta? w trakcie tej



podróży po dupie.

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### **Rob says**

Captivity is a beast of a book. I think the publisher did it a disservice by selling it as "The Life of Brian" meets "I, Claudius" because it's not a humorous book. It's an extremely immersive story of early Imperial Rome, seen through the eyes of a remarkable Jew. The first half of the book is surprisingly devoid of strong plot movement. It's almost like a sandbox RPG where we're just wandering aimlessly around Rome, Judea and Alexandria in the most meticulous detail imaginable. What I didn't know then was how important the infrastructure of people and place would become as the volcanic second act erupts. I really had to work to keep up with it all, despite my better-than-average familiarity with the period and the events that shaped it but it felt like work well-earned.

I really connected with the protagonist. He was deeply flawed but embraced change for the better every time it was needed. His relationship with his father and sons was especially touching. Much could be made about Spiro's depiction of most of the women in this novel but, seen as it was through Uri's eyes, making it some other way would have been less authentic.

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### **World Literature Today says**

One of three Editor's picks from WLT's Book Review editor Rob Vollmar. Read his thoughts on all three at <http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2...>

Also reviewed in May/Aug 2016 issue -

"Winner of Hungary's 2006 Aegon Literary Award, this Rabelaisian saga recounts the Job-like sufferings of the apparently feckless, lovelorn, often sex-starved Uriel, a Jewish citizen of Julio-Claudian Rome. György Spiró's extensive research renders Captivity a powerful time machine, but his strategies shape a historiographic metafiction that highlights the links between that world and our own." - Michele Levy

Read the full review by visiting our website:

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2...>

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### **Attila says**

this book is truly outstanding

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