



The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer

Isaac Bashevis Singer , Herb Johnson (Designed by)

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The forty-seven stories in this collection, selected by Singer himself out of nearly one hundred and fifty, range from the publication of his now-classic first collection, *Gimpel the Fool*, in 1957, until 1981. They include supernatural tales, slices of life from Warsaw and the shtetls of Eastern Europe, and stories of the Jews displaced from that world to the New World, from the East Side of New York to California and Miami.

The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer Details

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From Reader Review The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer for online ebook

Kurt says

What a great collection of stories. Some common themes include: the occult, demons, lovers, cheaters, Judaism, pious Jews, secular Jews, doubting Jews, outcast Jews, disenfranchized and disenchanting Jews, and Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Nazism, war, immigration, and cultural upheaval.

One very memorable passage that I will always remember is from the story *Brother Beetle*:

Suddenly I saw her. She glanced around, looking for someone, as if she had an appointment. I noticed everything at once: the dyed hair, the bags under her eyes, the rouge on her cheeks. One thing only had remained unchanged – her slim figure. We embraced and uttered the same lie: “You haven't changed.” And when she sat down at my table, the difference between what she had been then and what she was now began to disappear, as if some hidden power were quickly retouching her face to the image which had remained in my memory.

Gimpel the Fool : Because a young man refuses to acknowledge his fellow villagers as sometime pranksters, liars, and deceivers he routinely gets taken advantage of, especially by his wife who bears multiple children – none of them his.

The Gentleman from Cracow : A poverty stricken village is blessed with the arrival of a rich man who regales everyone with worldly goods. Only the rabbi suspects any malevolence. On the night of a festive and lavish ball the man's demonic nature is made manifest and the entire village nearly perishes as a result – saved only by the rabbi's selfless offering of himself as a scapegoat.

The Little Shoemakers : A family has a long history of being the shoemakers for a village. But the current shoemaker's many sons all emigrate to the U.S., leaving the widowed father alone with his trade which he carries on into very old age. But when his Jewish village is destroyed during the Nazi invasion of Poland, he too, with help from his American children, finally emigrates. During his life and especially in his travels he imagines himself as various characters from the scriptures, as they too experienced similar hardships and wonders.

Joy : A rabbi struggles with his faith and eventually loses it after the deaths of several of his children. He suffers from depression, but eventually he recovers his faith and later dies satisfied.

The Unseen : Narrated by the Evil One. When a well-to-do man succumbs to temptation, he divorces and abandons his wife in order to run off with their servant girl. The servant girl then ditches him after taking all his money. In desperation and after a year of living like the prodigal son, he returns to his wife, now re-married, who takes pity on him and hides him in the attic of a ruined cabin on their property where he becomes one “who sees without being seen.”

The Spinoza of Market Street : A highly educated and eccentric old bachelor obsesses about the philosopher Spinoza. He becomes an outcast for his perceived heretical views. He is broke and seriously ailing when WWII breaks out and his town (Warsaw) is threatened. His next door neighbor is a hideous old maid who discovers him near death in his room. She nurses him back to health and they get married, much to the amusement of the townfolk.

The Destruction of Kreshev : Narrated by “The Evil One.” The intellectual daughter of the richest family in a poor town chooses to marry a physically deficient man for his brilliant mental abilities. The man becomes depraved because of his intellect and manipulates his wife into having an affair with the young, handsome, and promiscuous coachman of her father.

Taibele and her Demon : A woman is abandoned by her husband because the only children she has borne all died in infancy. A widowed recluse in the town hatches a plan when he overhears her telling some other women a story of a demon who visits women at night. He pretends to be such a demon when he enters her room late at night, and he convinces her to be intimate with him. He visits her twice a week for an extended period of time. The woman is convinced he is a real demon, but she truly enjoys and appreciates his visits which come to an abrupt end when the man becomes ill and dies. The woman never finds out who her demon really was.

Alone : A man wishes for a little solitude while staying at a busy hotel in Miami. The next morning he learns that the hotel is bankrupt and everyone is being forced out. He finds a cheap hotel in which he is the only tenant and the only employee an ugly hunchbacked Cuban woman who gives the man the creeps.

The Last Demon : A demon fails in his assignment to tempt a rabbi.

Yentl the Yeshiva Boy : When a scholarly girl, Yentl, is orphaned she determines to continue her education by dressing as a boy and enrolling in a yeshiva.

Zeidlus the Pope : A demon is assigned, for the second time, to tempt a very righteous rabbi and decides to use the man's only flaw, vanity, against him. After becoming convinced that the Jews will never honor one of their own, he converts to Christianity, where he expects to rise to great prominence, even perhaps to become Pope. He fails.

Short Friday : A poor and inept tailor is married to beautiful and able woman. They both are very diligent in their religious duties, especially in the observance of the Sabbath. One winter evening, after leaving the fire going with the flue closed after their Sabbath meal, they are overtaken by fumes.

The Séance : A man who fled Europe prior to WWII seeks to reunite with his loved ones, especially his mistress, who died in the Holocaust by consorting with a medium. He recognizes that the medium is a fraud. But in a way he feels that he is a fraud too, and he's aging and ailing.

The Slaughterer : A rabbi wannabe is instead assigned to be the town slaughterer, much to his dismay as he loves all life. He consoles himself by the proverb that no one should have more compassion than God. But the constant slaughtering of innocent animals finally drives him insane.

The Dead Fiddler : A strange but pretty girl becomes possessed of two demons, one a male the other a female. The father seeks rabbinical help from surrounding cities in attempts to exorcise the demons.

Henne Fire : A malevolent woman with fiery hair and fiery eyes torments the town. Her husband abandons her after displaying more patience than anyone else can fathom. Her daughters all flee. One night her house catches fire. It becomes apparent that she herself is the source of the fires that ignite around her. The town's citizens attempt to take care of her and provide for her, but one day her blackened fire-consumed skeleton is discovered sitting in the barely scorched chair of her abode.

The Letter Writer : A single middle-aged editor for a Yiddish periodical in New York is in ailing health. While bedridden his furnace quits working and his room freezes. His death is averted only by the fortuitous arrival of one of his female correspondents who nurses him back to health and even cares for a mouse the man had adopted.

A Friend of Kafka : The narrator, a writer, tells about an eccentric acquaintance who habitually name drops – especially the name of Franz Kafka whom he supposedly had been good friends with.

The Cafeteria : The narrator, a writer, mingles with others, mostly Jews, at a cafeteria in New York. They are all Holocaust survivors or relatives of its victims. A young woman who frequents the cafeteria is pleased to meet the narrator, her favorite author. She is haunted by memories of the Holocaust. When the cafeteria burns down the woman claims that she saw Hitler there.

The Joke : The friend of the narrator deceives a European author of some note into believing that a wealthy young woman desires correspondence with him and perhaps a relationship also. When the man unexpectedly arrives in New York to meet the woman the narrator gets pulled into a coverup scheme.

Powers : A man tells a reporter about his supernatural powers. He can often tell things that will happen in the future and read other people's minds. His powers help him attract many women.

Something Is There : A rabbi in a small Polish village loses his faith after questioning why there is so much suffering in the world. He journeys to Warsaw to pursue the life of Gentiles. He is shocked at what he finds there and feels completely out of place. He realizes that the heretics and Gentiles have no better answers than the Jews.

A Crown of Feathers : An orphan girl is raised by her wealthy grandparents who die before they can get her married off. She hears their voices one night giving her conflicting advice. The grandmother, who had taught her to be extremely picky, tells her that the Gentiles have the truth. The grandfather tells her to marry the man he had lined up for her before he died. The grandmother gives her a sign in the form of a crown of feathers embedded within her pillow. So, the girl follows her grandmother's advice – and suffers bitterly as a result. But her later attempt to repent and follow her grandfather's advice turns out to be even more cruel for her.

A Day in Coney Island : A Polish refugee is down on his luck. Out of money and being threatened with deportation right as Hitler is planning his invasion of Poland.

The Cabalist of East Broadway : The narrator tells about an acquaintance, also a writer, who was very much down on his luck and struggling. After a few years of no contact with him, the narrator happens to run into him in Israel where he had become somewhat of a celebrity – a completely changed person. Years later, the narrator again finds him in bad shape back in America.

A Quotation from Klopstock : A man confesses his many love affairs, especially one with a much older woman over the course of many years. She became very old and decrepit while he maintained his youthfulness. Yet on rare occasions he still would meet up with her. One night, at his request, she leaves her old folks home to spend the night with him. In the morning the man realizes that she has died.

A Dance and a Hop : Three sisters live out their lives unable or unwilling to get married. There is evidence of a demon living in the chimney of their house.

Grandfather and Grandson : An extremely devout orthodox Jew has lived his long life in a small Jewish village, sheltered from the world. His wife is dead. His children have died. One grandson is alive, but he, like his parents, is no longer observant. The man is just waiting to die, but one day his grandson comes to stay with him. He tells his grandfather of science and politics and revolution. The grandson is some kind of a leader in a revolutionary group which is planning an uprising.

Old Love : An old rich miserly Jew lives alone in Miami. He has survived three wives and three children. His only grandchild does not visit him. One day he meets his new neighbor – a recently widowed well-to-do

woman, and he experiences joy and tragedy.

The Admirer : A writer accepts an admiring female fan into his apartment. They have some common ancestry and roots back in Poland. The woman becomes very flirtatious and the man welcomes and even encourages her. He then gets phone calls from the woman's husband and mother informing him that she is quite crazy. The man has a difficult time extricating himself from the difficult situation.

The Yearning Heifer : A poorly paid writer temporarily abandons his Manhattan residence to spend a few days on a farm in upstate New York. When he get there a cow continuously bellows for want of a bull or because it misses its former acquaintances. The farmer man is friendly but his wife and daughter are not. The farmer returns the homesick cow to its former owner for a full refund.

A Tale of Two Sisters : After the war n Europe a man encounters a woman who is determined to enter Russia to find her sister. Despite the dangers the man accompanies her and they miraculously find the sister. They then miraculously travel all the way back to Paris where they live together as a threesome.

Three Encounters : A young man rebels against his parents' Jewish traditions and religion. When he returns to his home after a failed attempt at becoming independent he scandalously encounters a young woman who is engaged. Seeing how she is not happy with the situation she is in, the young man tells her of the outside world. She is smitten with these ideas and, it seems, with the young man. A few years later the same woman finds him in Warsaw. She had left her family and taken up with a (supposedly) divorced American who impregnated and abandoned her. Years later in New York City the woman finds him again.

Passions : A passionately religious but poor man is obsessed with learning all he can about the Holy Land. One day he simply disappears without a trace. Five years later he shows up again. He walked all the way to Jerusalem, and sailed back. Another poor shoemaker is equally obsessed with religious matters. After a mistake is made and he is put in a position of prominence for a festivity, a rabbi protests by refusing to recognize his position.

The Psychic Journey : While feeding pigeons a man meets a woman with similar interests. She claims all sorts of psychic powers and convinces him to be the guide for her group of travelers to Israel.

Brother Beetle : While visiting Israel, a man encounters an old flame from Poland whom he has not seen since before the war and before the Holocaust. He is amazed that even though she has changed (aged) considerably all the differences disappeared a short while after their re-acquaintance. They enjoy a tryst at her apartment that ends very awkwardly.

The Betrayer of Israel : A man is brought before the rabbi for being married to four women. He is ordered to divorce all but his original wife and provide support for his children. He ends up slipping away with the youngest and prettiest of the four.

The Manuscript : A woman returns to Nazi-occupied Warsaw in order to retrieve her lover's treasured manuscript. After enduring unimaginable terrors and dangers, she returns to her lover with his manuscript only to find him in bed with another woman. She promptly tosses the manuscript in the stove.

The Power of Darkness : A woman is dying even though the doctors say she is fine. She wants her sister to marry her husband after she is gone and is even sewing her wedding gown from her sick bed. After she dies, the two do get married, but they quickly become secularized. They are unable to enjoy nights together because the ghost of the sister always enters the bed between them.

The Bus : On a bus tour through Spain the narrator is drawn to a rich Turkish widow with no small help from the widow's fourteen-year-old son who longs to immigrate to America.

A Night in the Poorhouse : Two incapacitated former criminals live out their lives in the poorhouse. At night before falling asleep they tell stories and discuss the reality (or not) of God.

Escape from Civilization : A man is told by a doctor to seek living quarters near the ocean. He goes to Sea Gate (evidently near Coney Island). He meets a woman there who has a room to rent. He hits it off real well with her.

Vanvild Kava : A strange man puts on great airs about his literary genius, which others in the literary community find annoying and amusing. When he is given a great opportunity to write a defining article on Yiddish literature he produces a large document which starts out brilliantly then delves into completely unrelated topics about race horses. The man never offers an explanation.

The Reencounter : A doctor gets an anonymous call telling him that an old flame he had not seen in years had died. When he goes to the funeral home, several hours early, he views his deceased friend alone until another woman enters whom he assumes to be the woman's sister. When she informs him that she is actually the deceased woman herself (in spirit form) and that he also is deceased, they embark on an ephemeral tour together as two loving lost spirits.

Moon and Madness : Four rabbinical scholars discuss the benefits and dangers of charity in a study house while two beggars listen. The stories involve cases where certain individuals were so overtly and foolishly forgiving that they brought death and destruction upon themselves, their family, and community.

Chris says

There is nothing new in the praiseworthy department that I can say about Singer's writing. He was a treasure, and my only regret is that I can't read the originals in Yiddish.

However, yesterday I saw a 2015 documentary, "The Muses of Isaac Bashevis Singer," about the "army" of young women he used as translators and who he referred to as his "harem."

Apparently, in spite of being described by many of the younger by decades "harem" as being "very ugly", "a pixie with white fringe", "old", and "did you see those ears?", he was QUITE the successful horn-dog.

*Singer had a common-law wife and child who he abandoned in Poland, after numerous broken promises to send tickets for them to follow him to America. He later somewhat reconciled with his grown son.

*He met his second wife, Alma, while vacationing in the Catskills. She left her husband and three children, completely cutting ties with them, to be with Singer. They remained married for life, and Alma turned a blind-eye to his sexual peccadillos and romantic affairs.

*He had a three decades-long love affair with his proofreader and muse, who he immortalized as a character in, "Enemies, a Love Story."

*Singer began hiring (and seducing) a variety of young, mostly non-Yiddish speaking / reading women to translate his works, after famous fellow-author Saul Bellow received much praise for his translation of Singer's, "Gimpel, the Fool." Singer resented the implication - real or imagined - that Bellow had improved upon the original Yiddish story with his translation. He set out to prove that it was HIS writing that should be lauded, not that of the translator. Perfectly understandable. Singer spoke "Yinglish", but wrote -and dreamed - entirely in Yiddish, the language of his upbringing in a Polish ghetto and would dictate in English to his translators, who would "clean-up" his immigrant's language to make it more accessible to a worldwide audience. There is some argument that much of the Jewish flavor of the shtetl was lost, "white-washed" as it were, by this method of translation, but it was Singer's preference. Overwhelmingly, his translators did not speak or read Yiddish; he preferred that they not attempt to learn it, and they were not professional translators. I'm curious enough to go back and compare the writing styles in stories translated by different women, as well as to the one translated by Saul Bellow.

It's a fascinating film, playful, salacious, but with some very troubling undertones, and full of great archival footage of New York in the late 60ies and 70ies. It's interwoven with candid modern interviews with his now-aged female army of translators, although many of them now insist that they were "the one" translator with whom he did not sleep. *Wink*

Zöe Yu says

The Cafeteria one is the best short story to represent Singer's ghost style, but it is not a regular ghost, it is a haunting cultural ghost as I call it. It's a writer's last shout to his own losing culture, but he doesn't need to worry, it won't be lost.

Alison says

There were some aspects of this anthology that weren't to my particular taste. In a collection of almost 50 short stories by the same author some repetition of themes and characters is only to be expected, but the author revisits certain themes with a passion bordering on obsession and unfortunately they did not all interest me - such as temptation, lust, adultery, judgement and punishment and salvation through religion. However, the stories offer a fascinating glimpse into pre-war European Jewish life and are absolutely written with the finesse of a literary genius. For these reasons it would be churlish of me to give this collection of stories anything but a five star review.

Adele Goetz says

FINALLY. This is an enormous book many stories...some of which I hated, some of which I loved. None of them bored me. I am left wondering if I.B. Singer disliked women especially, or all of humanity equally.

Evan Tucker says

I don't know if anyone who didn't grow up in a Yiddish-speaking Jewish household would feel this way...but this is the greatest book in the world. Isaac Bashevis Singer is my favorite writer. He writes a kind of magical realism, but of a very different sort than the type one finds in Marquez and Rushdie. The realism never bends in a way that does not illustrate a larger point, his stories are hidden philosophical queries about morality, about existence, about sin, about desire, about love. Singer is one of the greatest writers who ever lived: on the same level with Chekhov, Kafka, Shakespeare, Bellow, Saramago (make your own list...), and no book of any of theirs has ever meant more to me than this one.

Jessaka says

Years ago when I was living in Berkeley my friend gave me her New Yorker magazine, and I read one of the stories out of it. All I remember is that it was a story about a Jewish man and his wife living in an apartment in New York. I remembered the author's name as either Isaac Singer or Saul Bellow.

I bought this heavy volume of Isaac Singer's short stories to see if I could find that story. Who knows, maybe I will.

Singer's writing is refreshing because it is different. I am not too fond of it when fantasy/folk lore comes into the picture, but I still like the stories. If I read a story a day it would take me way over a month to read this book, but as I read each story I forget the last one.

So, how do I do a review, I thought? One story at a time and add each that I had thoughts about to my review, and actually not doing every story.

Today's story was called "Joy." It is the story of the death of a rabbi, who among other things ponders or even answers questions from others:

"Who rules the world, Rabbi?"

"It's not ruled."

"Who then?"

"A total lie!"

"Come, come..."

"A heap of dung..."

"Where did the dung come from?"

"In the beginning there was dung."

One day he picked a poisonous berry and then threw it away, but not without thinking, "If a thing like this can turn one into a corpse, what is a corpse? If everything hinges on a berry, then all our affairs are berries."

3 likes

Reading Progress

Nevena Kotarac says

Singerove priče su lijepe i prividno jednostavne.

„Gimpl bena“ je mračna i smiješna priča o čovjeku koji je cijelog života predmet šale, ali koji to pomirljivo prihvata. Njegova ženidba, njegov brak, njegov posao; sve je to nekako nastalo zato što su ljudi željeli da ga prevare, da izokrenu njegov svijet, i da mu se pritom surovo nasmiju. Međutim, u svoj porazan i smiješan život Gimpl unosi svu ljubav za koju je sposoban, bezuspešno ga osmišljava, uvijek sve oprašta i zaboravlja. Uporan u svom ne – primjetivanju bezdušnosti koja ga okružuje, Gimpl na kraju postaje lutalica, od dece voljeni starac koji priča priče. Pred smrt, utješno zaključuje: „Ovaj svet je, sasvim sigurno, svet laži, ali je on

samo korak daleko od istinskog sveta.“

„Mali obu?ari“ prati sudbinu jedne porodice u kojoj se obu?arski zanat prenosi sa koljena na koljeno. Kada ga svi sinovi napuste i odu u Ameriku, Aba nastavlja da predano radi svoj posao, zahvalan Bogu na svemu što ima. Me?utim, kada nastupi rat, i kada se voljena porodi?na ku?a uruši i cio svijet utone u strepnju, Aba putuje za Ameriku, kod svojih sinova, nose?i sa sobom ode?u, Talmud i obu?arski alat. Isprva zbunjen i uplašen, u Americi – snu, Aba pronalazi mir tako što iznova po?ne da popravlja i pravi cipele, koje neumorno traži od svojih snaji, unuka, komšija. Poslednja scena odgovara jednoj od prvih: vrijeme i prostor se prevazilaze kroz zajedni?ku pjesmu oca i sinova, udruženih u drevnom radu, u vje?itoj tišini porodi?ne sre?e.

„Spinoza iz Pija?ne ulice“ je pri?a o ljekovitoj snazi ljubavi. Veliki poklonik Spinoze, dr Nahum Fišelson, živi u strahu od bolesti, opsjednut filozofijom, posmatraju?i život kroz prozor svog sumornog stana. Svijet mu se ukazuje kao „poluosvjetljena ludnica“, kao „antiteza razuma“. Jedan neo?ekivan susret ?e, ipak, promijeniti njegov život – jedna Dobe ?e, sasvim nezamislivo, postati njegova supruga, njegovo izle?enje, njegov uzlet.

„Kruna od perja“ govori o Ashi, koju nestvarnom krunom od perja iskušava ?avo, prerušen u sen njene babe. Rastrzana iskušenjima, plemenita Asha mijenja vjeru, da bi potom tražila oprost; udaje se dva puta, oba puta bez ljubavi; obeshrabrena time što je zapravo niko ne razumije, vje?ito pati i pita se: „gde je istina“. Na samrti, umirena krajem svog tako promašeng života, shvata: „Ako postoji nešto kao što je istina, ono je isto tako zamršeno i skriveno kao kruna od perja.“

Nerjetko u Sinerovim pri?ama govori Ne?astivi, nasla?uju?i se svim svojim uspjesima; ljubavnici pate i ponekad nalaze iskupljenje; sre?a je slu?ajna ili smiješna, a ponekad ipak drevna i postojana; tuga dotrajala i vje?na; ljudi na kraju uvijek stari i umorni. Svijet je košmaran i nepostojan, uvijek donekle mitski, magi?an i dalek, nepoznatljiv. Vatra nepoznatog ga sagorijeva. Polovina uvijek nedostaje.

Rick Slane says

Many of these stories contain a demon that comes to tempt. I strongly recommend the story "Brother Beetle" for adults. It's only 8 pages.

Lizzy says

I used to read short-stories a lot. Now I'm remembering the pleasure they used to give me by going back and reading some of each book. Isaac Bashevis Singer's collection is one more excellent example of how short-stories should be written. Recommended.

Lars Jerlach says

Throughout the cornucopia of stories, ranging from the supernatural, to the eccentric folk-like tales originating in small villages in Eastern Europe, or through the stories concerning the pre and postwar displacement of the Jewish people from the Old to the New World, Singer manages to bring about both the gravity of human nature and the lightness of being. He eloquently spins a literary web filled with wonder, irony, despair and an underlying note of eroticism, which manages to satisfy our emotional as well as our intellectual desires. Each story is a unique exercise in tone and style; some are fairly plain and others rather complex, but each one is imbued with an unforgettable formation of characters that altogether epitomize the very idea of humanity.

Singer's masterful and serenely constructed language, that never comes across as labored or shallow, squares up to the mysteries of life with actual examination and wisdom, and ultimately leaves the reader with a profound appreciation of the human condition.

Amy Eyrie says

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote magical realism before it was fashionable. Most of these lyrical stories take place in the twilight world that existed between the first and second world wars. Set in tiny villages and lost cities, these tales are studies in morality and the struggle between good and evil. Singer's stories seem ordinary and warm at first, then turn on a dime and spiral into a strange, warped darkness where the protagonist's soul is often on the line and the devil walks among us in the form of Dybbuks and evil spirits who tempt and plague the human heart. A must for writers and romantics.

Andy says

If Sholem Aleichem is the grand master of Jewish folk tales depicting life of the common people then Isaac Bashevis Singer is the anti-Sholem Aleichem, representing all the misfits and lost souls of the Jewish ghetto. No matter what era – 18th Century, Pre-Holocaust or Post-Holocaust, or community - Poland, Brooklyn, anywhere, his stories all boil down to Jews that are either rejected by their communities or even by themselves. Add a gentle serving of ancient Jewish mysticism, mostly dybbuks and devils, and you've got a great compilation of magical folk tales, each one more enjoyable than the last one. The great irony is that the most disturbing tale is "Old Love", set in modern day Miami and bereft of magic but still creepy enough to stay with you for years to come.

s.penkevich says

'If you believe in God, then He exists.'

This sentiment best surmises the questions and crises of faith presented in the Nobel winning body of work from Isaac Bashevis Singer. The Polish born author came to the United States on the brink of WWII and left an honorable mark on Jewish literature, winning two National Book Awards, one for his memoirs and one for *A Crown of Feathers* (which he shared with Thomas Pynchon for *Gravity's Rainbow*), as well as the Nobel in 1978. While having written with a wide variety of stories, funny, sad, and occasionally outright depressing, Singer explores the strength of faith when faced with adversity, be it folktale demons or holocaust horrors, and illustrates the challenge of believing in a God who is *'eternally silent'*.

Singer personally selected the 47 stories presented in this collection, selected from a deep pool of seven story collections. He says this was difficult since he felt *'like some Oriental father with a harem full of women and children, I cherish them all'*. However, this offers a good overview of his work since it contains the pieces he feels best represents himself. The stories range in form and content, yet the message of faith resonates through all of them in various forms. The earlier stories read like folktales that reminded me very much of the Ukrainian Tales of Nikolai Gogol, presenting small Jewish villages in the backcountry of Poland assailed by demons and black magic (the satanic orgy in *The Gentleman from Cracow* is unforgettable). While it is frightening to see evil beings stalk the earth with ragged claws and hoofs, trying to seduce Rabbi's from their studies and women from the virginity, the truly chilling creatures are those in human flesh of his later stories. Singer shows that man can be the epitome of evil, even through simple, seemingly harmless ways, not just

the big obvious ones like the holocaust stories.

Through each tale, we watch evil descend upon the poor Jewish souls, and even when they take all, they cannot take their faith. Faith is often shaken, ridiculed and lost, but the Void these characters face when they are stripped of their faith is far more frightening than the evils that beleaguer them. He presents any which way one could feel lost in the world and question the existence of a God, a being who is always silent and remains on the sidelines, despite any pleading. While the opinions of a deity morph through the timeline of his writing, he never denounces his God.

Singer sparked plenty of controversy within both literary and religious circles with stories that embrace homosexuality and transgender characters. However, he broaches the topics with tact and respect, and such a broad love and open mind is what led him to be a recipient of such high honors. Singer writes what he believes, never panders, and makes no excuses. In his 'Author's Note' to this collection, he writes how he has recognized and avoided the dangers of writing fiction:

- '1. The idea that the writer must be a sociologist and a politician, adjusting himself to what are called social dialectics.*
- 2. Greed for money and quick recognition.*
- 3. Forced originality – namely, the illusion that pretentious rhetoric, precious innovations in style, and playing with artificial symbols can express the basic and ever-changing nature of human relations, or reflect the combinations and complications of heredity and environment...'*

He enters into a longer discussion on the pitfalls of what he considers 'experimental' literature, arguing that *'literature can very well describe the absurd, but it should never become absurd itself'*. This makes one wonder what Singer would think of the recent trend of books that, as many (myself included) have dubbed 'weirdness for the sake of weirdness'. Regardless of ones opinion on experimental books, I'll keep silent here and simply present the authors opinion as I don't wish to spark an argument with this as I am in no way qualified to present an opinion, I do enjoy the general idea of writing for your beliefs and not for others.

Literature lost a valuable moral compass when Singer passed on July 24th, 1991. His method of writing flows in a manner that makes one feel they are on his knee hearing a life lesson story. Let us all sit back and listen.

4/5

As a disclaimer of sorts, when it comes to books such as this, I try to remain detached from the author's opinions as these are often touchy subjects. I hope I respectfully presented this information, and I do very much wish not to offend anyone. I have no qualms with discussing these ideas with an open mind with a willing interlocutor, but I wish to refrain from stiff-arming any ideology in a review. I hope I have at least succeeded in that. Thank you for reading, and best wishes!

Elizabeth says

love love love his story-telling...learned so much about jewish americans' pasts and learning about their folklore, love it...read it

Wayne says

These are the equivalent of Grimm's fairy tales...for adults.
Rich, ruthless, colourful and magical...human and humorous.
(Kylie, did you read the volume I bought for you in Paris??)

"The Seance and Other Stories" was a parting gift, a volume I left languishing on the shelf for a few years and which I read more out of guilt, that is, until I got into the very first story. After that an obsession. Now - all read...EVERY volume!!

No Holocaust tales here...Singer tells the most magical, bizarre, intriguing stories of Jewish village and town life set in Poland, stories set in another time and space, until a detail makes you realise that this is 20th Century pre-Holocaust. Did such lives really exist then?? What characters! What tales! What plots! What a culture! What magic! You are inside the heads of people who believe in all sorts of ghosts and spooks. They are real and active. This is culture shock of the most absorbing kind. All types, every variety of situation, every demon, tragedy and comedy. Wondrous.

Then there are the post-Holocaust stories set in New York mainly. A totally different tone. The rich external culture of Poland has vanished. These are rawer, more modern and familiar, but still totally engrossing. The same Jews in similar complex situations.

I can't wait to read them ALL again.

And then there's the novels!!!!

Li Sian says

An impressive collection comprising stories split between featuring rural Jewish communities in pre-WWII Poland and post-WWII Jewish immigrants in New York City, involving meditations on Jewishness, sin, and the devil. In total IBS offers a rather gloomy, fatalistic vision of the world which I enjoy - but my main caveat is that Singer is fairly misogynist, especially his earlier stories which conflate sin and sex and women in that classically conservative, traditional way. This improves later on, when he gets more forgiving towards sex, and the unhappy people who have it. One of my favourite passages in the collection, on a sexually promiscuous girl of one of the characters' youth:

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Here's another quote:

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Ah, IBS. Pretty good with those killa last lines.

Irene says

This volume contains 47 of the prize winning author's short stories. Set among Jewish peasants in Poland or Jewish immigrants to the New World, their characters grapple with existential crisis: the temptation to abandon the practices of the faith, the struggle with doubt or the ambiguity of living between worlds force characters to confront questions of meaning. All are extremely well written. They beg to be read individually, with days or weeks to ruminate between each one. I did not do this and they began to seem too similar, losing their potency.

David says

These stories are the literary equivalent of Marc Chagall's paintings. They tend to concentrate on folklore and village characters, and are full of literally fantastic individuals and magical encounters. I loved all of them. I took this book with me when I was doing a week-long course and staying at a hotel near Heathrow about twenty-three years ago, although some nights I was too drunk to see straight and fell asleep in the middle of a story. Drinks were a perk.

Tiphany says

If I could have chosen a grandfather, I would have chosen this man for the stories alone.

I recommend this to people who like dry humor, vegetables, optimism devoid of religion, religion devoid of optimism, despair (both with and without rejection), facades, bold sarcasm, and flirtatious eyes.
