



The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

This is Isaac Bashevis Singer's tenth collection of short stories, and it proves that what Enobarbus said of Cleopatra applies to Singer as well: Age cannot wither him, nor custom stale his infinite variety. With the first tale, "The Jew from Babylon," the reader knows that he has entered Singer's peculiar world of Polish Jewry and demonic possession as the title character Kaddish ben Mazliach, travels across a surrealistic landscape for a final encounter with the evil spirits he has battled all his life.

The themes, too, are familiar, posing the eternal, because unanswerable, questions, such as what is truth. Can the Yiddish writer Schikl Gorlitz really be a Peruvian priest ("The Accuser and the Accused")? In "The Bitter Truth," Singer teases the reader out of thought by posing an impossible choice: Is it better to know the truth and suffer or remain ignorant and happy? The question assumes even greater complexity in the story, for it is not altogether clear that what Zeinvel, the main character, regards as the truth actually is the truth. Does chance rule the world, as the storyteller in "A Peephole in the Gate" maintains, or does providence shape man's life?

One does not find easy answers or happy endings in this collection, for Singer writes with a tragic vision. Yet the stories also reveal a strong streak of humor. Thus, the damned souls prepare to lobby for a four-day week of suffering ("Sabbath in Gehenna"), and when an old rabbi marries his adolescent maid, the townspeople expel them on a Friday, sending them off in an oxcart because it moves so slowly that the couple will be forced to spend the Sabbath in the middle of the road.

Methuselah observes that after nine hundred years he is not what he used to be. Singer at age eighty-four shows that he, on the other hand, definitely is.

Sources for Further Study

Booklist. LXXXIV, February 1, 1988, p. 889.

Chicago Tribune. April 10, 1988, XIV, p. 5.

Kirkus Reviews. LVI, March 1, 1988, p. 320.

Los Angeles Times Book Review. May 1, 1988, p. 1.

The New Leader. LXXI, June 27, 1988, p. 20.

The New York Times Book Review. XCIII, April 17, 1988, p. 3.

Publishers Weekly. CCXXXIII, March 4, 1988, p. 98.

Time. CXXXI, May 2, 1988, p. 84.

Copyright Notice

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/death-methuselah-other-stories-salem>