

Burdened by history

LÁZÁR: A NOVEL

By Nelio Biedermann,
MacLehose, ₹699

Nelio Biedermann's novel is a sweeping saga set in Europe documenting the changes across the continent and then weaving them together with the changes in fortune of the Lázár family across three generations. The novel begins in the years before the First World War as we are introduced to Baron Sándor von Lázár, his wife, Mária, and their children, Lajos and Ilona. By the time the novel reaches its end with the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the lives of Lajos and his children, Pista and Eva, have changed forever.

Lázár is the ambitious work of a young writer who uses the portrait of a crumbling family to mirror a changing world order. Both the family and the world outside are caught up in the rapid changes. The world inhabited by the characters of the novel has an almost other-worldly quality to begin with, the consequence of their aristocratic lineage. But by the time the novel draws to a close, their lives lose the patina of their blue blood and turn them into

ordinary people. This might be for good, the ending seems to suggest. Because the inheritance of the Lázár family also includes secrets, shame, trauma and guilt.

The richness of Biedermann's descriptions and the metaphorical quality of his writing are apparent from the beginning: they draw the readers into the world of the Lázárs. Elements like the figure of the translucent child, the boy who speaks to the shadows, and the forest near the manor are intriguing, making readers curious about the characters and invested in their fate. To cover the lives of three generations in less than three hundred pages, Biedermann uses an episodic narrative movement, which gives readers snapshots of his characters' lives.

But this strategy feels at odds with the richness of the prose. Even though one encounters the characters often, one never quite gets the feeling of knowing them. Besides, the writing suffuses everything — the manor, the surrounding forest, Lajos's translucent skin — with significance, leaving the reader hoping for future revelations. But like the characters who get swept away by the winds



of change, abandoning most things of significance behind in the process, the reader, too, is swept away by the force of the narrative and the revelations that never quite arrive. Then there are the memorable but minor characters. They add to the narrative tapestry but do not always contribute to the main action.

Lázár is a work of literary ambition. But there are moments when the seams begin to show under the combined weight of historical and fictional details.

Sneha Pathak