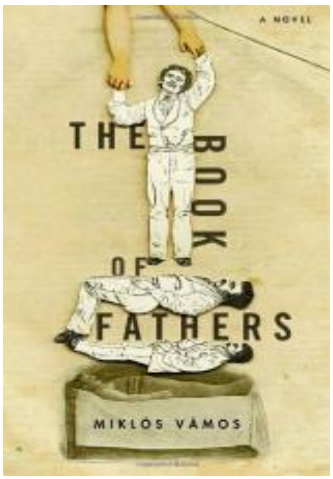
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The Book of Fathers

by Miklós Vámos



About the Book

When in 1705 Kornél Csillag?s grandfather returns destitute to his native Hungary from exile, he happens across a gold pocket watch gleaming in the mud. The shipwrecked fortunes of the Csillag family suddenly take a new and marvelous turn. The golden watch brings an unexpected gift to the future generations of firstborn sons: clairvoyance. Passed down from father to son, this gift offers the ability to look into the future or back into the past --- for some it is considered a blessing, for others a curse. No matter the outcome, each generation records its astonishing, vivid, and revelatory visions in a battered journal that becomes known as **The Book of Fathers**.

For three hundred years the Csillag family line meanders unbroken across Hungary?s rivers and vineyards, through a land overrun by wolves and bandits, scarred by plague and massacre, and brutalized by despots. Impetuous, tenderhearted, and shrewd, the Csillags give birth to scholars and gamblers, artists and entrepreneurs. Led astray by unruly passions, they marry pious French noblewomen and thieving alehouse wenches. They wander from home but always return, and through it all **The Book of Fathers** bears witness to holocaust and wedding feast alike.

Discussion Guide

1. This book closely examines ethnic identity and the ways in which we classify ourselves and create a self-identify based on our heritage. Think about the descriptors you use to quantify your own identity. How do Jews (or Christians, Hindus, Muslims, etc.) know they are Jews? And what does it mean to you when you lay claim to a specific nationality based on your ancestry? In what ways do you celebrate your heritage? In what ways do you attempt to instill an appreciation for your heritage into future generations within your family? What does it mean to you to be an American?

2. As is true for many of his contemporaries, as a result of the Holocaust, the author Miklo´s Va´mos had no knowledge or access to information about the history of his family. Discuss how **The Book of Fathers**, despite being a work of fiction, serves as an imagined memoir. What is the value of this to Va´mos? To others with a similar history?

3. The Book of Fathers has been published in thirteen languages and has had a deep impact on readers around the world. Many have gone to visit their older relatives, interviewed them about their life, made notes or videotaped the conversations, in the end creating their own ?book of fathers.? Think about your own family. Are you satisfied with the level of knowledge you have of your own history? How did you come upon this knowledge? What attempts have you made --- or would like to make --- to fill in the gaps?

4. A sense of shared history defines the Csillag family through the centuries. What major events in the history of your own people do you identify with even though you may not have lived through them yourself? In what ways do events in our history (e.g., genocide, war, slavery) reverberate through generations, shaping our politics, career choices, love lives, and our very identities? Is it important to you to continue to bear witness to the triumphs and burdens faced by your ancestors? Why or why not?

5. When Kornell finds the family?s gold pocket watch, it becomes a totem for the long line of Csillag men. Discuss the significance of the fact that their family touchstone comes in the form of a timepiece. What items are cherished within your own family or have been passed down from generation to generation? What meaning do these items hold for you?

6. Though they may be interested in the history of their own nation or that of their mother country, many people lack an interest in the history of far-off countries. How would you classify your own level of interest in world history and international affairs? What factors influence the scope of your interest? How does one?s knowledge of world history add to or limit one?s understanding of the history of their own nation?

7. The Book of Fathers examines language and the effect it has on our identity. Does your family mix various languages or incorporate foreign words and phrases that were used by previous generations? What does this add to your overall mental picture of your family? Think about how the English language is evolving and how much it has changed since our country?s founders first arrived on American soil --- or even in your own lifetime. What are your thoughts on these shifts? How does language evolve over the course of this novel?

8. The Csillag men are clairvoyant, able to glimpse both the past and the future. Were you able to suspend disbelief and go with this construct? Why or why not? Discuss other writers who have employed magical realism in their work. How does Va´mos?s work compare?

9. The names Csillag and Stern both mean ?star.? Discuss the many ways in which solar imagery is used throughout the book. Why do you think Va´mos chose this imagery? What meaning did he intend?

10. Women play a fairly insignificant role in **The Book of Fathers**. What are your feelings about this? In thinking about your own family, what role do the men play in defining who you are and the way in which your family views its place in the world? Is gender more or less important now than it was in previous generations? In what ways?

Author Bio

Miklós Vámos is one of the most respected and widely read writers in his native Hungary. He is the author of thirty-three books, eleven of them novels. He has taught at Yale University on a Fulbright fellowship, served as The Nation?s Eastern Europe correspondent, and was the host of a popular cultural TV talk show in Hungary. Today he is a correspondent for *The Washington Post* online. He is the proud father of three children.

Critical Praise

"In this sprawling chronicle of the Csillag family, celebrated Hungarian author Vámos depicts the lives of 12 generations of men, each a first-born son, and in the process offers a whimsical 400-year history of his native country... The book has many sublime moments, from meditations on the nature of time to a sly investigation of how words accumulate to form books."

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Publication Date: October 13, 2009
Paperback: 480 pages
Publisher: Other Press
ISBN-10: 1590513398
ISBN-13: 9781590513392