



Magda Szabó (1917–2007) is considered one of Hungary’s greatest novelists. Her novels, dramas, essays, and poetry have been published in forty-two countries and in 2003 she was awarded the Prix Femina Étranger for *The Door*.

Len Rix is a poet, critic, and former literature professor. In 2006 he was awarded the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize for his translation of *The Door*.

Ali Smith was born in Inverness, Scotland, and lives in Cambridge. Her latest novel is *How to Be Both*.

THE DOOR

by Magda Szabó

Introduction by Ali Smith

Translated from the Hungarian by Len Rix

\$16.95 US • \$19.95 CAN • Paperback

ISBN 978-1-59017-771-6 • eBook 978-1-59017-801-0

“I’ve been haunted by this novel. Szabo’s lines and images come to my mind unexpectedly, and with them powerful emotions. It has altered the way I understand my own life. [It is] a work of stringent honesty and delicate subtlety.”

—Claire Messud, *The New York Times Book Review*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

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, Magda’s housekeeper, 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. Emerence has taken control over Magda’s household, becoming indispensable to her, and, in her own way, she has also 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.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Magda Szabó gives away such a major part of her book’s ending in the first chapter?
2. Szabó’s novel hops around in time; the narrative seamlessly moves between early and later anecdotes from Magda and Emerence’s relationship throughout. Why do you think Szabó constructed the book like this?
3. A few times in the novel, Magda is offended by what she sees as Emerence’s flippancy toward the traumas of the Holocaust. When Emerence brings soup for Magda’s ill husband in a christening bowl left behind by the murdered Grossman family, for example, Magda is horrified and considers Emerence’s use of the bowl extremely insensitive at best (pp. 34–35). Is Magda right in taking such offence at Emerence’s treatment of relics from a traumatic past?
4. When Emerence’s mysterious young visitor breaks off their lunch for business reasons, Emerence sees the event as a most profound betrayal (see the chapter “The Murano Mirror,” pp. 57–71). How is Emerence’s definition of loyalty different than the average person’s? Is she justified in holding such views?

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5. It is often noted by both Magda and other characters in the book that Emerence and Magda's relationship most closely resembles that of a mother and daughter. Magda is told after Emerence's death that the housekeeper referred to Magda as her "daughter" and "little girl" among friends (p. 168). Are there limitations to this pseudo-familial bond, however? Are there important ways in which the two are not like a mother and a daughter?
6. In a startling revelation, Emerence reveals to Magda that she has been saving her money all these years for a grand family crypt—one "as big as the whole world" (p. 31). What does such a seemingly morbid goal tell us about Emerence and her relationship with death?
7. What do you make of Emerence's disappointment after visiting Magda's film set? What about her bewildering statement: "Art. . . If that's what you were—artists—then everything would be real, even the dance, because you would know how to make the leaves move to your words, not to a wind machine or whatever it was" (p. 135)? What does Emerence mean by this?
8. Magda's husband says once that he and Magda ought to "live with one foot permanently in the grave, or sink into some bottomless pool from which [Emerence] could pull us out—then she would be thoroughly content and satisfied" (p. 166). Do you agree that Emerence needs to take care of other people to be happy? If so, why, and if not—why not?
9. In an attempt to explain her behavior after Polett's suicide, Emerence speaks to Magda about the prospect of putting their beloved dog Viola down one day, telling her, "Try to understand. When the sands run out for someone, don't stop them going. You can't give them anything to replace life" (p. 100). Should Magda have followed this advice when it came to Emerence's brush with death? Was her letting the others into Emerence's home to save her "truly unforgivable," as she later accuses herself (p. 186)?
10. After relating her painful past with little Éva Grossman, Emerence cautions Magda, "Let this teach you not to love anyone to death because you'll suffer for it, if not sooner than later" (p. 131). Do you think Emerence really believes this? Does Magda believe this at the end of the novel?
11. Why does Emerence cover her face when Magda enters her hospital room? Is it out of shame, anger, fear, or something else?
12. What is the reader supposed to make of the disintegrated furniture Magda receives in the end? Does Magda deserve such an "inheritance"?
13. The handyman tells Magda at the end of the novel, "The dead always win. Only the living lose" (p. 260). Does the novel as a whole support this statement? Is there any instance in the book in which the living "win"?