

Creatives

*The Worlds
We Make*



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Photographer
Maria Verrier
(COM'88)

Artist and
entrepreneur
Cody Ben
Lewis (CFA'16)

New books by
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Books

Outer Worlds and Inner Lives

In Jessica Keener's Strangers in Budapest, family mysteries mingle with the city's haunting past / BY CORINNE STEINBRENNER

WHEN JESSICA KEENER FIRST visited Budapest, Hungary, the city reminded her of Boston. "It's got the river running through it. It has the trolleys," says Keener (CAS'79). "Where I live, in Brookline, we have these stairways that cut through the hills—and Budapest has stairways that cut through the hills."

Keener returned to Budapest in 1993, soon after the end of Communism there, to live for a year with her husband and infant son. She'd always wanted to live abroad, and Hungary was irresistibly inexpensive at the time.

“It was a very different experience than traveling through as a tourist,” says Keener. “You get into deeper layers. It was haunting to me, and it unexpectedly agitated some latent feelings and thoughts I’d had about life and about my own personal history as a Jew and my ancestors who came from Eastern Europe.”

Keener, who has since published three books and numerous short stories, wrote essays and kept a journal in Hungary. “But it wasn’t until years later,” she says, “that it clicked into place that it would make a great setting.”

Her latest novel, *Strangers in Budapest* (Algonquin Books, 2017), follows an American family—Annie, Will, and baby Leo—to the Hungarian capital, as Will seeks a business opportunity and Annie tries to distance herself from a string of hardships, including her brother’s recent suicide. In her hopes for a fresh start, Annie is well matched in 1990s Budapest, a city poised for cultural and economic rebirth after decades of Soviet rule. But shaking the past isn’t easy, and Annie doesn’t know if she can come to terms with her grief, just as she isn’t sure Budapest’s once-grand buildings, “their facades soot-covered, pockmarked by decades of neglect,” will ever reclaim their former glory.

Annie’s new life takes a dramatic turn when she meets Edward Weiss, a Jewish World War II veteran and another American expatriate, and is caught up in his pursuit to avenge his daughter’s murder. The quest becomes as contradictory as the city whose wide and lovely Danube River divides the historic cities of Buda and Pest and once carried away the bodies of Hungarian Jews murdered by Nazis. Across the river, atop Budapest’s highest hill, stands Liberty Statue, a grand monument to the Soviet liberation of Hungary after World War II—a liberation that soon became a brutal occupation. The paradoxical statue, flooded in lights, stands in the distance as the novel reaches its tragic climax.

Budapest provides more than a picturesque backdrop to the book’s slow-

burning suspense: the city’s moodiness seems to infect the book’s characters.

Or perhaps it’s what drew them there in the first place. Creating this connection between her characters’ outer worlds and their inner lives was important to Keener, who believes “that our external environments are a

manifestation of who we are internally.”

Keener wrote poetry while studying English literature at BU and began writing fiction soon after graduation. Her early work earned her acceptance to Brown University’s creative writing program. Since then, Keener has made a living as a technical writer, a marketing writer, a teacher, a manuscript consultant, and a freelance journalist, but she’s always made time for her own creative work. She began *Strangers in Budapest* about 10 years ago, and the process involved “a lot of pulling apart and putting together and revising and putting in the drawer,”



For her novels and short stories, Jessica Keener (CAS’79) often draws on personal experience to craft rich settings. The city of Budapest, where she lived for a year, provides a picturesque backdrop to her new book’s slow-burning suspense.

which is typical of her fiction projects, she says.

For her novels and short stories, Keener often draws on personal experience to craft rich settings; her previous book, *Night Swim* (Fiction Studio Books, 2012), is set in a fictional Boston suburb, modeled after her hometown of Newton, Mass. The book’s protagonist, Sarah, remembers being 16 in her beloved—though often troubled—childhood home, with its built-in bookshelves, plush green carpet, and a stained glass window that left a trail of orange shadows across her dinner plate. She recalls the home’s rose garden, complete with a pocket of earth for her mother’s glass of scotch.

Set in the 1970s, *Night Swim* transports readers to that culturally tumultuous time. “Keener’s observations perfectly capture a certain kind of 1970s adolescence,” says the *Boston Globe* in its review, “the adults who tried too hard, the sudden appearance of a joint when in the presence of older cousins, the way a grownup party could spin from fun to disturbing in a blink.”

Keener’s short story “Recovery,” from her collection *Women in Bed* (The Story Plant, 2013), was inspired by the experimental bone marrow transplant she received just weeks after her BU graduation and the two months she spent in a hospital isolation room.

The story is set in a sterile room surrounded by a transparent curtain. Keener references lakes, oceans, and currents, reflecting her character’s sensation of drifting through time as the minutes, days, and weeks of her treatment and convalescence float by. The procedure cured Keener’s aplastic anemia—a rare blood disorder—and sparked an interest in health and healthcare.

Keener is a proposal writer at Boston’s Brigham and Women’s Hospital and spends weekends on her fiction. She recently finished a draft of a new novel. “All I’ll say about it is that it’s set in Boston in the present time.”