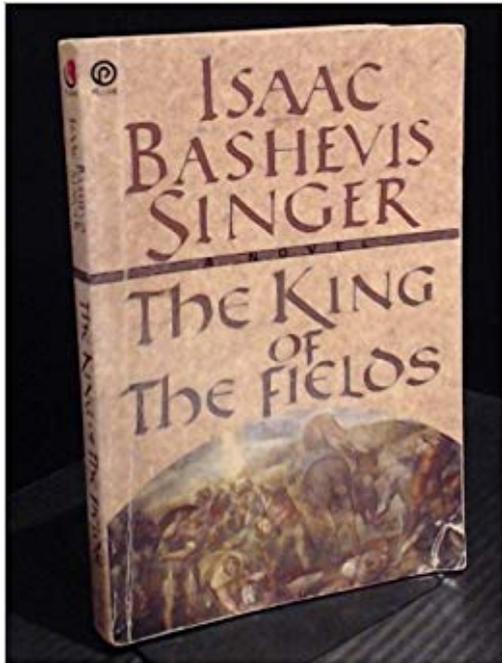


The King of the Fields *by* Isaac Bashevis Singer



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ISBN: 0452263123

ISBN13: 978-0452263123

Author: Isaac Bashevis Singer

Book title: The King of the Fields

Pages: 256

Publisher: Plume (November 30, 1989)

Language: English

Category: Contemporary

Size PDF version: 1798 kb

Size ePUB version: 1524 kb

Size FB2 version: 1789 kb

Other formats: txt rtf azw lrf

In an age of darkness, Poland lives under the iron fist of Krol Rudy until their leader, Cybula, returns with the knowledge of an outside, civilized world and his leadership heralds tremendous changes and a new era



Reviews of the *The King of the Fields* *by* Isaac Bashevis Singer

Braendo

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Ynap

The King of the Fields is not the usual kind of tale we would expect from the 1978 Nobel Prize

winning author for literature Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991). This book, published in 1988, is one of the last books that he wrote. Generally, the protagonist of his books is a Jew living in recent times. This novel depicts life in a pre-historic period and the main character is a heathen, Cybula, who did not believe in the gods but was an unsophisticated pantheist.

The people in the novel are not only unsophisticated and uneducated, they are depicted as being far from bright. Most believed in the powers of demons and gods who aided or harmed them. Their world was filled with violence, theft, murders, rape, and sexual perversion. Cybula, for example, slept with a mother and daughter and had sex with both while both lay next to him.

Cybula was a leader of a tribe of hunters who were beaten in battle by warriors who lived off of foods grown from the ground.

There is a Jew in the story. A man who was captured and sold as a slave. Cybula brings him to his land where he piously teaches the people about Judaism; anachronistically not the Judaism of the prehistoric period of the novel, but of the much later talmudic period. What he teaches is impractical, such as teaching them how to read and write, but not the language of the time, but Hebrew, written from right to left rather than left to right as was written during Cybula's lifetime. It is likely that Singer was using this minor character to mock Rabbinic Judaism.

The tale can, and I believe should, be read as a parable showing the inhumanity in modern times.

Fararala

"The King of the Fields" is a little unusual for Singer. It is one of the last novels he wrote and maybe he decided to abandon his usual framework and try something different. The central character is not a Jew but is a heathen, Cybula. Nominally the period is some time around the century or so after Christ's death which I think is much earlier period than any other of his novels ("The slave" is 17th century - I can't remember reading anything earlier). In the novel he imagines a primitive Polish tribe of hunters who are conquered by another group who force upon them a more agricultural way of life. This kind of dates it much further in the past. In fact it's best to relate to the novel as a fable, a musing on various changes in human society and not to treat the events or contexts too literally..

After the hunter group are conquered their leader Cybula flees to the mountains while the leader of the conquering group, Krol Rudy, marries Cybula's daughter. Cybula eventually returns to his village and joins forces with Krol Rudy. Cybula is sent with another member of Krol Rudy's group, Nosek to a nearby town - this is the first time he has seen any community outside his own. They return from the town with a Jew and a slave girl. When they get back to the village Krol Rudy is gone mad and no longer functions as a leader. Cybula, who for most of the book is carrying on a fairly open sexual relationship with his best friend's widow and her daughter (both of whom approve of this) eventually becomes the leader of this primitive community. The Jew becomes the village teacher and all seems well but of course it doesn't last. There are plenty of developments in the story not to mention rape, incest, human sacrifice, matricide and lynchings. All this makes the novel sound a bit heavier and depressing than it is. The story flows, there is much black humor and the characters are interesting and as with most Singer books once you start it you can't put it down till you finish it. So an interesting and entertaining novel worth your time and, as with everything else I have read by this author, recommended.

Fomand

Many years ago, when I was a teenager, I read Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*. Today, I barely remember the plot or the characters. What I do recall is the sense of beauty and strength in the writing, how it evoked strong feelings and emotions. I have meant to go back and re-read that book. Now after reading *The King of the Fields*, I definitely will.

In this novel, a story about a small tribe in pre-industrial Poland, the Lesniks, and their leader

Cybula, Singer manages to evoke a good number of universal human experiences, in particular disturbing thoughts. For example, Cybula deals with his desire to die rather than confront the problems of daily life, as well as his discomfort with seeing his own daughter nude. He seeks truth but is constantly confused about what is true or not. His tribe believes in many gods, but this belief is tested when it encounters a Jew and later a Christian bishop. Who should he believe? As far as he can tell, his own gods did not protect him or his tribe from misfortune and the new gods seems to come with their own burden of contradiction, rules and cruelty. This basic questioning of religious faith - to believe or not, of so what to believe, and if so, how to deal with the contradictions and inconsistencies? - is something that most people confront and deal with at some point. Cybula's default is his god of death, who seems to be the final arbiter who gives peace when someone dies.

The religious aspect is but one of many different perspectives upon which the novel touches. There are also the plusses and minuses of industrialization, including the challenges and meaning of giving up a former way of life. There is also a lot of substance to be found on the meaning of relationships between men and women. Singer presents this in a very crude and raw form, as they probably were in those pre-modern times, with women being completely subservient to man. At the same time, Singer shows how this power relationship can be easily inverted given the right circumstances.

This is a powerful novel that will resonate with the reader for a long time. Read it and enjoy the work of this Nobel laureate who has been called a master story teller.

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