Contributor: Ben Furnish

Entry: Singer, Isaac Bashevis (1904-1991)

Singer was born in Leoncin, Poland, where his father was a Hasidic rabbi. He grew up from 1908-1917 in Warsaw and 1917-1921 in Bilgoray (Biłgoraj), which shaped his knowledge of small-town Jewish life. The younger brother of Yiddish writers Israel Joshua Singer and Esther Kreitman, Singer began reading secular literature at 10, and after years of religious study, he eventually followed his brother into Warsaw’s bohemian literary Yiddish community, translating several modern writers into Yiddish. He did not marry the woman who bore his son in 1929 before she and the child moved to the Soviet Union and later to Israel.

Singer’s first novel*, Der Sotn in Goray [Satan in Goray]*, set in 17th century Poland amid pogroms and the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi, appeared in 1934, and the next year, he joined Israel Joshua in New York City where both wrote for the Yiddish press. In 1950, Singer married Alma Haimann Wassermann, a German Jewish immigrant from a once wealthy family who supported the couple as a retail clerk. Singer wrote in Yiddish for his entire life; most of his novels were serialized in the *Jewish Daily Forward* Yiddish newspaper. Unlike most great Yiddish writers, he found success in translation, particularly after Saul Bellow’s translation of the story “Gimpel the Fool” appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1953.

Singer’s work deals with pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Poland and with Holocaust survivors and other Yiddish speakers in New York City. Although Singer, like some of his protagonists, had no use for marital fidelity, and he was not religiously observant, his artistic sensibility employed the profane medium of literature to describe traditional Jewish life with clear-eyed respect. Many of his protagonists are transgressors in (or on their way out of) this traditional world, and he describes them without judgment—though they face torments—some clearly deserved consequences of their choices, some clearly not, and some ambiguous.

Although Singer fully understands modernist ideals and principles, he remains ultimately sceptical of modernism’s assumptions. The supernatural operates in his works not merely as a symbolic or fantastic element but as a plausible one. Characters confront the free choice between good and evil. Singer views the divine as real and traditional Jewish religious life as coherent even if his protagonists often choose, or surrender to, secular modernity for themselves. He eschews political themes. A popular perception mistakes Singer for a sentimental chronicler of Polish Jews’ folkways now lost after the Holocaust. But his literary legacy is vastly more complex, even if he did quip: “I don’t write messages. I write love stores, sex stories.” He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978, as well as two National Book Awards and three Newberry Medals.

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