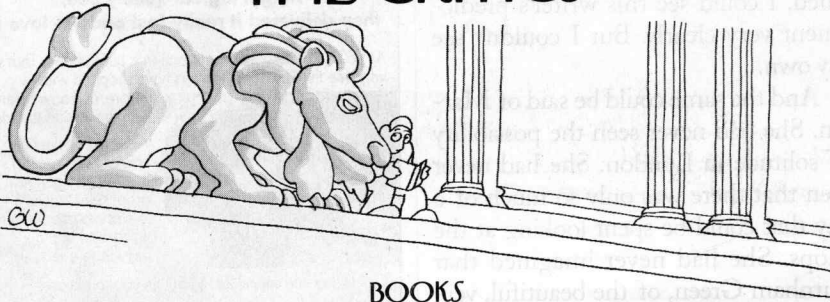


THE CRITICS



BOOKS

THE FABULIST

How I. B. Singer translated himself into American literature.

BY JONATHAN ROSEN

Isaac Bashevis Singer was still alive when I began working at the *Forward* in 1990, though he no longer came into the office to deliver the stories and articles and serialized novels that the paper had published in Yiddish for more than fifty years. By then, he was dying in Florida, his mind erased by Alzheimer's disease. But it was possible to uncover traces of his presence.

"Of course I knew Singer," an old typesetter told me, in answer to my eager questions. "He was a pornographer!" This typesetter, an Orthodox Jew and a survivor of several concentration camps, added that he often took it upon himself to edit out the more licentious passages of Singer's prose. What's more, he boasted, when the paper moved from its Lower East Side location to Thirty-third Street and Park Avenue, he had gathered up a manuscript of "Enemies, A Love Story" and thrown it into a dumpster.

Then there was the woman claiming to have been Singer's longtime mistress—one of many. She was peddling a tell-all manuscript that promised astonishing revelations and that I deeply regret not having photocopied.

And there were the Yiddishists, tiny men in ties and woollen vests, who explained to me that I. B. Singer wasn't half as good a writer as I. J. Singer—I. B.'s older brother, Israel Joshua—who had died in 1944. In their view, Bashevis—as I. B. Singer was known to his Yiddish readers—wasn't really a Yiddish writer at all, just an Anglicizing panderer who, through cunning and lon-

gevity, had snookered an ignorant American readership into believing that his concocted shtetl stories were the real thing. For years, the widow of a well-known Yiddish writer used to call me at the *Forward* to tell me that Singer had stolen her husband's Nobel Prize. And all the while, as if to stick it to his critics, Singer himself kept popping up. In the years following his death, in 1991, Farrar, Straus & Giroux published "Scum," "Meshugah," "The Certificate," and the monumental "Shadows on the Hudson"—more novels than many living writers publish in an entire career.

Singer would have celebrated his hundredth birthday this year, on July 14th. And if he inhabits that inevitable gray zone that follows the death of a major writer, he has already managed to perform so many literary miracles that, to use a heretical metaphor, his ultimate canonization seems assured. To coincide with the centenary, the Library of America will publish three volumes of Singer's stories, each volume almost a thousand pages. It is the first time the august series has featured a fiction writer whose works were originally produced in a language other than English.

Singer was a master of so many modes that it is difficult to think of him as a single writer—as befits an artist who used multiple pseudonyms and whose stand-in characters have multiple lovers and sometimes even multiple wives. He was a high modernist who perfected the simple folktale and the not-so-simple folktale. He wrote sweeping historical sagas, in-

tensely personal novels of self-discovery, and at least one scathing political parable. Along with the novels, and hundreds of short stories, he wrote many volumes of memoir artfully blended with fiction. Late in life, he launched an enormously successful career as a children's-book author, and he developed an interview style that became a kind of cosmic standup comedy: "Of course I believe in free will. I have no choice."

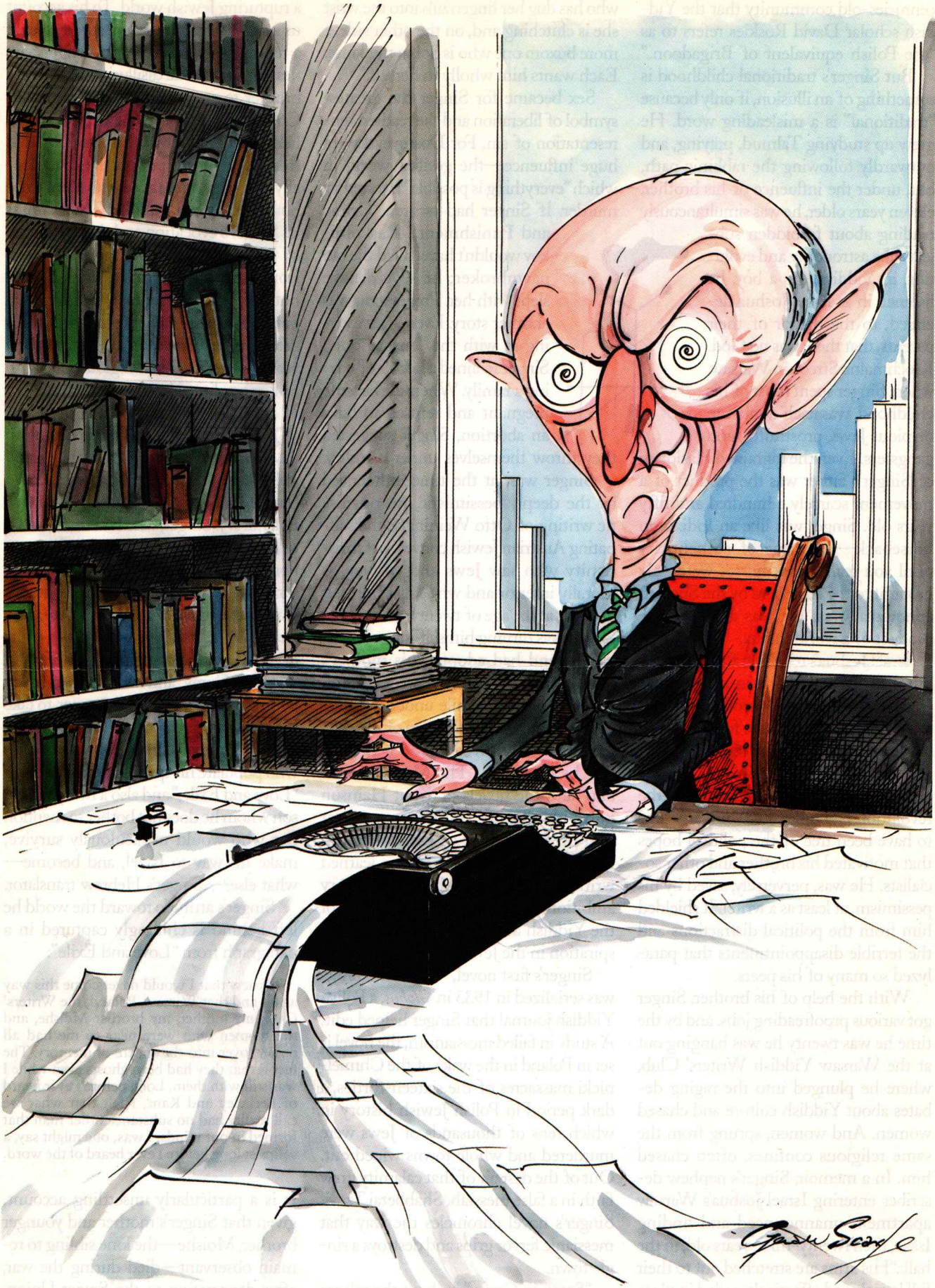
Singer was a humorist steeped in tragedy, a post-Holocaust chronicler who often wrote as if the Holocaust hadn't happened, a Jewish writer at war with the Jewish culture he memorialized, and, most remarkable of all, a Yiddish master who became one of the great American writers of the twentieth century.

Singer was born in Leoncin, Poland. Like the narrator of his novel "Shosha," he was "brought up on three dead languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish." He would not have thought of them as dead, of course, any more than the Poles around him would have viewed Polish as dead, or doubted the existence of their homeland, despite the fact that Poland had been partitioned in the late eighteenth century and no longer appeared on maps.

Singer's town was under Russian rule, and his father, a rabbi, refused to learn Russian—he considered books in that language unclean. Pinchas Mendel was therefore only a quasi-legal rabbi, which seriously hampered his ability to make a living. A mystic of deep piety who would leave the family for weeks at a time to study, dance, and pray with his rebbe, Pinchas Mendel was untroubled by his financial straits and, like a Hasidic Mr. Micawber, kept assuring the family that something would turn up, possibly even the Messiah. This seems to have been a lifelong source of exasperation for Singer's mother, Batsheva, whose father was himself a renowned rabbi—though he was a rationalist and viewed Pinchas Mendel as a feckless schlemiel.

Batsheva's father was also a man of powerful religious conviction who woke daily at 3 A.M. and wrote Torah commentaries till dawn. Bilgoray, the religious community he ruled over not far from the Austrian border, was to have a deep impact on Singer. His visits to the remote shtetl gave him a glimpse of a

GERALD SCARFE



As an American writer, Singer came to represent the folksiness that he had scornfully rejected as a young man in Poland.

centuries-old community that the Yiddish scholar David Roskies refers to as “the Polish equivalent of Brigadoon.”

But Singer’s traditional childhood is something of an illusion, if only because “traditional” is a misleading word. He grew up studying Talmud, praying, and outwardly following the rabbinic path, but, under the influence of his brother, eleven years older, he was simultaneously reading about forbidden subjects like astronomy and evolution in Yiddish. As a boy, he listened in as Israel Joshua declared, to the horror of their parents, that there was no God. Krochmalna Street, in Warsaw, where Singer spent most of his childhood, was itself a mixture of pious Jews, prostitutes, and gangsters. Even the ingrained Hasidism of Singer’s father was the product of a movement scarcely a hundred and fifty years old. Singer was like an Indian on horseback—an image of authenticity until you realize that horses were only brought to the Americas by the Spanish conquistadores. He was an authentic product of a world in flux.

Israel Joshua’s rebellion fuelled Isaac’s but also neutralized it in some ways. Isaac watched his older brother head off to Kiev in 1918 to work for a Yiddish publication and join the revolution. He also watched him return in 1921, embittered by the violence and chaos that the revolution had unleashed. Singer seems to have been free of the political hopes that motivated his brother and other socialists. He was, perversely, saved by his pessimism, at least as a writer. It shielded him from the political distractions and the terrible disappointments that paralyzed so many of his peers.

With the help of his brother, Singer got various proofreading jobs, and by the time he was twenty he was hanging out at the Warsaw Yiddish Writers’ Club, where he plunged into the raging debates about Yiddish culture and chased women. And women, sprung from the same religious confines, often chased him. In a memoir, Singer’s nephew describes entering Israel Joshua’s Warsaw apartment unannounced and finding Isaac, then twenty-three years old, in the hall: “His arms are stretched out to their full length and effectively nailed in place by, on the one side, a skinny young woman

who has dug her fingernails into the wrist she is clutching and, on the other side, a more buxom one who is doing the same. Each wants him wholly to herself.”

Sex became for Singer the greatest symbol of liberation and the readiest representation of sin. For Dostoyevsky—a huge influence—the godless world in which “everything is possible” is tested by murder. If Singer had written “Crime and Punishment,” Raskolnikov wouldn’t have killed the old pawnbroker; he would have slept with her. Procreation was another story. Even after moving in with the “buxom one,” Singer retained a horror of having a family. When she became pregnant and refused to have an abortion, Singer suggested they throw themselves under a trolley.

Singer was, at the time, influenced by the deeply pessimistic, misogynistic writing of Otto Weininger, the self-hating Austrian Jewish convert to Christianity who saw Jews and women as morally inferior and who killed himself in 1903, at the age of twenty-three. That Singer was turning himself into a Jewish writer (and had adopted his mother’s name, Batsheva, to differentiate himself from his brother) while under Weininger’s spell is a good indication of the contradictions he thrived on. So is the fact that he translated “The Magic Mountain” and the novels of Knut Hamsun into Yiddish while churning out a great deal of anonymous or pseudonymous trash, absorbing the lessons he learned writing pulp into his high-art literary ambitions. Or that, a vocal advocate of the Yiddish avant-garde, he sought inspiration in the Jewish past.

Singer’s first novel, “Satan in Goray,” was serialized in 1933 in *Globus*, a Polish Yiddish journal that Singer helped edit. A study in failed messianism, the novel is set in Poland in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres of the sixteen-forties, a dark period in Polish Jewish history in which tens of thousands of Jews were murdered and whole towns wiped out. Out of the despair of that calamity grew faith in a false messiah, Shabbetai Tzevi. Singer’s novel chronicles the way that messianic fervor grips and destroys a single town.

“Satan in Goray” is about the release of the repressed forces breaking loose in

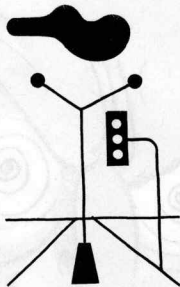
a rupturing Jewish world. To his account of a self-destructive sexual revolt against a repressive religious world, Singer harnessed the political disillusionment of his brother to create a bitter parable about Communist hysteria. “Satan in Goray” is like Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible” told from the opposite perspective: Satan really is at large, and those who seem to be possessed by evil truly are. The richness of Singer’s evocation and the ambiguity of his art, however, set the novel apart from pure political satire. Singer could not have written “Satan in Goray” without Bilgoray, the ancient shtetl where his grandfather served as rabbi for many years. Bilgoray gave religious ballast to Singer’s political horror.

By the mid-nineteen-thirties, with Hitler ascendant in Germany and Polish Fascism on the rise, it was clear to Singer that he would have no future in Poland. I. J. Singer, who had immigrated to America in 1933, was by then internationally famous. In 1935, Singer followed, sent for by his brother and Abraham Cahan, the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, as the *Forward* was known in its original incarnation. Cahan saw merit in “Satan in Goray” and had been persuaded by Israel Joshua, a star at the paper, to take a chance on his brother. Singer abandoned the Lenas and Ginas and Stefas who populate his quasi-fictional memoir “Love and Exile,” and also a five-year-old son whom he does not bother to mention but who would miraculously survive, make his way to Israel, and become—what else?—Singer’s Hebrew translator.

Singer’s attitude toward the world he left behind is chillingly captured in a paragraph from “Love and Exile”:

I knew that I would never come this way again and that Warsaw, Poland, the Writers’ Club, my mother, my brother Moishe, and the women who were near to me had all passed over into the sphere of memory. The fact is that they had been ghosts even while I was still with them. Long before I ever heard of Berkeley and Kant, I felt that what we call reality had no substance other than that formed in our minds. I was, one might say, a solipsist long before I ever heard of the word.

It is a particularly unsettling account, given that Singer’s mother and younger brother, Moishe—the lone sibling to remain observant—died during the war, after deportation to the Soviet Union. (His older sister, Hinde Esther—also a



writer, though in the thwarted manner of Alice James—was saved by a miserable arranged marriage that sent her to England.)

In America, Singer put in his seven lean years first. He spoke almost no English; he had lost his girlfriends; his brother was famous and translated, and he was writing articles with titles like "People Who Enjoy Hurting Others and People Who Get Pleasure from Being Hurt" and "Divorced His Wife and Took Her as a Lover." The socialist bent of the *Forward* made him, with his pessimism and apolitical tales of demons and dybbuks, the odd man out. For his part, Singer declared that "Yiddish America is hell," writing to his abandoned wife, then living in Palestine, "The very idea that a work of mine would be published in the *Forward* makes me want to shun literature. I hate their broken and vulgar Yiddish and their notions of literature."

In 1940, Singer married Alma Wassermann, a German Jewish refugee who, improbably enough, spoke no Yiddish and who left a prosperous husband and two children to be with him. She supported Singer by working as a saleslady at various department stores while he wrote, hung out in cafeterias where refugees gathered, and conducted an elaborate web of affairs. The marriage gave him a home and, finding its own mysterious equilibrium, lasted for more than fifty years.

The anchor of marriage and the growing trust of the *Jewish Daily Forward* no doubt stabilized him, but what gives Singer's career its demonic arc is that the Holocaust, which destroyed everything and nearly everyone he knew, set his imagination on fire, as if the loss of the world he came from liberated him to re-create it. Added to this was the unexpected death of I. J. Singer, who suffered a massive heart attack in 1944. Singer often said that he never recovered from his brother's death, but he also confided to his nephew Maurice Carr that, for the first time, he felt free. In 1945, Singer finished "The Family Moskat," a kind of "Buddenbrooks" for Polish Jews that traces Jewish life in Warsaw from the beginning of the twentieth century to the eve of the Holocaust. From that moment on, he began producing stories and novels at a feverish pace.

The story of Singer's introduction to

the English-speaking literary world gives a good idea of how simultaneously randomness and overdetermined his success can seem. Irving Howe, in his memoir "A Margin of Hope," describes how he had developed an interest in Yiddish literature as a way of confronting his own "troubled sense of Jewishness" and was collaborating with a Yiddish poet, Eliezer Greenberg, on an anthology of Yiddish stories. One day in 1953, Greenberg read a story aloud to him in Yiddish. "It was a transforming moment: how often does a critic encounter a major new writer?" The story was Singer's "Gimpel the Fool."

Howe persuaded Saul Bellow, "not quite so famous yet," to do the translation. They sat Bellow down in front of a typewriter. Greenberg read the story aloud slowly in Yiddish:

Saul occasionally asked about refinements of meaning, and I watched in a state of high enchantment. Three or four hours, and it was done. Saul took another half hour to go over the translation and then, excited, read aloud the version that has since become famous. It was a feat of virtuosity, and we drank a schnapps to celebrate.

It says something about the way Yiddish culture still tugged like an undertow on assimilated Jews—and American literary culture itself—that a great postwar American critic sat in a room in New York with a great postwar American novelist, translating a writer known only to readers of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. And who better than Bellow to reverse the flow of Singer's prose so that it emptied into an American ocean? Having grown up in a Yiddish-speaking household, he had done as much for himself. Bellow had just completed "The Adventures of Augie March," and no great leap was required for him to pass from writing "I am an American, Chicago born," to typing out "I am Gimpel the Fool."

Disguised as a folktale, "Gimpel" is really a portrait of the artist, and it functioned as a perfect advertisement for the author. The story, which captures the sort of radical innocence that only a cynic and doubter can create, is about a cuckolded simpleton who refuses to suspect his wife, despite her slew of bastards, until she is dying and confesses all. Tempted by the Devil, Gimpel, a baker, pisses in the dough to get his revenge on the mocking shtetl that arranged his marriage in the first place. But he is saved

by a dream—his wife, suffering in the next world, warns him to save his soul. And so Gimpel buries the tainted loaves and leaves the shtetl to become a wandering storyteller. Followed by children, supported by alms, Gimpel becomes a kind of holy man. The fool has persisted in his folly and become wise. The power of the story, characteristic of much of Singer's work, is that although the evidence is all against him, we wish to believe with Gimpel; his transformation seems plausible and even enviable. Whether this is the power of faith or the power of fiction is one of the great challenges of Singer's work.

Howe sent the translation to Philip Rahv, at the *Partisan Review*. Rahv, Howe wrote, "immediately grasped the canny mixture of folk pathos and sophisticated overlay that made 'Gimpel' so brilliant a story and thus became the fourth man in this chain of discovery."

Of course, Howe discovered Singer the way Columbus discovered America; by this point in his career, Singer already had thousands of Yiddish readers and "The Family Moskat" had been published in English by Knopf. Still, Howe isn't wrong to see him as born again in the *Partisan Review*. In those days, it was hard to tell if Singer was a Yiddish writer living in America or an American writer producing stories in Yiddish. After "Gimpel," the balance began to shift. Howe's story is itself an emblematic fable about the merging of the marginal and the mainstream. New York Jewish intellectuals brought Singer to American literature the way one might bring a beloved uncle over from the Old Country.

The uncle, however, refused to behave himself. Singer never contacted Bellow for further translations, because, he later admitted, he did not wish to be overshadowed by him. (For his part, Bellow claimed that Singer was "an opportunist" and too "Jewy.") What is more, Singer began eclipsing all the Yiddish writers that Howe was laboring to promote, and his appeal was built not on what Howe prized in that literature, the moral and social values of secular Yiddish culture, but on something stranger, pre-rational, and at the same time more starkly modern.

Consider a story like "Blood," about a married woman who falls in love with a ritual slaughterer. Risha's infatuation begins when she observes the pitiless way

that Reuben kills birds, flirting with the housewives as the bloody creatures flap at his feet. Before long, Risha and Reuben are having an affair: "In their amorous play, she asked him to slaughter her. Taking her head, he bent it back and fiddled with his finger across her throat." Soon Risha insists on slaughtering animals herself, thereby rendering them unkosher and drawing the whole town into sin.

The story is framed as a morality tale about the link between "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery," but Singer imposes a modern load of evil on his hapless shtetl dwellers. A spy watches Risha cutting the throats of cattle:

The steaming blood gurgled and flowed. While the beasts were bleeding, Risha threw off all her clothes and stretched out naked on a pile of straw. Reuben came to her and they were so fat their bodies could barely join. They puffed and panted. Their wheezing mixed with the death-rattles of the animals made an unearthly noise.

The post-Holocaust perversion that creeps into the story, the throat in love with the knife, is far more unnerving than a mere gothic tale. Singer was a sort of reverse dybbuk, throwing his mordant, contemporary voice back in time to speak through the mouths of the dead.

All writers can be accused of betraying the world of their childhood as much as they preserve it, but when that world has been brutally destroyed the challenge to the literary imagination itself is larger, the unease inevitably greater. Reading Singer, one has no sense that, had the Nazis not come, the struggles of European Jews with the Enlightenment, and with each other, could have produced a rich and sustaining Jewish culture. Even Singer's generous biographer Janet Hadda has suggested that, in "The Family Moskat," Singer made his Polish Jews, whether assimilated or pious, so spiritually exhausted, so morally bankrupt and inept, that their ultimate destruction looks more like suicide than murder.

There is a context for Singer's dark view of Jewish life. The same assimilationist forces that were reshaping American Jews had been unleashed in Poland as well, but after the devastations of the First World War—and in the face of the virulent anti-Semitism that took on new intensity with Polish independence—neither assimilation nor a return to former piety was possible. Jewishness could seem

simultaneously obsolete and ineluctable. Singer captures this sense of futility perfectly in "The Family Moskat." When, during the First World War, an order of expulsion comes to the shtetl where the hero grew up, the pious rabbi finds himself fleeing next to the town atheist:

Reb Dan's wagon drew up alongside the cart on which Jekuthiel the watchmaker sat, the tools of his trade piled around him. He looked at the rabbi and smiled sadly.

"Nu, rabbi?" he said.

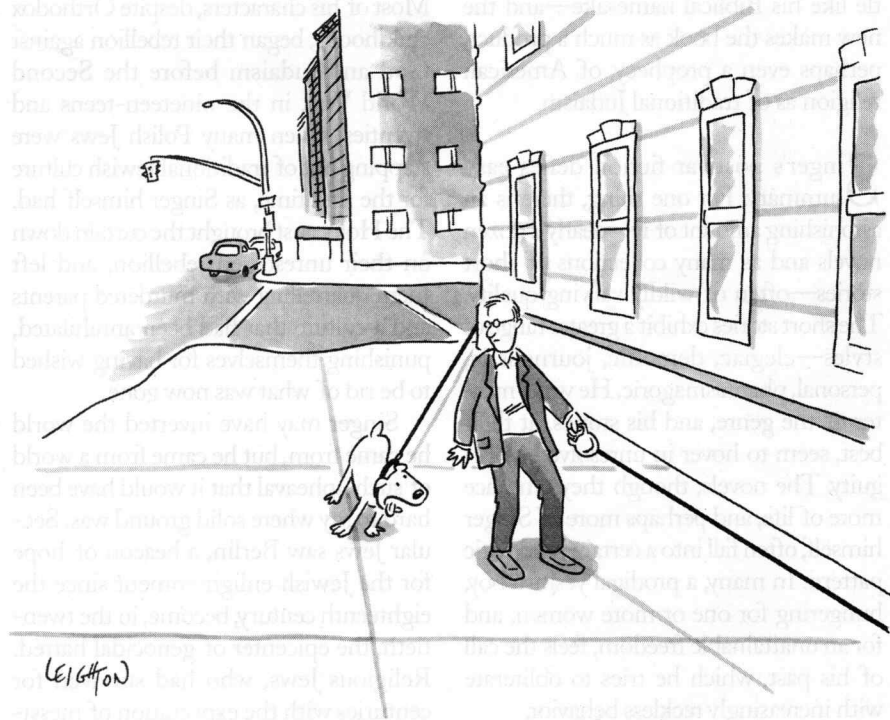
It was clear that what he meant was: Where is your Lord of the Universe now? Where are His miracles? Where is your faith in Torah and prayer?

"Nu, Jekuthiel," the rabbi answered. What he was saying was: Where are your worldly remedies? Where is your trust in the gentiles? What have you accomplished by aping Esau?

After the 1953 translation of "Gim-Apel the Fool," when Singer's stories began appearing regularly in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Playboy*, he developed a system that his longtime publisher Roger Straus called "super-editing" rather than translation. His hastily written stories and serialized novels, published first in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, were polished and shaped into English, often with multiple translators, many of whom knew no Yiddish at all. By eventually treating the work he produced in Yiddish as a rough draft for the English "original," Singer seemed to deny the wounded world that had spawned him.

(There are critics today who argue that Singer should be read as two writers, Yiddish and English, and who would find my discussion of his work, without engaging the Yiddish texts, a betrayal of Singer, even if it is the outgrowth of his own literary behavior.) In 1943, Singer had declared that a real Yiddish writer could not write about America; he would lack the vocabulary to keep pace with a modern metropolis. Not one to be bound by his own declarations, Singer did come to set a great deal of his work in America, though his characters are primarily refugees grappling with the psychological equivalent of his linguistic dilemma. But, in a certain way, Singer fulfilled his pledge. Without formally abandoning Yiddish, he managed to make it the rocket fuel, consumed in the journey, that propelled him into American literary life.

"The Family Moskat," along with "The Manor" and "The Estate," which followed it, are capacious novels that bow to history. One feels Singer, driven by guilt and pity and a doom-filled exhilaration, trying to gather up everything that was lost. Gradually, however, his novels begin to shed their historical freight. They become shorter, more personal, and, though often set in the Jewish past, they are written in a kind of burning eternal present. Built around a single central consciousness, they take



on a subjective, modern, confessional tone that gives them immediacy and an oddly American flavor.

"The Slave," Singer's most beautiful work, tells the story of Jacob, a man sold, after the 1648 Chmielnicki massacres, to Polish peasants for whom he tends cattle in almost total isolation. A Jewish Robinson Crusoe, Jacob has no books, but scratches all he can remember of the six hundred and thirteen Jewish commandments on a rock. When at last he is redeemed and brought back to his rebuilt shtetl, he discovers just how out of tune he has become with any community:

His love for the Jews had been wholehearted when he was distant from them. He had forgotten the shifty eyes and barbed tongues of the petty—their tricks, stratagems and quarrels. True, he had suffered from the primitiveness and savagery of the cowherds, but what could be expected from such a rabble?

What saves Jacob is his love for Wanda, a Polish peasant. Together they represent a new birth of freedom for Jewish consciousness. Theirs is not the communal Judaism of Eastern Europe but something built on an almost Emersonian individualism. Singer found a way to transform misanthropy and self-interest into a road to spirituality. The book, serialized in the *Forward* in 1960-61 and published in English a year later, has a mythic energy that is deeply religious but requires a betrayal of history to achieve. The fusion of the ancient—Jacob is more than a little like his Biblical namesake—and the new makes the book as much a product, perhaps even a prophecy, of American religion as of traditional Judaism.

Singer's postwar fiction defies easy summary. For one thing, there is an astonishing amount of it—nearly a dozen novels and as many collections of short stories—often of wildly varying quality. The short stories exhibit a greater range of styles—elegiac, demonic, journalistic, personal, phantasmagoric. He was a master of the genre, and his stories, at their best, seem to hover in unresolved ambiguity. The novels, though they embrace more of life, and perhaps more of Singer himself, often fall into a certain schematic pattern. In many, a prodigal yeshiva boy, hungering for one or more women, and for an unattainable freedom, feels the call of his past, which he tries to obliterate with increasingly reckless behavior.

The heroes of Singer's novels are unbound Jews, but their destinies are shaped by conventional morality and his characters are often made to suffer and repent; they compensate with self-loathing for what they've achieved in liberation. The hero of "The Magician of Lublin," a Houdiniesque escape artist, recoils in horror after one of his lovers commits suicide; he walls himself into a tiny room with no door, where he will be unable to act on the carnal impulses that have ruled his life and ruined the lives of others. Most of Singer's heroes live with a nameless dread, an expectation that they are deserving of death and that it is only a matter of time before the axe falls.

Such fatalism, however, does not diminish the spitting fury of Hertz Grein, a philandering refugee who, in "Shadows on the Hudson," contemplates the Florida Jews who have snubbed his new lover: "Why should it matter to me if they massacre types like these or burn them in ovens? . . . The tragedy is that they destroyed the good ones and left this trash behind." More than one character in the novel—written in the nineteen-fifties but left untranslated until after Singer's death—compares God, unfavorably, to a Nazi.

Though much of the darkness of a novel like "Shadows on the Hudson," filled with self-hating survivors, stems from the Holocaust, Singer was chronicling a more complicated phenomenon. Most of his characters, despite Orthodox childhoods, began their rebellion against God and Judaism before the Second World War, in the nineteen-teens and twenties, when many Polish Jews were stepping out of traditional Jewish culture for the first time, as Singer himself had. The Holocaust brought the curtain down on their unresolved rebellion, and left them quarrelling with murdered parents and a culture that had been annihilated, punishing themselves for having wished to be rid of what was now gone.

Singer may have inverted the world he came from, but he came from a world of such upheaval that it would have been hard to say where solid ground was. Secular Jews saw Berlin, a beacon of hope for the Jewish enlightenment since the eighteenth century, become, in the twentieth, the epicenter of genocidal hatred. Religious Jews, who had survived for centuries with the expectation of messi-

anic redemption, found abandonment and death. It may have taken Singer's ice-cold eye and taste for paradox to do this world justice and to weather the despair that might otherwise have engulfed anyone attempting it.

America—where Singer's sideshow attractions were taken as the main events of Eastern European Jewish life—became the most paradoxical place of all. His eventual success—the best-sellers, the movie adaptations, the National Book Awards—seemed, even to him, an absurdist joke told at the expense of his pious ancestors and his high-minded peers. He may have felt like Alchonon in "Taibele and Her Demon," the scrawny schoolteacher with the fabulous imagination who pretends he is a demon, romancing the gullible Taibele with fantastic stories of the netherworld. Taibele's lonely need is such that, like Singer's readers, she willingly submits to the ravishments of the imagination.

But if Singer's very success suggested to him a triumph of the dark forces of the universe, demonic reversals of fortune made the irreverent Singer a pious figure as well as an impious one. A man who wore sober suits wherever he went, a vegetarian who claimed he did it for "the health of the chicken," a writer as devoted to literature as his father was devoted to Torah commentary (he even used the same kind of notebook to write in), an icon of Jewish life and culture, however much he quarrelled with it, Singer did become a kind of secular rabbi. In "The Magician of Lublin," Yasha, doing penance, is embarrassed by the parade of seekers who come to his little doorless hut hoping for advice and blessing. Distressed that anyone should seek the blessing of a sinner, Yasha consults a rabbi, who responds, "He to whom Jews come in audience is a rabbi." This does not seem to have been a wholly ironic notion for Singer. America became for him what Yiddish literature was supposed to be—an alternate Jewish reality.

It is remarkable how naturally Singer fits into the American literary tradition. His demon-loving orphans and sin-obsessed rabbis may have little in common with actual Eastern European Jews, but they have a great deal in common with Hawthorne's Puritans, those New England shtetl dwellers who scurry off to their black Sabbaths and dream of witches while preaching piety, and who somehow

BRIEFLY NOTED

gave birth to our republic. Singer's own guilt-ridden journey allowed him to channel a powerful current that is the flip side of Emersonian optimism: the uplift of Biblical promise disturbed by a deep anxiety that God's blessing has been forfeited by human folly or, what is more sinister, rescinded by a deceiving deity.

In that American context, Singer's work seems surprisingly mainstream. The greatest American novel of the nineteenth century, after all, tells the story of a whaling ship—a whole civilization, really—that sinks; everyone dies except one solitary survivor with a Biblical name, who narrates the story. Or consider the novels of Hemingway, steeped in a post-war bleakness so deep that distraction alone holds despair at bay—a condition with which Singer's survivors, a truly lost generation, are intimately acquainted. These lost souls would not be out of place in the novels of Faulkner, where the past is so tormenting that, as one character says, it's not even past.

The fictional hero of his own whom Singer most identified with, or so he told his son, was Herman Broder, of "Enemies, A Love Story"—a man with three wives. He is unable to choose among the pious bride of his youth, the slavishly devoted Polish maid who saved him from the Nazis and has followed him to Brooklyn, and the sexy, suicidal Holocaust survivor. The book's title is intended to refer to Herman and the half-mad survivor, but it has always seemed to me an equally apt description of Singer's relationship to himself, to Judaism, and to God.

"Don't leave your child," the survivor urges Herman, not long before killing herself.

"I will leave everybody" is Herman's chilling reply—the last words he speaks in the book. We do not know Herman's fate; it may be, as one of his wives speculates, that he, too, will commit suicide. Or it may be that he will return, beached like Jonah on the shore of an inescapable Jewishness. Most likely, he will remain in motion. Fleeing responsibility, religion, social entanglements, marriage, morality, the past, himself, the beleaguered refugee lights out for new territory. Herman would like to find the utopia that Singer himself envisioned in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, where one can "attain all possible pleasures" and "still serve God." In the meantime, he has discovered America. ♦

The Outlaw Sea, by William Langewiesche (*North Point*; \$23). For Langewiesche, the ocean is still a frontier, a lawless domain where brute economics always trumps moral considerations. His overview ranges from a story of contemporary piracy off the coast of Indonesia to a portrait of the ship-breaking yards of India, where workers die by the dozen. The centerpiece of his exploration is the sinking, in 1994, of the ferry Estonia in the Baltic Sea, in which more than eight hundred and fifty people died. In harrowing detail, Langewiesche describes the chaos—sons abandoning mothers, criminals robbing fellow-passengers amid the confusion—and then follows the botched investigation that ensued. He makes an eloquent case that the ocean's forgotten corners have become too dangerous to neglect: Al Qaeda has begun to use freighters to smuggle its members across international borders.

Wonderland, by Michael Bamberger (*Atlantic Monthly*; \$23). The juniors and seniors of Pennsbury High—whose fortunes Bamberger traces in this account of a year in the life of a suburban Pennsylvania public school—are a familiar menagerie: jocks, grocery baggers, the odd A.V. Club geek. But their earnestness about the renowned, over-the-top Pennsbury Prom is striking. One student schemes to secure the DeLorean from "Back to the Future" as transportation. It's a fitting detail; although Bamberger means to present a microcosm of contemporary middle-class America, his weakness for quaint traditions results in a book that feels more nostalgic than up to date. It's unclear whether Bamberger found a campus preserved in fifties-era amber or merely ignored aspects of it that would complicate his white-bread vision. Still, he succeeds in evoking the strangely obdurate innocence of a place

where generations come and go but the school rest rooms still smell of "grapefruit disinfectant."

A Death in Brazil, by Peter Robb (*Henry Holt*; \$26). One night twenty years ago in Rio de Janeiro, the author was attacked by a knife-wielding burglar, who then broke down and stayed until dawn, unburdening his soul. Robb became fascinated with Brazil, and here offers a seductive synthesis of history, gastronomy, literature, pop culture, and current events. He is most drawn to the landscape of the northeast. Once home to communities of escaped slaves, the region has, more recently, produced such figures as the disgraced President Fernando Collor de Mello, who was impeached in 1992, and Luis (Lula) Inácio da Silva, a former metalworker who was elected President a decade later. Between the mouthwatering dishes and caipirinhas, Robb explores the extreme contrasts of wealth and poverty, beauty and brutality—tens of thousands of violent deaths each year—in what he considers the "most thrilling country in the Western Hemisphere."

Birth of the Chess Queen, by Marilyn Yalom (*HarperCollins*; \$24.95). Chess was invented in India in the fifth century and was spread by Islamic conquests to Europe, where the piece known as the vizier became the queen—the only female in the all-male club of chess pieces. Yalom makes a credible, though circumstantial, case that this rise reflects the power intermittently accorded to, or seized by, female European monarchs. It was in the late tenth century, during the regency of Empress Adelaide, that the vizier underwent his sex change. Five hundred years later, in Queen Isabella's Spain, the queen was transformed from a timid lady mincing one diagonal step at a time into what one shocked Italian bishop called a "bellicose virago." But there's a sting at the end of this feminist historical fable: the queen's supremacy made the game so much faster and more competitive that it was considered unsuitable for upper-class women.

