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Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories

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The Devil is in the Details

ESSAY BY JUDY BOLTON-FASMAN

In 1978, when Isaac Bashevis Singer accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature, he delivered a speech in English that contained only a single sentence of Yiddish. Singer was aware that it was the first and, in all likelihood, the last time that his native language would be spoken in the Assembly Hall of the Swedish Academy. Seven years later he wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* that he “seemed to have been born an anachronism.”

With Singer’s Centennial in full swing, consideration of his oeuvre contradicts that self-assessment. In fiction that is set in a Jewish Europe forever gone or Jewish New York in the years following World War II, Singer colored sepia photographs with equal parts of phantasmagoria and psychology.

By now the facts of his life in America are well known. In 1935 Singer followed his older brother Israel Joshua, also an accomplished novelist, to New York. Through Israel’s connections, Isaac contributed to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a venue in which he continued to publish for nearly a half-century. During his early years in America, the younger Singer was plagued with writer’s block. In the late 1930s he wrote mostly journalism and translated the works of Dostoevsky and Mann into Yiddish. It was not until 1944, when Singer’s beloved brother Israel suddenly died and Polish Jewry was completely destroyed, that he realized his mandate as a writer would be to access the past in order to reinvent it.

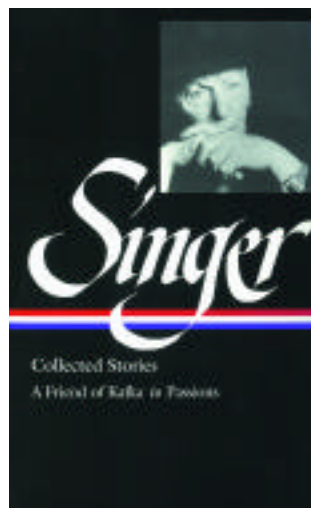
“Gimpel the Fool” was the first Singer story to be trans-

lated into English. In one sitting Saul Bellow furiously typed and translated as the Yiddish poet Eliezer Greenblatt read Singer’s prose in the original over his shoulder. After the story was published in the *Partisan Review*, the two future laureates went their separate ways. Singer feared that an ongoing collaboration with Bellow would make his prose sound too “Bellowsque” in English.

Singer’s work in translation set noteworthy precedents. In 1964 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and

Letters, becoming the only American member to write in a language other than English. The initial publication of his stories in *The New Yorker* broke the magazine’s long-standing rule of not publishing fiction in translation. Later in his life, Singer actively participated in translating his stories, calling English “his second original language.” Singer realized the irony of English as the medium to preserve what he wrote in an almost extinct language: “I like to write ghost stories and nothing fits a ghost story better than a dying language. The deader the language the more alive the ghost.”

In “A Crown of Feathers,” a ghost who poses as the devil makes the desire to understand God maddeningly and tragically ambiguous. Akhsa is a beautiful and gifted orphan who lives with her wealthy and pious grandparents. After her grandmother dies, her grandfather attempts to marry her to a severe and ascetic yeshiva student. On advice from her grandmother’s ghost she refuses the student, Zemach, and also hears her grandmother tell her that Christ is the son of God. She instructs Akhsa to look inside her pillow for a sign and the girl sees a crown of feathers topped with a small gold cross. Akhsa converts to Christianity and marries a Polish squire who turns out to be abusive. Suicidal, Akhsa then hears the voice of her grandfather, who died from the shame of her apostasy. He urges



her to return to her people and to marry Zemach, who by now has lost two wives under suspicious circumstances.

Not surprisingly, the devil has been impersonating Akhsa's grandmother. And her grandfather has been wrestling with him for his granddaughter's soul. Akhsa eventually obeys her grandfather and is once again a Jew. She becomes the very poor wife of Zemach, who devises and oversees her cruel and ultimately fatal repentance – a repentance to which the local rabbis object because of its sadism. Zemach's disappearance on his way to find a doctor for his dying wife leaves his intentions and even his identity an open question.

As she lies dying, Akhsa begs for another sign that her repentance, indeed her death, will not be in vain. Another crown of feathers appears, but this time “in the wavering light of the wick she could see each letter clearly: the Yud, the Hai, the Vov, and the other Hai. But she wondered in what way was this crown more a revelation of truth than the other. Was it possible that there were different faiths in heaven? Akhsa began to pray for a new miracle. In her dismay she remembered the devil's words: ‘The truth is that there is no truth.’”

As a man who has been ostracized all his life and then cuckolded, Gimpel the fool uniquely understands people's complex attitudes toward truth. He is the ultimate *hacham* or wise man. Looking back on his life he reflects that, “I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. What doesn't really happen is dreamed at night.”

Gimpel's revelation is the subtext of “Taibele and Her Demon.” Taibele is repeatedly visited in the middle of the night by Alchonon, a dreary, poor assistant teacher who impersonates Hurmizah, nephew of the King of the Demons. That persona liberates the couple emotionally and sexually. By day, Taibele, who was abandoned by her husband and childless, only glimpses Alchonon at a town well, that familiar landmark where many of the Bible's great love affairs began. It is a myth that Singer brilliantly manipulates to great and ironic effect.

In “A Friend of Kafka,” the Yiddish actor Jacques Kohn espouses the very Singerian view that demons and imps revitalize literature. According to Kohn, his old friend Kafka was a great admirer of the golem, a creature that had the word *emet*, truth, stamped on his forehead. Yet the truth often crumples because “Jews remember too much. This is our misfortune. It is two thousand years

since we were driven out of the Holy Land, and now we are trying to get back in. Insane isn't it? If our literature would only reflect this insanity, it would be great. But our literature is uncannily sane.”

Singer embroiders supernatural events with realistic details. The result is not only a re-creation of bygone worlds made surreal by the dark emotions that rise to the surface, but also a complete breakdown and reassembling of stereotypes. Singer's stories set in Polish shtetls are the stuff of dreams and nightmares, the insanity described by Kohn, which will shadow the Holocaust survivors in his America stories – stories that he did not begin writing until the 1950s.

Singer's artistry was connected to his times – times in which he felt that the irrational dominated history. That irrationality, ingeniously showcased in his fiction, led Isaac Bashevis Singer to end his Nobel acceptance speech by describing Yiddish as the idiom of a “frightened and hopeful humanity,” an idiom that will always be cherished and understood through his work. **JR**

EXCERPTS FROM “COLLECTED STORIES”

One moonless summer evening when the town was as dark as Egypt, Taibele sat with her friends on the bench, telling them a tale she had read in a book bought from a peddler. It was about a young Jewish woman, and a demon who had ravished her and lived with her as man and wife. Taibele recounted the story in all its details. The women huddled closer together, joined hands, spat to ward off evil, and laughed the kind of laughter that comes from fear. — **TAIBELE AND HER DEMON**

Akhsa knew that she should be spending her last hours in repentance and prayer. But such was her fate that doubt did not leave her even now. Her grandfather had told her one thing, her grandmother another. Akhsa had read in an old book about the Apostates who denied God, considering the world a random combination of atoms. She had now one desire – that a sign should be given, the pure truth revealed. — **A CROWN OF FEATHERS**

No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world. At the door of the hovel where I lie, there stands the plank on which the dead are taken away. The gravedigger Jew has his spade

ready. The grave waits and the worms are hungry, the shrouds are prepared – I carry them in my beggar’s sack. Another *shnorrer* is waiting to inherit my bed of straw. When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived. — GIMPEL THE FOOL **JR**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Singer once quipped, “I believe in free will. I have no choice.” How does that paradoxical statement stand out in “A Crown of Feathers”?
- 2) “I am Gimpel the Fool. I don’t think of myself as a fool.” What impact do these words have by end of “Gimpel the Fool”?
- 3) In what ways did Singer’s personal and public tragedies – the death of his brother and the destruction of Polish Jewry – liberate his muse?
- 4) What is Singer’s attitude in his fiction toward “pure” truth?
- 5) Compare Jacques Kohn’s understanding of Jewish continuity with that of the narrator in “A Crown of Feathers.”
- 6) How does sexual desire illuminate Singer’s characters?
- 7) How do the “old world” stories challenge assumptions and refute stereotypes?
- 8) What does Singer’s work lose in translation? What does it gain?
- 9) Singer called English his “second original language.” What did he mean by that?
- 10) Singer was an American writer who wrote in Yiddish. Discuss his role in American literature and his place in Jewish letters. **JR**

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