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Off the Bookshelf

BY ANNA HANKS

A Book of Memories

by Péter Nádas

translated by Ivan Sanders with Imre Goldstein

Overlook Press, 720 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

You may think the world needs another 700-page Hungarian novel like you need dental work, but this 700-page Hungarian novel is different. It's lovely and lyrical and highly erotic. Nádas wrote *A Book of Memories* over approximately a decade, which was then followed by a five-year battle with Hungarian censors. Like Nádas, the (unnamed) narrator grew up in Communist Hungary in the Fifties and lived in Berlin during the early Seventies. But the narrator is also writing a book-within-a-book that features a well-to-do young writer named Toomas living at the beginning of the 20th century and details his early family life and erotic exploits. Finally, there is another narrator who appears near the end of the novel. Despite the complicated structure, describing *A Book of Memories* by depicting its structure tells as much about the book as explaining the inner workings of a car by saying that it is a metal box with wheels on it. True, but it is so much else -- like evocative meditations on political systems, sexual politics, and artistic freedom. There's even an unforgettable pig-birthing scene. Reading it may be a commitment, but the relationship is a worthwhile investment of time.

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