The King of the Fields Short Guide

The King of the Fields by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Contents

Characters

The short, twelve-chapter novel follows the fortunes of a small tribal group in rural Poland, the Lesniks. At the outset, Krol Rudy (the Red King), a Pole, controls the Lesnik camp. The Lesnik leader, Cybula, has fled with others into the mountains. Krol Rudy takes Laska, Cybula's surviving daughter, as his wife, and he sets the Lesniks to clearing fields for the planting of grain. Krol Rudy also sends Nosek, a trusted associate, to persuade Cybula and other Lesniks to return to the lowland camp and live in peace under his rule.

Krol Rudy brings about several forms of cultural conflict. The Lesniks had been nomadic, forest-dwelling hunters and food gatherers. They have lost many men in battle with the Poles; many of their women have been raped and some are carrying children of the raiders; and they are unlikely to survive a hard winter in the mountains.

Thus, they grudgingly and suspiciously accept Krol Rudy's plan to make the camp a farming site. From grain they can make bread enough for all to eat.

From grain, they can also brew beer and vodka, and Krol Rudy himself succombs to alcoholism. His motions of peace, reconciliation and a more stable agricultural life only partially succeed.

Cybula, subordinate to Krol Rudy, remains responsible for the Lesniks in the camp — their housing needs, their legal disputes, and other social needs.

As father-in-law to the krol, he retains some political security, yet he is despised by Krol Rudy's Polish kniezes or knights. He serves as a focal character for the socio-political clashes in the Gentile society since he moves from krol to fugitive to a subordinate noble in a primitive ruling class, and then back to the position of krol when Krol Rudy grows incompetent. He returns to the role of fugitive when another Polish raider, Yodla, moves into the camp with more horsemen than the Cybula's warriors can resist.

Cybula acts to focus the religious conflicts in the novel. While his paramour, Kora, believes in spirits and demons, Cybula discounts the traditional animism of the Lesniks, nor does he embrace any of the parallel gods or spirits of the Poles. The only supreme power Cybula acknowledges is Shmiercz, the god of death. All else he dismisses as superstition.

From the distant town of Miasto, Cybula and Nosek, a trusted Polish noble, bring Krol Rudy various tools and goods, as well as the Tatar concubine, Kosoka, and the Jewish shoemaker, Ben Dosa. With the late introduction of Ben Dosa into the narrative, Singer expands the cultural and religious conflicts of the novel. The Lesniks benefit from well-made shoes and clothing, yet Ben Dosa also speaks constantly of his God and the laws of his God. Befriending and trying to understand Ben Dosa, Cybula hears of a single, loving God who is in everything from stones and leaves to the human heart.

The strict mores and customs Ben Dosa observes contrast starkly with Cybula's willingness to rape on impulse, or to cohabit with both his young wife and her mother. Cybula supports Ben Dosa's instruction of children and adults in the Hebrew alphabet and Torah, the Five Books of Moses, even studying himself. He sees the devout Jew as a highly committed person, doing much good for the camp, but still as a stranger with a restrictive God. When Polish missionary bishop Mieczyslaw arrives, Cybula recognizes the similar views the Abrahamic faiths advance concerning the nature of God, but is dismayed by the conflicts over the role of Jesus Christ, and the bishop's emphasis on the view of the Jews as "Christ killers" — long an excuse for prejudice and violence against Jews in European history.

The religious issues, Cybula eventually decides, are "all lies." He publicly breaks up Kora's planned sacrifice of Kosoka to the goddess Baba Yaga, but succeeds only after he appeals to the camp's fear of chaos if he gives up leadership. His appeals to the religious principles of Ben Dosa and Bishop Mieczyslaw do not carry as much influence with the pagan Lesniks and Poles.

When Cybula yields to Krol Yodla and his raiders, his own belief in the god of death draws him to apparent suicide.

While the reader ponders the benefits and liabilities of Judaism and Christianity through Cybula's perspective, Cybula remains a skeptical, almost agnostic pagan. It is Kora, Cybula's mother-in-law and lover who epitomizes pagan beliefs. Kora was the wife of Kostek, Cybula's best friend before Krol Rudy's attack. During the span of the novel, the widowed Kora shows insuppressible lust for Cybula, even though her daughter, Yagoda, is Cybula's wife. In her passion for Cybula, she even names him her god. When a Polish knight attacks Cybula one night, she not only kills the Pole in revenge, but also organizes a women's revolt that returns Cybula to power since Krol Rudy has lost effective control of the camp.

Cybula's release of the captive Kosoka and public shaming of Kora destroys their relationship for some time.

Yet, after Cybula yields control of the camp to Yodla and flees with Yagoda, Kora cannot live without him. She catches up with them in the mountains and asks him to kill her. She admits to having lain with practically every available male in the camp — Lesnik or Pole. Her words and deeds exemplify no constructive hope in this life or the next, only unprincipled and sometimes murderous lust. Cybula accepts the satisfactions of sex and power that Kora can give, but he disdains her gods and spirits as meaningless figments of the imagination.

Ben Dosa, the shoemaker, tailor and furrier, carries the burden of representing his God and Torah to illiterate, savage Gentiles who live in a warring mixture of pagan cultures. He does not aim to convert them all to Judaism, but in teaching them to read and write he conveys what he can of God's laws.

The ridicule of Ben Dosa by the pagan members of the camp and his opposition from the Christian bishop parallel the experiences of Jews in the Gentile world for centuries.

Ben Dosa teaches Kosoka his traditions of godliness, yet resists her wish for conversion. Thus he demonstrates the attraction Jewish traditions may hold for others, along with the reluctance of the more orthodox believers to accept outsiders. Ben Dosa's fate — settling in a supportive community and marrying a converted Kosoka — shows that even the very devout cannot avoid some influences of the wider world. It also gives the devout wanderer a home, even though the home is not Ben Dosa's first home, Babylon, nor is it a Zionist's ideal home, Jerusalem.

Social Concerns/Themes

A devout Jew wandering among Gentile cultures in an unclean world; superstitious, unsophisticated village folk who fear demons and spirits; characters struggling to survive clashes in political, religious and economic systems — none of these situations is new in the fictional world of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Nor is Singer's preference for the role of storyteller rather than that of a thinker with a clearly fixed world view. In The King of the Fields Singer recounts a parable of a devout Jew at the mercy of a tumultuous and often vicious Gentile world.

While some might view the novel as a confirmation that Singer's work is basically pessimistic about human life and society, others see in it a fundamentally optimistic tale because the isolated Jew, Ben Dosa, eventually settles in a community of devout Jews, while the Gentile characters perpetuate a cycle of wanton, destructive domination.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

In The King of the Fields, Singer composes a vague blend of references to time, melding the cultural traits of hunters, farmers, and city-dwellers into an almost timeless antiquity. His pagan male characters tend to seize what they want whenever they want. The female pagan characters generally serve the impulses or interests of the male.

Nosek, the intellectual, worldly-wise Pole, displays political opportunism, but prefers a relationship with a young man to the exploitation of the available women.

In the sole Jewish character, Singer cannot fully develop the full range of viewpoints he knew in his early life among Hasidic Jews in Poland, but the characteristic impulse to separateness from Gentile society, paralleling an absolute devotion to God and Torah, is evident.

While the fate of the Jewish character is Singer's typical interest, the time and description given to the Gentiles in The King of the Fields is greater than that given to Ben Dosa. Viewing the novel as a parable of the fate of the Jew in Western society allows it to work effectively as a parallel both to life in earlier centuries and to conditions in Eastern Europe during the Nazi era.

The rapacity of the novel's Lesnik and Polish societies parallels the visciousness of Nazism, which attempted to revive ancient Teutonic paganism in Germany, encouraged free love for Aryan soldiers of the Third Reich, and institutionalized anti-Semitism. Assuredly, Germany itself is not the literal focus of Singer's novel; Poland is. But in most of Europe during the World War II era, anti-Semitic attitudes and policies grew fatally strong, despite the ideals of conventional Judaism and Christianity.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994