



# The Door

*Magda Szabó , Len Rix (Translation) , Ali Smith (Introduction)*

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**One of *The New York Times Book Review's* "10 Best Books of 2015"**

An NYRB Classics Original

*The Door* is an unsettling exploration of the relationship between two very different women. Magda is a writer, educated, married to an academic, public-spirited, with an on-again-off-again relationship to Hungary's Communist authorities. Emerence is a peasant, illiterate, impassive, abrupt, seemingly ageless. She lives alone in a house that no one else may enter, not even her closest relatives. She is Magda's housekeeper and she has taken control over Magda's household, becoming indispensable to her. And Emerence, in her way, has come to depend on Magda. They share a kind of love—at least until Magda's long-sought success as a writer leads to a devastating revelation.

Len Rix's prizewinning translation of *The Door* at last makes it possible for American readers to appreciate the masterwork of a major modern European writer.

## The Door Details

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# From Reader Review The Door for online ebook

## Diane S ? says

I found the atmosphere of this novel to be full of darkness and despair. The friendship between two woman, one an up and coming author, the other an older woman revered on the street. Emerence is a character I will not soon forget, a woman who has seen much, sheltered unbiasedly different people throughout the war, a hardworking woman of the utmost honor and pride.

The title has many different meanings in this book, the literal door and other doors, internal and psychological. This book raised so many questions. What does friendship mean? How much of how a person sees themselves should be taken into consideration when the person needs help. How much do you owe a person when you are the only one they let behind the barriers and the secrets they have constructed in order to keep their past and present private? I have thought of this book on and off for the last few days, it is brilliantly written and packs a powerful punch. I loved Viola the dog and how attuned he was to the wants and need of Emerence and she to him.

This is not a happy little story but it is a thought provoking one, a book that will not be easily forgotten.

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## Diane Barnes says

It took me 10 days to read this book, which is unusual for me as I can read fairly quickly, especially when I really love a book. But this one demanded to be read slowly, not only to savor the language, but to get inside the mind and heart of Emerence, which proved impossible in the end.

Emerence was a servant, working for an author and her husband. When she turned the tables on them at the interview, claiming that she was in fact interviewing them ("I don't do just anyone's dirty laundry, you know."), that should have been a clue that she would always be the one in control. She also worked as a caretaker for her apartment building, sweeping the streets, shoveling snow, fixing things, (in her 70's!) She took care of the sick, helped the poor, hid people during and after WWII, all without expecting or desiring any return.

But Emerence was no saint. She railed against God and religion, hated any type of authority, made fun of any type of art or culture, refused to accept any help to improve her lot in life, preferring to remain a person who worked with her hands.

Her strength and endurance were legendary with her neighbors, and her iron will and determination made her intractable. She lived alone with her secrets, and never allowed anyone through her door. A woman never to be forgotten or trifled with.

Magda Szabo reveals Emerence to us very slowly, in small doses, and even at the end we can't know what really made her tick. I thought it was appropriate that the narrator is unnamed, only known as "the lady writer". She was one of the few people loved by Emerence but it was not her story. Emerence controls the reader as she does everything else in her life. A great book that I won't soon forget.

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## Nicole~ says

Magda Szabó lauded as Hungary's foremost female writer was renowned in Western Europe for her powerful

prose and memorable heroines. She won France's Prix Femina Étranger for *The Door* in 2003; it is considered her most notable achievement. Written in 1987, *The Door* tells the story of the strange and complicated relationship between two strong women of opposing backgrounds and personalities: Magda-the intellectual, the writer; and Emerence-her mysterious housekeeper, the relentless worker.

Emerence is an enigma who has built up a solid barrier around herself. Her "door" is both real -for the structure she uses to shut away the outside world , and metaphoric - for the hardened exterior behind which her secrets lay.

The psychological plot unravels aching slowly as Magda inches further to opening that door, exposing Emerence's painful story. How Szabó presents Emerence's puzzling personality is outstanding; the rage that comes off the page, then stops in its tracks to quiet apology is a mark of Szabó's unique style, one that initially took a while for me to get used to, then to admire and embrace.

This was a worthwhile story for its unusual heroine, one I would remember for quite some time.

Magda Szabó October 5th, 1917-November 15th, 2007

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## Garima says

*I still don't know how she fitted so much living into one life.*

Hope and despair go hand in hand whenever I try to form a rather fragmentary sketch of a far-off Hungarian landscape. It is one place which has become an essential part of my past as well as prospective literary sojourns and whenever I decide to visit there, to meet another storyteller and to hear one more hypnotic tale, there's always a throbbing anticipation to receive a treasured souvenir made out of unfamiliar lives but exceptional words. And this time, when I found myself standing in front of Emerence's door, without knocking; patiently waiting on her front porch while listening to her dearest companion, Magda Szabó, I was lucky to witness the masterful weaving of my parting present.

*I didn't like my own secrets. I liked other people's even less.*

There was something about Emerence. From the outset, her enigmatic persona heightened the curiosity in me and the conjectures which followed were all kinds of strange to silly. I was baffled, moved, scared and eventually relieved. My idea of hell was getting replaced by a more sinister one and my idea of paradise was becoming more dazzling. The bewitching narration was doing the whole trick, which was a cross between a guileless confession and a virtuous revelation. Our narrator, a writer by profession had to have a constant exposure to fiction, as a result of which she allowed herself *carefully monitored doses of reality*. But soon enough she needed help. A domestic help in the worldly sense but something which carried a lot more than the stipulated deal.

*How irrational, how unpredictable is the attraction between people, how fatal its current.*

How fatal indeed. When people become too familiar with one's surroundings and abide by an invisible but existent code of conduct, then something comes forth to shake the status quo. Emerence, a headstrong, self-reliant lady had little but rigid demands from the world around her. A giver more than a taker, she always knew what really matters. Of all this, the door of her home and whatever it concealed was part of her prized possessions. To unlock that wooden door, it was necessary to find the key to Emerence's heart first. It was as simple and as complicated as that. A synonym for "Vulnerability" can easily be depicted as 'that one person' and for Emerence, that person was her employer, our narrator. Among engaging discourses and occasional

dialogues, a relationship of a lifetime flourished between two people which followed itself to the heavenly realms of death.

With the charm of a legend, the credibility of everyday life and the sanctity of a heartfelt writing, this book made me see another glorious aspect of Hungarian world. I'll soon visit there again.

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## Ema says

Romanians and Hungarians have a long history of not liking each other. I'm no xenophobe and I have a few friends in Budapest, yet I was sometimes wondering: what does Hungary have to offer in terms of art, music and literature? They could say the same about Romanians, too; what the heck, we are questioning our place in art history ourselves! Well, after reading this novel, I've come to think that Hungarians do have their hidden gems, just the same as we do. Magda Szabó's novel was my first foray into Hungarian literature and my first step towards abating my ignorance.

**The Door** has one of the most powerful and intriguing characters I've come across until now. She is merely an illiterate caretaker named Emerence, but what a character she is! Surrounded by a shroud of mystery, endowed with mythological strength, dismissive of religion and doctors, mocker of activities that don't include physical work, but also bestower of gifts, vessel of kindness, benefactor of abandoned animals, rescuer of fugitives, possessor of a higher understanding.

She had been everyone's model, everyone's helper, the supreme exemplar. Emerence was pure and incorruptible, the better self that each and every one of us aspired to be. With her permanently veiled forehead and her face that was tranquil as a lake, she asked nothing from anyone and depended on no-one. She shouldered everyone's burden without ever speaking of her own.

I was mesmerized by Emerence from beginning till end, although I can't truly say that I loved her. Her personality is magnetic, raising conflicting feelings, impregnating the reader's memory with a powerful image that lasts.

Her past is surrounded by mystery; the stories about her childhood resemble fairy tales and are just as unreliable. Her present life is also an enigma: she keeps the door to her apartment tightly shut, inviting no one inside her home. All her friends (and she has many) are entertained outside, on her porch. Nobody has the full picture of Emerence - *she must have enjoyed a quiet smile at our expense as we struggled to work out the full story, as each of us tried to match his own allotted pieces of information with those granted to others.*

Almost the whole novel gravitates around Emerence; slowly, we come to know her through the words of the Lady writer who hired her. Much more than the story of a rocky relationship between two different women, **The Door** is most of all a tale of discovery and conquest of a monumental personality. Did one of them manage to possess and kneel the other? *I killed Emerence...* the woman writer confesses right at the beginning of the novel. But is everything just as simple as that? *I had long known that the more simple a thing was, the less likely it was to be understood*, Magda Szabó writes, and she is right.

I could go on and on talking about Emerence; she is truly remarkable. But it's best to discover her through the pages of this novel, which I urge you to read!

I know now, what I didn't then, that affection can't always be expressed in calm, orderly, articulate ways; and that one cannot prescribe the form it should take for anyone else.

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## **Teresa says**

### **4.5**

At some point during my reading of this, I was reminded of *The God of Small Things* in that I felt as if this too can be read on two levels and that if I knew more of the history of the country of origin (here it is Hungary), I would've gotten even more out of the novel. Because I know basically nothing of the latter (I googled some), and even though this can be read as a character(s)-relationship study, I feel as if something essential has eluded my grasp. Yes, we are told in perfect pacing what Emerence has endured and how she has survived the upheavals, but there are also minor characters—such as Sutu and Adelka—that might represent the accommodation and compromise Hungary was forced to negotiate during and after wartime. The dignity Emerence fights so hard to keep behind the locked door of her flat is certainly a metaphor for more than just a personal boundary.

The narrator, a writer, has made accommodations with the government, though these are not spelled out. As she looks back (the whole book is a reflection), she realizes how unseeing and selfish she'd been toward the demanding, selfless Emerence, a character described in fable-like and mythological terms, who'd tried to teach her some difficult lessons in unorthodox ways, most importantly, how to act with unconditional love. Emerence's demands are perhaps beyond the scope of anyone to fulfill; yet the narrator (only named near the end when Emerence calls her by an affectionate nickname) realizes she has failed the older woman, especially as Emerence had taught her what she needed to know (remember Polett?) to handle the climatic situation. (As I write this, I realize there is also a third level.)

During my read, I went back to the powerful beginning at least twice to reread it. A scene near the end is a strong indictment against materialism, for any reason, even love. If I have any criticism, it's that though the book isn't long, it went on for a bit too long. Except for the aforementioned scene, the novel's other points had already been made. Despite this one reservation and my wish that I knew more, this is the kind of novel I love, one that has me testing my own boundaries.

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## **Viv JM says**

I found *The Door* to be an unexpectedly moving and profound story. It tells the story of the relationship between an eminent writer and her somewhat cranky cleaning woman. For much of the book, not much actually happens, but the last third just tore me apart emotionally. It raises ethical issues in relation to friendship, love, death and dignity that have no easy resolution. I have rated this five stars, not so much on how much I *enjoyed* the book so much as how much it got under my skin. I will be thinking about this for a long time.

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## Dem says

### **Magda Szabo really makes the reader work hard with this book and I for one found the characters and the story unconvincing**

The Door is a novel by Hungarian writer Magda Szabo. The novel documents two decades of life in Budapest after the Communist takeover in 1948. The novel tells the story of a developing and complicated relationship between a young Hungarian Writer and her housekeeper and is partly autobiographical.

Having visited Hungary only last year I was up to date on the history and was glad of that when reading this novel. The book started out promising but the further along I read the more I became frustrated with the character's actions and the repetitive nature of the novel. I know this is a favorite of many but I just couldn't relate to Emerence's rages and tantrums and never felt I understood her or indeed her employer or their actions and while the book is very readable and there are moments where it captured my imagination but I can't honestly say I enjoyed the novel and hence my 2.5 Rating.

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## Margitte says

*In modern postwar Hungary, an old woman who is now a famous author recalls a nightmare: herself as a young woman. The novel begins after she has passed through a "politically frozen" time and started to be able to write again and to be publicly lauded for it. She and her husband move up a step on the social ladder. They hire an old woman, Emerence, as a servant. Or is it the other way round? "I don't wash just anyone's dirty linen," Emerence says, coming to see their flat in her "ceremonial" headscarf and taking her time deciding whether they will suit her before she takes over the household, turns up for work whenever she feels like it, and bonds with the dog in a way no one else can.*

*Emerence is primitive, demanding, and without religion in a way that makes her somehow full of God's wrath. There is "something superhuman" about the way she can work. She feeds all the neighborhood sick, sweeps all doorsteps; nothing human and in need is alien to this woman who has hidden refugees across the board from Fascist to Communist.*

Emerence had her ideas about everything. Even doctors were not to be trusted and God only understood her take on trust, religion and all things human. The church vehemently disagreed, but that was their problem. She only relied on the security that she had created for herself and the animals she so passionately protected against the cruelty of life and humans. She had a belief in animal purity ("They can't inform on us, or tell lies about us"), while never questioning her way of beating animals into near-senseless submission.

Nobody, except herself and her foundlings were allowed behind the locked door of her apartment. Come icy cold winters, or scorching hot summers, everyone was received on the veranda. The windows were securely closed up to any prying eyes. No human being ever tried to disrespect her wishes. Emerence was a ferocious defender of herself and what was right according to her. She could be dangerous, as some neighbors realized

soon enough after meeting her.

Until she met 'the author' and the latter's husband, Emerence never allowed anyone into her personal space or circle of trust. In fact, there was no circle of trusted friends. She had a whole community who loved her, but that was different. Only animals and herself understood her way of love and devotion to them. It would ultimately lead to a tragedy and regret. No person is an island, although life forced Emerence to create her own hide-away since she was a young girl of nine-years-old. As long as the neighbors and her employers allowed her to function within her own secure borders, she acted normal...

And as long as 'the author' and her husband allowed Emerence to treat them like children, the author was able to learn more about this reclusive, yet hardworking caretaker of the mansions across the street. The autobiographical tidbits Emerence told the young author *were impossible, folk ballads in prose*. It kept 'the author' mesmerized and devoted to her new housekeeper for many years.

Emerence was immensely strong and tragically weak. She was trustworthy but untouchable; giving but refused to receive; tough but loving; challenging but devoted to the people she lived with. She thought she could trust the famous author. Alas...

*The narrator('the author'): Once, just once in my life, not in the cerebral anemia of sleep but in reality, a door did stand before me. That door opened. It was opened by someone who defended her solitude and impotent misery so fiercely that she would have kept that door shut though a flaming roof crackled over her head.*

*I alone had the power to make her open that lock. In turning the key she put more trust in me than she ever did in God, and in that fateful moment I believed I was godlike — all-wise, judicious, benevolent and rational. We were both wrong: she who put her faith in me, and I who thought too well of myself.*

*The prize, I reflected bitterly, had already begun to work its influence. I had rushed off in a TV car towards its radiance, away from illness, old age, loneliness and incapacity.*

... Away from Emerence who was unable to tell the author that she loved her, or needed her. The only way she knew how to do that, was to lash out in cruel profanities and verbal abuse. The author misunderstood her words, just like the Lieutenant Colonel did not speak the same language as Emerence when it came to expressing their feelings and emotions.

*Author: So he(Lieutenant Colonel) didn't grasp my meaning either; or perhaps he couldn't. We were dealing in such different currencies. Emerence's dictionary featured filth, scene, scandal, laughing stock of the street and shame. His contained law, order, solutions, solidarity, effective measures. Both phrasebooks were accurate, it was just that they were in different languages.*

In the introduction to the book the translator says:

*...unless we read other languages, we miss out on superlative novels like The Door by Magda Szabó. This American edition comes nearly thirty years after its original publication, and very little by Szabó, one of Hungary's most eminent novelists, is available in English. But The Door is so full-blooded and stately a book that it clearly belongs with a shelf of equally fully made creations by the (now elderly) Szabó, every one of which the reader will want to find after*



*finishing this compelling, funny, and horrifying novel, translated by Len Rix in a rich and calm tone.*

I first watched the movie, available on Youtube, in which Helen Mirren portrays Emerence brilliantly, before reading the book. The cast of characters are British, the production team Hungarian, and the ambiance of the 1960's era as well as the cultural environment were masterfully done. The language is English. It brought this book alive on a totally different level and for once I believe that the film saved the book in a way. Absolutely masterfully done, but of course adapted and I wanted to know the real story, so I got the book. A wise decision, I believe.

One of the most profound events in the book, when Emerence explained her fear of lightning to 'the author', was so much better experienced in the text. Gripping and heartbreaking. And all of a sudden, we see Emerence as the traumatized nine-year-old little girl hiding inside the bravado and toughness of the ageing housekeeper. And suddenly we wanted to hold the old curmudgeon, hug her, love her, protect her from her own tragic pain.

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

I suspect that some of the magic of the prose got lost in translation, which is corrected in the movie as far as ambiance and atmosphere is concerned. Yet, I found the book a fascinating read as well, and wanted to relive the life of Emerence through the prose again. It was well worth the read and a thought-provoking experience about the different emotional languages we all use to express the memories we dared not talk about. We have different ways of building those protecting walls around ourselves and when a community have to deal with a crisis, we suddenly have difficulty in understanding each other's words while talking the same language.

The book is written in the first person as a memory. A welcome linear tale, presented in an intimate conversational tone with the reader. The author communicated her thoughts and regrets directly with the reader, which makes it a great experience. I was wondering if this was based on a true story or pure fiction. It was told that well! Biographical novel?

I accidentally encountered the movie and the book, but what a magnificent start to a new year of reading it was!

Recommended for sure! An absolute gem.

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## Orsodimondo says

### L'AMICA GENIALE

Magda Szabo gioca con il lettore spargendo nella narrazione fragili elementi autobiografici: il marito della protagonista è uno scrittore proprio come era Tibor, il marito della Szabo; Szabo e suo marito subirono l'ostracismo e la messa al bando, a lei fu addirittura ritirato un premio appena consegnato, e durò per anni, dal 1949 al 1956. Poi ci fu la riabilitazione e il ritorno alla scrittura a tempo pieno. E allora una domestica entrò effettivamente in casa Szabo-Szobotka.

## **Helen Mirren nel ruolo di Emerenc nel film omonimo del 2012 del regista Ivan Szabo.**

Ma è inutile, e controproducente, andare al di là di queste tenui analogie. “La porta” non è un romanzo autobiografico, non lo è anche se la protagonista è una scrittrice che si chiama Magda, e non è neppure un romanzo realistico.

“La porta” parla di una scrittrice, che è la voce narrante, che vive in Ungheria in un paese che però si capisce essere un quartiere della capitale, insieme a suo marito, a sua volta scrittore. Le loro opere sono state vietate, ma un po’ prima che questa storia abbia inizio, sono state riammesse e riabilite: la scrittrice narratrice può tornare a scrivere, quindi, non avrà più tempo per occuparsi dell’economia domestica e avrà bisogno di aiuto. Le parlano bene di un’anziana di nome Emerenc che cucina e pulisce per tutti gli abitanti della strada e del quartiere, si prende cura dei bambini, spazza la strada dalle foglie morte e d’inverno dalla neve. Emerenc conosce tutto di tutti, tiene salotto nel piccolo portico davanti a casa, la cui porta nessuno è autorizzato a oltrepassare, dalla quale arrivano sinistri effluvi di detersivi.

Il primo momento spiazzante è all’inizio quando apprendiamo che non sarà la domestica a subire un esame, ma viceversa: perché Emerenc non lava *i panni sporchi al primo che capita* - quindi, solo se Magda e suo marito hanno buone referenze, Emerenc assumerà l’incarico.

Non succede molto altro: Magda e suo marito adottano un cucciolo salvandolo dalla neve ed Eminenc diventerà la vera padrone e il riferimento affettivo del quattrozampe, con gran gelosia di chi racconta; il marito di Magda si ammala ed Emerenc sa come curarlo; si ammala anche Eminenc... Szabo sa come regalarci dettagli e informazioni con parsimonia.

### **Emerenc e Magda interpretata dall’attrice tedesca Martina Gedeck.**

Non succede molto, come dicevo, routine, banalità, la trama è esile: il tesoro è dietro la porta, in quello che c’è, in quello che non c’è, in quello che rappresenta e significa. Un tesoro che dilaga quando Emerenc si ammala, nell’ultima parte del pagine: a questo punto si intuisce che dietro la porta c’è uno scrigno (davanti alla porta c’è effettivamente una vecchia enorme pesantissima cassaforte) pieno di gemme preziose.

*...ogni legame sentimentale rappresenta una potenziale aggressione, da quante più persone ci lasciamo avvicinare tanto più numerosi sono i canali attraverso il pericolo può colpirci. Non fu facile ammettere che Emerenc contava sempre più, la sua esistenza era diventata una componente essenziale della mia vita; all’inizio mi spaventava l’idea che un giorno avrei potuto perderla: se le fossi sopravvissuta nella schiera delle mie ombre ci sarebbe stato un ulteriore fantasma, insaziabile, tormentoso, che mi avrebbe seguita ovunque e gettata nella disperazione.*

Szabo ci fa credere che tutto si svolga in un paesino: la strada dove tutti si conoscono, personaggi ricalcati su stereotipi del paese (ma anche come se fossero usciti da una parabola: il poliziotto buono, il fornaio...), solidarietà umana e anche tanta sfacciata curiosità (privacy bandita e sempre impicciarsi degli affari altrui). Invece siamo nella capitale, a Pest per la precisione.

### **Emerenc e il cane Viola.**

La scrittura della Szabo sembra fatta di nulla, semplice e senza pretese: ma è precisa, sapiente, costruisce magnifiche cattedrali e splendidi castelli con cerchietti e stanghette, con gli stecchini o i fiammiferi come i detenuti. Lentamente sprigiona il quadro, piano piano le gemme cominciano a rilucere, prima nascoste, si può solo intravederle, poi velate, per arrivare al finale dove occorre coprirsi gli occhi, tanto è forte il chiarore.

Una scrittura così sapiente che sa trasformare personaggi intollerabili in creature indimenticabili: Emerenc è burbera e sgradevole al limite della brutalità, di quelle che si vanterebbero di “non avere peli sulla lingua”; la scrittrice è lamentosa e pusillanime. Perfino il cane è un ben strano quattrozampe che di canino ha poco, sembra ricalcato su qualche modello umano (il quattrozampe funge da messaggero tra il mondo del razionale e quello la cui comprensione non è alla diretta portata degli esseri umani).

### **Magda Szabo.**

Tutto converge a fare di Emerenc un personaggio mitologico. In grado di compiere miracoli (a cominciare da come sequestra l'affetto di Viola, il cane). Sin dalla sua prima apparizione, col gigantesco mestolo davanti al calderone nel quale lava i panni, è avvolta in un'aureola di luce. Ha l'energia di una valchiria nonostante sia anziana. Accoglie i randagi, cani e gatti, come sembra che facesse il cristo con i bambini e i mendicanti. È circondata da tre presenze femminili che sembrano le Parche Moire (Sutu, Polett, Adélka).

Il romanzo si apre e chiude con un sogno, che è un incubo, che esprime l'impotenza di fronte alla morte dell'amica e il senso di colpa che la narratrice non riesce a controllare, e superare.

### **Viola cerca di aprire La Porta.**

La porta è il confine della propria intimità, l'ingresso all'amore, all'intimità, alla reciproca conoscenza. *Ora vedrà qualcosa che nessuno ha mai visto, né mai vedrà finché non sarò sotto terra. Io oggi le ho fatto più male di quanto meritasse, le offro l'unica cosa che ho, l'unica cosa che ai suoi occhi abbia un valore. Prima o poi l'avrebbe vista, perché in fondo questa è roba sua, ma almeno così la vede mentre sono ancora viva. Entri. Non abbia paura.*

La porta si apre sul mistero della comunicazione umana, sull'umana lotta per superare la distanza tra anime, quella valle che separa uno dall'altro. La porta conduce al mistero dell'amore.

Magda ed Emerenc si sono riconosciute, nel profondo hanno capito di essere composte dalla stessa materia, parlano la stessa lingua anche se sembrano non capirsi, hanno frequenti scontri, il silenzio è spesso la loro forma di comunicazione.

### **Emerenc seduta sotto il portico davanti a casa.**

Per Ali Smith Emerenc è una raffigurazione dell'Ungheria.

Personalmente, invece, trovo particolarmente affascinante quest'altro percorso di lettura: siamo alla presenza di un io narrante che è una scrittrice, la quale scrive e racconta di un'altra donna, un'amica speciale. È la storia della loro relazione che riempie le pagine. Possiamo fidarci al cento per cento di questa narratrice? Ci racconta di un'altra donna, impenetrabile, in qualche modo inafferrabile, una donna con segreti, ma con talento speciale che però sembra voler auto-limitare. È l'altra donna, l'amica, che impone le regole della comunicazione, che decide aperture chiusure momenti di confidenza e momenti di privacy.

Queste due donne sono davvero divise o sono le due parti della stessa persona? Chi delle due è quella brillante? Lila e Lenù sono due metà dello stesso io, come potrebbero esserlo Magda ed Emerenc?

Poi, certo, davanti alla 'porta' succede davvero poco, mentre le vicende di Lila e Lenù sono un'irradidio. Ma l'eco, io la sento, e mi piace sentirla, mi aiuta a comprendere.

### **Emerenc e La Porta.**

PS

Il film del regista Ivan Szabo (Mephisto), che credo sia solo omonimo, non parente della scrittrice, è una trasposizione sciapa, didascalica, messa in scena con maldestrezza, visivamente a livello di una fiction Mediaset. Neppure la splendida Helen Mirren nella parte di Emerenc riesce a risollevare il tono di un film nato male (tra i tanti misfatti: attori che recitano in inglese con difficoltà così palesi da dover ricorrere a doppiatori inglesi – flashback in stile horror).

## **Magda Szabo.**

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### **Robin says**

*An uncomfortable look at the barriers that we put up to protect ourselves, and the price that is paid for that self protection. Does it ever really work?*

Magda Szabo wrote this in the original Hungarian in 1987, but it is now translated and available in English. It tells the story of the relationship between two women: Magda, a writer, living with her husband, and Emerence, an older peasant woman who is hired as her housekeeper. Both women come from vastly different backgrounds. Emerence is an almost unknowable, unstoppable force, who for some reason, Magda is obsessed with understanding and gaining her trust. Slowly, and often very painfully, Emerence opens up, showing glimpses into her life's story, showing vulnerability that she normally cloaks. She also puts Magda and her husband through the ringer many times with her very unorthodox behaviour and her incredibly bossy and caustic ways.

One day, this friendship is put to the test in what I found to be a complete catch-22. Magda is faced with a situation in which she has no good choice to make - both are a form of betrayal. When she picks, it weighs on her heavier than she can express to anyone. The fallout of her decision is something she will have to live with.

I was drawn into the story easily, although there was a stretch in the middle where the conflicts between Magda and Emerence felt repetitive. Then about 2/3 in, I was fully engaged and couldn't put it down. The weakness of the novel for me is why Magda wants to connect so much with Emerence in the first place. The woman is mainly weird and unpleasant to her, rejecting her good intentions and exposing, ruthlessly, her flaws. I didn't understand Magda's need to win over Emerence, unless it is simply the desire to unmask what was so carefully hidden.

The story asks questions about friendship and acceptance, about aging and dignity. Also about doors, or barriers that we put up in order to protect ourselves. Can we ever truly protect ourselves? Can we allow ourselves to remain untouched by others in our world? I would argue that the answer is no, for better or worse.

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### **Kalliope says**

How on earth could the telling of the life and character of an aged Hungarian cleaning lady feel so eerily

uncanny?

Because, do not be mistaken, this is not a mystery book. This is a novel about the relationship between two women: an illiterate servant and her considerably younger employer, a writer. The latter narrates the story, which is set in Hungary around the 1960s-80s.

So, how could this be such a memorable story? Magda Szabo (1917-2007) proves in *The Door* to be an astounding writer. After a gripping beginning, she then takes us through a very intense, scary, and magical unfolding of the tale. Szabo draws her brushstrokes regularly, building up the suspense, or may be peeling off the many veils that cover reality.

What emerges is the extraordinary and colossally strong personality of *Emerence*, the servant. She is an atavistic force that communicates with animals like no other person can, and who has a magnetic power and physical strength to attract or banish or condemn those beings around her according to her beliefs, moods and whims.

In contrast, the other woman --the “woman writer”-- as narrator seems subjected to the will of the strong elderly servant. The unbalance in strength is found also in the way the book focuses our view. If the name of Emerence is introduced at the very beginning of the book, the name of the “woman writer”, *Magdchen*, which is also Szabo’s name, is only mentioned, in passing, towards the end. The writer and creator becomes the anonymous observer, the “woman writer” in the story.

But is she just an observer? Is she really subjected to Emerence’s forces? For, as she tells us, at the very beginning: “I killed Emerence...” And this chilling start prompts the telling of the story that led to this, the relationship between two beings that *The Door* separates. This ambiguity on who is acting on whom makes me think of this book as a meditation on subjectivity.

*The Door* was published in Hungary in 1987 and has been translated by Len Rix, winning him the prestigious Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize in 2006. This is my first book by Magda Szabo and would like to read more. Unfortunately very little has been translated.

Now I will wait until Istvan Szabo’s 2012 film version, with Helen Mirren as Emerence is shown in a cinema near me...!!!

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## **Praj says**

Johannes Brahms can make autumn leaves dance in one of nature’s most graceful circle. The chill in the air was about to birth the season’s very first snowflake. The clatter of rusty shovels being removed equated to the asinine banter of old women gossiping on the porch. After the death of its final leaf, the trees lay barren like a country that had abruptly lost its people. There were no birds to be seen, yet I heard them chirp a summer song. The fervent barking of a mongrel was followed by a pair of impenetrable irises; blue as the deepest ocean. The frost on my eyes made it tricky to see the peculiar lady carrying a christening bowl with glistening chicken soup. I rubbed my eyes to wipe the frost and something terribly stung me. It was morning, again!! The sunlight on my pillow showed beads of sweat on my arms and the frost along with the barking

dog and the lady magically vanished. While poor Brahms still played his 'Lullaby' at my bedside, Emerence saw that I still stayed in bed. It's been couple days now that I sleep with Emerence's 'mirror-like' face and wake up trying to experience the sound of her soprano voice. When I open the pages of **'The Door'**, my heart beats faster than the breeze on my window and my lips are bitten while I take deep breathes, for Emerence brings out my emotional vulnerabilities ; letting my scars bleed through someone else's wounds.

*"Sometimes the strongest women are the ones who love beyond all faults, cry behind closed doors and fight battles that nobody knows"- Anon.*

Indeed, the silent , big-boned lady with an impenetrable face and having the persona of a Valkyrie ; Emerence was the strongest of the lot. A mystery that deepened the moment the door was shut. What kind of a flower was Emerence? A rose or a white oleander that tenderly grew around the fence. The now tranquil garden had once seen the dishonorable terror of red and white roses and the bloodbath that a few revolutionary chrysanthemums caused as they tore apart the fair camellias. They were bruised petals scattered like feathers of a hunted dove; each time when a flower revolted, irrespective to their colour. At times it was better when the pristine flowers hanged themselves from the devilish vines because shootings never seem to work all the way. And , *" if you don't die straightaway, they have to come over and beat you to death or shoot you back"*, till all was left were trampled saplings.

*"How can I truly describe her, or trace the real anatomy of her compassion — this woman who peopled her home with animals?"*

Emerence comes across as an eccentric, arrogant lady bearing an unfathomable obscurity. When the writer hires Emerence as a caretaker, a series of love-hate relationship flourishes between the two ladies. The oddity of Emerence's demeanor created a haunting mesh of rumors of what really thrives behind the closed door of the villa. With every tiny window that Emerence opened, it led a draft of fresh air into Emerence's concealed life whilst the writer gaining confidence of someday being the owner of the clandestine key. But, was it this wretched key that the writer held firmly in her palm, be the very cause of her disloyalty to Emerence?

*"I killed Emerence....."*

Szabo creates a marvelous personality through Emerence. Like a mother who bestows her true love at the rarest moments in a child's life, Emerence spreads her loving arms ; her kindness becomes the healing medicine for a hemorrhaged life. Her eyes were so intense that they could win battles and a heart that was warmer than the sun on a spring morning. Emerence was authoritative yet lovable; she was irascible on the verge of being bi-polar, yet she was comical and angelic when she smiled. She had an innate goodness that shone through her being a dedicated soldier to her profession and when she saved a helpless life from a deathly ditch by giving it a home. The porch of her villa became a dais for culinary entertainments. Her loneliness was veiled among the silken folds of her compassion. Her uprightness was stricter than the commands of a lion tamer and her honor came from her ambitious vibrant Taj Mahal. She valued the idea of absolute love because it is only love that saves, even through betrayal and death. The fragmentary chronicling of Emerence's life demarcates the historical events that led the foundation of a burgeoning country and its people. I believe that when one comes across a commendable book, it becomes essential to cherish the prose with intellectual finesse and not mockery as it silently pays a tribute to the efforts and thoughts of the author. This book certainly deserves the said gesture.

*"It is just that, as well as love, you also have to know how to kill".... " Lord kills too..."*

Szabo makes it decisively known to the reader, the mindset of war victims and people who were spectators to the bloodbath of a country's egotistical power battle and their probable abhorrence to religious validations. These sentences in the book, makes you think the legitimacy of religious norms adhered to find a welcoming acknowledgement and defining the presence of God, even if it means to sacrifice the well-being of human life, the very own premise that celebrates God's worship. If it us humans, who ultimately authorize the matter life and death, choose to love and hate as per as our fallacious opinions and annihilate the very foundation of survival, then why do we use the pretext of the Lord to define our mortal egocentricities. Szabo's prose is not only hypnotic but memorable, as her words follow you like a willful shadow never letting go even in the darkest night.

*"You can't give anyone a greater gift than to spare them suffering...."*

It was these among numerous other words that made me fall in love with Emerence. It may sound harsh even horrifying maybe, but when a blood drenched body lies on the gates of death, breathes gasping for its finality an additional bullet or a stab may just bring a smile on the departed rather than the sorrow that engulfs a slow death. When Emerence reminiscences her past while she stitches, I cry; when she reprimands either Viola or the writer and shows a speck of her blooming affection; I smile and when her eccentricities peak with obnoxious childish acts; I laugh.

**'The Door'** is a powerful metaphoric representation of a woman and several others like Emerence who rather live a restrictive yet dignified life dwelling in the opaqueness of a wooden door than drowning in the nakedness of merciful alms. Emerence was more than a categorical flower; she was *"a truly great lady, pure as the stars"*.

Szabo's writings make me reflect whether we who belong to the generation that frets on the mere number of 'likes' acquired on a social website, ever tried to know people like Emerence who have seen a country grow, perish and once again grow? Is it too late before an entire generation is wiped out and their stories are just mere sentences in newspaper archives? When a country is in its most horrendous turmoil and when innocent lives are cut short, isn't it becomes necessary on the part of those alive to give a significant burial and carve memorable tombstones so that the perished do not have wasted lives. Is it too much to ask to honor the dead? Emerence makes me wonder about the degree of pain to be suffered that eventually dries up a human's tear ducts. How many heart wrenching cries does it take to have a single serene bath? There are several who have move past the atrocities of egotistical power hoarders and have a flourishing life, but what about those who have closed all doors and have lost the key of faith along the way. With every inch that Emerence opens the door of her life, floodgates are opened within me, hurling me in a vortex of emotions. It is here that I wish so dearly to be sitting with Viola, Emerence, Polette, Sutu and Adelka on the porch, and while Emerence poured tea in her prettiest china I have an earnest desire that I was the sole owner of the key that would open the door to all of their precious lives.

*"Like a truly great commander she settled everything around her in person, with a single impressive gesture..... Humankind has come a long way since its beginnings and people of the future won't be able to imagine the barbaric early days in which we fought with one another, in groups or individually, over little more than a cup of cocoa. But not even then will it be possible to soften the fate of a woman for whom no-one has made a place in their life. If we all lacked the courage to admit this to ourselves, she at least had done so....."*

Ladies and Gentlemen!!! *Emerence Szeredás..*

(\*\* Actor Helen Mirren essaying the role in the namesake movie).

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## Candi says

*"I know now, what I didn't then, that affection can't always be expressed in calm, orderly, articulate ways; and that one cannot prescribe the form it should take for anyone else."*

What an unusual sort of book and a very peculiar relationship examined therein between Magda, the narrator of **The Door**, and her housekeeper, Emerence. This novel really grabs you from the start – right away the reader knows that there is some mystery surrounding these two disparate women. Magda is a writer, privileged and becoming something of a public figure in her home country of Hungary. Emerence is uneducated, hard-working and tireless. The difference in social class between these two would certainly seem to preclude them from establishing a friendship, and yet over time they do just that. Yet, their relationship raises many questions about the various nuances that exist within a friendship. What do each owe the other in this relationship? Emerence's life is a swarm of secrets and plenty of hearsay about her background seems to be shared amongst the members of her community. The symbolic meaning of the title **The Door** is shared with both Emerence's physical door to her home - *"No-one had ever seen Emerence's door standing open... Guests were never invited in, and she took it very badly if anyone unexpectedly called her to come out"* as well as the barrier she creates to her inner self. Still, she shares of herself in so many other ways – shoveling the snow from walkways up and down her street, providing food for the sick, giving odd gifts of treasures that others may consider junk, and sheltering homeless animals. She asks nothing in return except the respect of her privacy. Magda struggles with this as she yearns to learn this woman's deepest secrets. Emerence is privy to Magda and her husband's *"dirty linen"*, yet Magda knows very little about this woman that she allows into her home every day. As time goes by, however, the various layers of Emerence are peeled back for Magda's eyes only and we, as readers, slowly learn about this eccentric as well.

While I enjoyed the slow reveal of Emerence's character, I still could not truly become attached to her. Her manner was harsh and any bond with her was nothing short of volatile. While she appeared to be non-judgmental and magnanimous in her treatment of humanity at large, I found her to be just the opposite with those that were the closest to her, including both Magda and even the dog, Viola. I know people like this and despite their goodness I still cannot reconcile myself to those traits that seem almost mentally abusive. Emerence detests those that work with their minds rather than their hands and she was not afraid to point this out to Magda – *"You think there'll always be someone to cook and clean for you, a plate full of food, paper to scribble on, the master to love you; and everyone will live for eternity, like a fairy tale; and the only problem you might encounter is bad things written about you in the papers, which I'm sure is a terrible disgrace, but then why did you choose such a low trade, where any bandit can pour shit over you? God knows how you got yourself a name. You're not very bright, and you know nothing about people."* No matter how charitable a person, what gives them the right to speak in this way to another human being? Especially one they call a friend. If Magda is expected to accept Emerence as she is, then should not the reverse be true? Should Emerence not dole out the same respect? Yet Magda wants to please Emerence and be worthy of her love – almost in the same way as Viola the dog would do anything for her true master, Emerence.



In the end, will Magda stand by Emerence and do right by her? Magda could become a bit watered down at times and play the role of an escapist. But yet, in a friendship, what matters the most – that we do exactly as our friend wishes us to do even if it goes against everything we believe in? If we are the guardians of the door, do we have the right to open that door for others to see what has been entrusted only to us if we believe that this is the correct choice of action? How to preserve the dignity of another human being is a question with no clear answer, but one which we all may need to consider at some time. This was a thought-provoking book which I found quite different from any I have read thus far. I was not really a fan of either of the main characters, and since this was character-driven this was a point that took away from my enjoyment just a bit. Definitely a book worthy of discussion and for that I have given it 3.5 stars.

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### **Karen says**

What a mesmerizing and quite dark little book. This is about a Hungarian writer and her husband who have an older servant woman who basically takes over their household and their life. The book is mostly about the relationship between two women, and it's a tense situation throughout but I really did like it!

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### **Camie says**

This is a strange little book translated from Hungarian about the unlikely postwar friendship of Magda( our narrator) a writer married to an academic, and a very secretive illiterate village woman named Remenence , who though hired as a household servant, quickly has them wondering who is really in charge. Reading like a mythic tale full of symbolism , this book chosen by NYT as one of 2015's 10 Best Books (though it was originally written in 1987) is not one of those warm fuzzy books about friendship. In one sentence I'd call it a compelling haunted story of the very blurry line between what we perceive ourselves and others to be and who we really are. 4 stars , because though I enjoyed it , I really cannot think of anyone to pass it along to. Looking forward to club discussion.

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### **Tony says**

In this work of Hungarian minimalism, the narrator is Magda Szabó, same name, same occupation, same childless marriage. Her, but not exactly her. She is a witness.

She hires Emerence to be a housekeeper of sorts. Well, that's not exactly true. Emerence gives them a probationary period, then allows herself to be hired. Emerence is a tireless worker, but decidedly sets her own rules. She suffers no fools and abjures education, religion, pretense. The Magda of the novel is an award-winning writer, a church-goer, and almost pathologically self-conscious. Yet, with difficulty, there is symbiosis.

More thoughtful readers will smell allegory perhaps, the shifting of mores in a modernizing Hungary. I liked the *exchange* that occurs, when one gives, one accepts. See, there is an importance in the smallest of things. Or we can have them so. The *Magda* of the novel says: *In most people there is a dull sort of shame*. That's when even the well-intentioned disappoint.

Thirty pages into this novel, I ordered the only other novel by Szabó that has been translated into English. Halfway through, I was certain it would be a top-ten book, maybe book of the year. Things stalled towards the end though. Even the now-obligatory anthropomorphic dog lost his enchantment. Time, as always, will tell.

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## **Erika says**

I finished this novel a couple of weeks ago, but haven't had time to review it until now. Turns out that was a good thing. Two weeks ago, I would have given *The Door* three stars and moved on. It was slow. It felt a little pointless. I didn't like the characters.

But, because I wanted to review it, I kept the book in the front of my mind and over time a deeper truth began to emerge for me.

*The Door* is slow because its subject matter is difficult and slippery. It felt pointless because I didn't work hard enough to see the point. And as for likable, this isn't necessarily intended to be a novel where you're rooting for someone.

The book opens with the narrator as an old woman, talking about a reoccurring nightmare where she tries desperately to open the door to her house, but is unable to turn the knob or even speak. She then says,

“Once, just once in my life, not in the cerebral anaemia of sleep but in reality, a door did stand before me. That door opened. It was opened by someone who defended her solitude and impotent misery so fiercely that she would have kept that door shut though a flaming roof crackled over her head. I alone had the power to make her open that lock...I believed I was godlike, all-wise, judicious, benevolent and rational. We were both wrong.”

This novel is about the relationship between the narrator, and the woman who opened the door to her.

## **Not Plot Driven**

Magda Szabo was a bestselling author in her native Hungary and *The Door*,, originally published in 1987, was considered one of her strongest books. It's the story of a successful writer and her larger-than-life housekeeper. Emerence is a contradiction: abusive yet gentle; irrational yet pragmatic; completely open yet obsessively private. Over the two decades that Emerence works for the narrator, the women form a sort of passionate friendship filled with drama and complexity like a relationship between teenaged girls. Things come to a head, a door is opened, and another one is closed. That's basically all that happens.

“So nu?” as my grandmother used to say.

## **The Doors**

This is a novel about doors, the physical one that secures Emerence's apartment, and the invisible ones that are more nuanced. It's about the doors between social classes, between artifice and truth, and between the public and private self. And, for me, the deepest realm of this odd novel is the door between who you think you are and who you actually are.

At a pivotal moment in their friendship, the narrator betrays Emerence and even though her intentions are

good, the act has horrible repercussions. She makes a choice, and for the rest of her life, she has to walk around knowing that she is a person who will make that choice and not the other. You can't unsee that in yourself. Emerence, on the other hand, doesn't have that interior door. She's ridiculously difficult, but she also knows exactly who she is, and that gives her a kind of freedom.

I ended up really liking this deep and narrow novel.

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## **Brina says**

The Door by Magda Szabo is a fictionalized autobiography of the author's relationship with her octogenarian housekeeper named Emerence Szerebas. A goodreads friend from Hungary recommended this novel to me because she sees that I enjoy reading women authors from around the globe. Szabo wrote many prize winning novels during the course of her career, including both this book and the one depicted in it. During the course of this award winning novel, the readers experience post life in post Holocaust Hungary as well as the baggage that survivors carry with them. It is in this regard that we meet Emerence and the door barring people from her physical and emotional lives.

Magda and her husband are in need of a housekeeper as they are both too busy with their writing lives to care for their apartment on their own. Friends and acquaintances tell them that an older woman is to be better trusted than a young woman who might spill and break things. A caretaker of a villa down the street, Emerence is recommended to them. A countrywoman from the twin towns of Csabadul-Nadori, Emerence carries a lifetime of grief with her as she takes on cleaning job after cleaning job. Even though she works for Magda for over twenty years and appears to be ageless, the writer does not see through the door to the peasant's soul until near the end of their relationship.

Orphaned by age thirteen and responsible for the death of her twin siblings, Emerence is sent to Budapest to work as a governess and housekeeper. First employed by the Grossman family, she is entrusted to care for their daughter Eva as her own as the parents escape to the west for the duration of the Holocaust. No questions asked, her family sees nothing but Emerence's shame, yet the Grossmans repay her generously for her selflessness. Emerence as we later find out would have done this act of kindness without expecting anything in return. As a result, she hides her treasure deep inside her new apartment, never to show anyone inside the door to her secrets.

By the time Emerence goes to work for Magda and her husband, nine rescued cats are her only companions and she cares for them as others would care for babies. Despite the grief and despair occurred over a lifetime, Emerence has accumulated a neighborhood of admirers who see nothing but the Emerence who sweeps the streets, maintains an apartment building, and cares for others in their homes, including Magda. Even her nephew does not know her secrets until later. Emerence and Magda develop a deep relationship that is not fully realized until the end, including the shared caring for a dog named Viola who comes to see both women as her owners. Even though Magda is seen as self absorbed and Emerence as cold, over the course of the novel I came to deeply admire the two women as did the people who lived in their neighborhood.

It takes courage to write about oneself in less than a positive light, yet Szabo does this in The Door.

Developing a trusting and loving relationship over many years between two unlikely people, readers enter through the figurative doorway to the protagonists' souls. Reading about the grief during post Holocaust Hungary was gut wrenching at times, and selfless people like Emerence should be lauded for their actions. This novel is not for everyone, especially not people in search of happy characters. Yet, The Door is an introspective novel that I enjoyed reading because I somehow could connect with the protagonists despite their at times cold dispositions. A award winning novel, I rate The Door 4 quality stars.

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**. says**

(4.75 stars)

this story is tragic, but so amazing. there are facets of bleakness/frustration/misfortune/mystery. emerence is quite a character with the ability to be likeable and loathable almost simultaneously. even taking her stupefyingly sad past doesn't excuse all her actions, yet time and time again you are drawn to her. it is unbelievable how magda's (character) concern/action to help emerence becomes such a burden/jagged concrete brick to the face to the both of them. i feel like this story is emerged in philosophical clashes but i couldn't tell you the philosophies.

dark at times, this story is still brilliant.

ps) arrrgh! what was jozsi's boy's name?!?!

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