A Day of Pleasure Short Guide

A Day of Pleasure by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Overview

A Day of Pleasure describes the author's experience of a world that was beautiful but fleeting. The Warsaw ghetto, where Singer spent much of his boyhood, and the Polish towns of Radzymin and Bilgoray, where he also lived as a child, no longer exist as Singer knew them. The book is thus both a memoir of and a memorial to a once vital, colorful, and exciting way of life that was irretrievably lost to Nazi depredations during World War II. For Jews born in America and elsewhere since the war, the book affords more than a glimpse into those bygone times that their parents or grandparents once knew intimately. A Day of Pleasure is not only about a series of incidents and adventures of a young boy growing up in what now must appear as strange and exotic surroundings; it is about growing up itself, about the hopes, fears, aspirations, difficulties, disappointments, and encouragements that are all part of that process. It is also about the conflicts caused by a deeply religious upbringing—Singer's father and maternal grandfather were both rabbis—and the appeals that secular intellectualism and art hold for a keen sensibility and intelligence seeking to develop and expand.

In spite of the specific time and place that Singer portrays, many readers can relate to the events and concerns that the book presents. Concrete details about the unfamiliar setting give his stories their realism. Furthermore, young Isaac shares with youthful American literary heroes—ranging from Photograph of Hasidic boys by Roman Vishniac for A Day of Pleasure by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York (1969).

the title character of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn to Holden Caulfield of J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye—a desire to learn as much as possible about the world and to make sense of it. Often that world appears baffling, as Isaac discovers when he squanders a present of money in the title story. But sometimes it can be, or can seem to be, logical and inspiring, as in "The Washwoman." In this story, Isaac comes to the conviction that hard work and honesty count for something and are rewarded, both in this world and the next.

About the Author

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born in Leoncin, Poland, on July 14, 1904. He was the third of four children, three of whom became writers. Hinde Esther, the oldest, is least known. Israel Joshua, Isaac's older brother, wrote The Brothers Askenazi and other novels after immigrating to the United States in 1933, where Isaac followed him two years later. Isaac had been writing essays and stories for Yiddish newspapers in Poland, but for several years after his arrival in New York, he wrote only some reviews for the Yiddish-language newspaper, the Jewish Daily Forward, and other journals. Meanwhile, his first novel, Satan in Goray, had been published in Poland, although he left the country before seeing a copy.

It was not until the early 1940s that he resumed writing fiction, still in Yiddish.

In 1940 he married Alma Haiman. They have no children, although Isaac has a son, Israel, by his Communist mistress, Runya, from the days they lived together in Poland. Starting with The Family Moskat (1950), which had been published serially in Yiddish in the Jewish Daily Forward, Singer's books began appearing in English as well. In 1953 Saul Bellow translated Singer's story "Gimpel the Fool" in the Partisan Review, introducing the writer to a wide audience, and in 1955 Satan in Goray appeared in English translation. From that time on, Singer's work, though usually written first in Yiddish, has regularly been published in English as well. In 1970 A Day of Pleasure won the National Book Award for children's books, and in 1974 his collection of stories, A Crown of Feathers, also won a National Book Award. In 1978 he received his greatest recognition with the world's most famous literary honor, the Nobel Prize for Literature. Singer is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He lives with his wife in New York City and North Miami Beach and teaches a course at the University of Miami, giving occasional lectures in Israel and throughout the world.

Setting

The main setting for these stories is the Jewish section of Warsaw before and during World War I. The Singer family moves from rural Radzymin to a small apartment at No. 10 Krochmalna Street.

Father Singer is a rabbi of the Hasidic sect, which emphasizes mysticism and religious zeal. He earns a meager living from contributions and from small fees for acting as a judge or mediator in divorce cases, legal disputes, and other matters involving religious law. The daughter of a rabbi, Isaac's mother is rational and pragmatic, complementing her husband's devout attitudes and beliefs but not offending them. Isaac, also called Itchele, adores his older brother, Israel Joshua, who is fast becoming an "enlightened" Jew, rejecting the family's strict orthodoxy and aspiring to become a writer. Moshe, Isaac's younger brother, and Hinde Esther, his sister, have only small parts to play among the dramas enacted by Isaac and many of his energetic and curious schoolfellows and friends.

Social Sensitivity

Life in the Warsaw ghetto of the early twentieth century could be rough, even brutal, and Singer does not gloss over the conditions he endured as a child. He graphically describes the lack of running water and bathroom facilities, the filth and vermin, the abject poverty and disease in stories such as "The Shot at Sarajevo" and "Hunger." Singer also depicts the cruelties human beings inflict upon one another, but they do not receive undue attention. Singer remembers that despite deplorable circumstances individual acts of kindness and charity, even from those least able to afford them, were not unusual. When the Singers find themselves in severe straits, a helping hand frequently appears to save them from ruin and despair. Finally forced to move from starving Warsaw to rural Bilgoray during World War I, Isaac recalls the shoemaker's hovel where he went to get his shoes repaired in preparation for the journey. He could scarcely believe the cramped, unhealthy quarters—a single room for the entire family—in which the cobbler worked and lived. Although even today Singer blames squalor and poverty upon the ills of society and, as a boy, felt sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries, he also remembers feeling sorry for the deposed tsar, who was forced to chop wood and was later murdered with his family.

In "A Day of Pleasure," Isaac encounters scurrilous individuals who cheat him of his dwindling kopeks, but he meets honest and worthy people too, such as the droshky driver who does not ask for his money in advance, takes him to the correct destination, and shows real concern for the little boy. Later, in "I Become a Collector," Isaac discovers other aspects of worldly behavior usually hidden from boys attending cheder (religious school). He offers to collect contributions for his father after a series of dishonest professional collectors rob Rabbi Singer of most of the money due him. While many of the contributors Isaac meets are gracious and forthcoming, his quest also takes him to sweatshops and gambling dens, and he meets diseased and crippled human beings, even a corpse. Thoroughly frightened and revolted by his experience, he resolves never again to do anything for money that goes against the grain, a resolution he says he has kept to this day. His father, anticipating all this and preferring his son to spend his time studying, relieves him of this responsibility. Rabbi Singer apologizes and decides to do without the income rather than subjecting his family to the indignities of collecting or trusting in the honesty of professional collectors.

Literary Qualities

The stories collected in A Day of Pleasure are more than autobiographical sketches or memoirs. They reveal the vivid imagination and intellectual curiosity, the conflicts and dilemmas of a sensitive boy brought up under trying circumstances in an environment at once fertile and threatening. Isaac's love of adventure moves him to explore the city and the countryside around Warsaw in ways that, for a person of his age and background, are both dangerous and daring. But in every instance, the author shows the boy trying to learn from his experiences, to relate them to important ethical, religious, or ethnic issues.

Singer offers acute perceptions, such as Isaac's grasp of worldly vanities in "The Satin Coat," his appreciation of the exceptional virtues of Reb Asher the Dairyman, and his understanding of the unfortunate situation of Reb Meir the Eunuch.

Singer originally wrote his stories in Yiddish, the language of East European Jews, but the English translations have much of the conciseness, color, and wit of the originals. One not only sees but feels what it was like to live on Krochmalna Street in those days. The stories never bog down in unrelieved pathos or solemnity, for Singer invariably introduces humor or some alternative perspective. For example, an episode of wry humor concludes "Hunger,"a story otherwise characterized by grim descriptions of freezing and starving people—including the Singer family— during the German occupation of Warsaw in World War I. Isaac's mother gets a cat to help rid their apartment of the mice that threaten to overrun everyone and everything, but the cat appears utterly indifferent and ignores the mice.

Rabbi Singer cares for the cat and speculates that she might be the reincarnation of a saint: "The earth was full of transmigrant souls sent back to correct a single transgression." This being the case, he treats the cat respectfully, and she behaves "with an air of majesty." How could she be expected to go after mice?

Singer's knowledge of the Bible and biblical commentary is extensive, and he draws adept analogies to illuminate a situation, such as his reference to Joseph and his brothers in "The Strong Ones." Although devoted to Judaism, Singer is no chauvinist: he shows Jews in both good and bad light. While sensitive to the kinds of prejudice and hatred that culminated in the Holocaust, he provides a balanced view of Gentiles and of Gentile-Jewish relations. The nonJewish title character in "The Washwoman," for example, is one of the most compelling and inspiring portraits Singer has drawn.

Themes and Characters

The most important character in these stories is of course Isaac, and his experiences as a young boy provide the main theme. But other characters play significant roles as well, including the rest of the Singer family, Isaac's friends, and the people he meets. One of Isaac's best friends is Boruch-Dovid, who takes him on an adventure into the outlying countryside around Warsaw to see the "wild cows." The day fills Isaac with delight, mostly from the wonderful sights of nature denied city dwellers. In addition, Isaac learns that the wild cows exist only as figments of Boruch-Dovid's imagination, which Isaac comes to appreciate. In "The Strong Ones," Isaac has a temporary falling out with his friend Mendel for reasons he at first does not understand, but eventually the two make up. "The Mysteries of the Cabala" demonstrates Isaac and Mendel's shared passion for inventing stories.

Throughout the book, Isaac develops and grows. His father recognizes this at one point and does something he has never done before: he bends down and kisses his son on the forehead.

Many of the stories focus directly or indirectly on the conflict between the religious and the secular ways of life.

Within the Singer household, the eldest son, Israel Joshua, becomes a renegade and finally leaves home. Isaac, too, feels the tug of non-Hasidic ideas and attitudes, as he shows in "The New Winds."

But everywhere there remains the constant element of interest in, if not passionate devotion to, real human beings in all their human qualities. The characters Singer offers may not be quite as colorful as Sholom Aleichem's characters in the Tevye stories, which were made into the popular musical comedy Fiddler on the Roof, but they have the depth and vividness of characters created by the greatest writers of fiction, such as Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevski, and their struggles and predicaments are always convincingly real.

Topics for Discussion

1. What kind of boy is Isaac? Does he fit the description of young Isaac in the introductory story, "Who I Am"? What are his main character traits?

2. Isaac's father, Rabbi Singer, does more than officiate at religious ceremonies. What are some of his other functions? Why does the woman come to him, for example, in "Why the Geese Shrieked"? What is a rabbinical court?

How is it different from other courts?

3. What attraction does the countryside have for young Isaac? Why does he love nature so much?

4. What is the Cabala? Why are young boys such as Isaac not allowed to study it? When Isaac brags to his friends that he studies it, what aspect of his character is revealed?

5. The customs and rites of Hasidic Jews may seem strange and exotic. Does Singer apologize for them, explain them, or simply present them as part of his stories? What did you learn about them?

6. Many photographs are interspersed throughout the book. Do they "illustrate" the stories? If not, why are they there?

7. Singer began writing, he tells us, even before he knew the alphabet, and he and his friend Shosha loved to tell each other stories. What kind of imagination does Isaac have as a child? Is it typical of most children? Does it prefigure the writer Singer was to become?

8. What other families appear in A Day of Pleasure? How do they compare or contrast with the Singer family?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How important is the element of fantasy in Singer's stories? Does it detract from or enhance the realism they also contain?

2. Compare the mainly autobiographical stories in A Day of Pleasure with the more forthrightly fictional tales in books such as Gimpel the Fool or Short Friday.

What aspects of Singer's imagination are common to all of them? How can you tell they were all written by the same author?

3. The Talmud and the Mishna contain important supplements to and commentaries on the Old Testament. Why does Singer often refer to them? Can you find out anything more about them?

4. Many Americans and Europeans are familiar with Yiddish literature through the musical comedy Fiddler on the Roof, which was adapted from Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stories. Compare the characters and incidents in A Day of Pleasure with those in either Aleichem's stories or the musical comedy. Are there important similarities or differences?

What are they?

5. Singer shows the diversity of the Jewish people. Hasidic Jews, such as Isaac's father, represent only a minority sect. What other sects are there, and how are they different? Does Singer give any examples of the conflicts among them?

6. Chaim Potok is an American-born rabbi who is also a novelist. His first novel. The Chosen, was made into a film recently. Do the problems and concerns the boys experience in Potok's work resemble those of young Isaac and his friends? How are they different?

7. Spinoza was an important Jewish philosopher who was excommunicated as a heretic. What did the rabbis find objectionable in his views? What ideas appeal to Isaac in "The New Winds"? Can you explain their appeal to him or to others?

For Further Reference

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Most of the stories in A Day of Pleasure are taken from the autobiographical memoir In My Father's Court (1966), to which Singer has added five new stories, including the introductory piece, "Who I Am." Singer's other autobiographical books are A Little Boy in Search of God: Mysticism in a Personal Light (1976), A Young Man in Search of Love (1978), and Lost in America (1981). These have been collected, but without their accompanying illustrations, in Love and Exile: The Early Years (1984), which contains a new introduction, "The Beginning." Related fiction includes the novel Shosha (1978), which tells the full story of Isaac's boyhood girlfriend, and "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," which was adapted to the stage in 1974 and to film in 1983.

The movie version featured Barbra Streisand in the leading role. Several other stories by Singer have been dramatized, and PBS has aired a film supported by the National Endowment for the Arts of his return visit to the Brooklyn boarding house in which he lived when he first came to the United States. Several of his stories and novels in Poland have been filmed, such as The Magician of Lublin (published in 1960; filmed in 1979), in which Alan Arkin stars as the irreligious and adulterous magician who becomes a saint after his wife commits suicide on his account.

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