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The King of the Fields

By Isaac Bashevis Singer

Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 244 pages

"Whenever a writer tries to be more than a storyteller," Isaac Bashevis Singer insists, "he becomes less." In *King of the Fields*, written in Yiddish and translated by the author, Singer takes his own advice and retreats from his recent tendency toward private, acidic stories to return to fable, his greatest strength. From this bleak yet absorbing novel's first line, "The story begins--when?" we sense the once-upon-a-time voice of the adult storyteller framing his tale, and we surrender to its spell.

Set in a primitive Polish past that feels oddly present, the tale focuses on Cybula, chief of a tribe of forest dwellers called Lesniks whose neolithic hunting culture is overrun by the more powerful, iron-weaponed "woyaks" who force the Lesniks to flee to the mountains. The woyaks, known also as "Poles" because in their language "pola" means field, establish a planting society. Cybula, living in the mountains with his wife Yagoda and her mother Kora, who shares their bed, convinces the Lesniks to seek peaceful coexistence with the woyaks and receives a position of secondary authority in the newly melded community.

Cybula is sent to the "civilized" metropolis of Miasto from which he brings back a Babylonian Jew named Ben Dosa and a Tartar slave woman, Kosoka. The fierce and lustful Kora leads a group of Lesnik women in assassinating the woyak leaders and setting Cybula up as the new chief, called the "krol." Ben Dosa tries to teach literacy and monotheism to Cybula's crude tribe, but they prefer to retain their practice of human blood sacrifice. Although Cybula listens attentively to Ben Dosa, only Kosoka, more and more deeply in love with the Jewish adviser, grows sympathetic to his religion. Caught in a whirlwind of conflicting directions by their savage past, the transition to planting, the civilizing Jew and a visiting Christian bishop, the prospects for Cybula's and the Lesniks' survival grow increasingly dim.

Dark and cheerless, the novel presents a powerful vision that touches chords seldom stirred in Singer's recent story collection, *The Death of Methuselah*. In the shape of an historical novel we find a timeless archetypal fable of man's struggle to find some way to live in a cruel and changing world. Singer has a paradoxical gift for seeming at his most realistic when he writes in the language of myth, and we sense beneath his gloomy, simple story a solid foundation of conviction and ideas.

One central idea is that man has the terrible freedom to choose between good and evil, that despite the strength of angelic and satanic forces pulling from without, each individual must fight this battle from within, and that no matter how fearful the weight of responsibility carried in his choice, having the choice is, in Ben Dosa's words, a divine gift.

The heart of this novel, then, is conflict, and this reflects the massive contradictions that have always impelled Singer. He has been called by his biographer, Paul Kresh, an atheist who believes in God, a religionist who resents the dogmas of religion, a mystic who respects science, a philosopher with strong reservations about philosophy. In *King of the Fields* Singer explores a tangle of discordant approaches to how to live. Like the Lesnik krol Cybula, who comes to realize his insufficiency to meet life's fundamental problems, Singer constantly raises the question of what the mystery of life means. That neither Cybula nor Singer finds a satisfactory answer never diminishes the nobility of the question.

Cybula struggles to find a faith to live by but finds only a faith to die by. Like Singer's Yasha, he walks a tightrope as he tries to make a better world amid rape, slaughter, famine and deceit and finds himself facing the dilemma Kent presents to Lear's Fool: that in a world of moral depravity our only redeeming choice lies in becoming a fool rather than knave. Cybula is no knave and, unlike Gimpel, cannot be a fool.

He sees the inner peace Judaism provides Ben Dosa, but for himself Cybula can accept no such answers. Judaism provides Singer's roots but not his theology, and the God of Ben Dosa appeals no more to Cybula than do the

Lesniks' witch-goddess Baba Yaga, the woyaks' fertility god Chlebowdawca, or the bishop's Jesus. Ultimately, the only god Cybula can trust allegiance to is Shmiercz, the god of death, and he follows him more doggedly the closer the book nears its resolution. By the final pages, following the god of death has become to Cybula a passion.

Singer has often twinned the passion of searching for God with the passion his men feel for women, the two drives being somehow of the same substance. While women in this novel can be petty, brutal and perverse, they still fare better than in his recent stories where Singer seems to view womankind with almost unrelieved disgust. Yagoda remains loyal to Cybula and follows him even into death. Kora, promiscuous and bloodthirsty, still earns admiration for her competence and devotion to Cybula. Most constant and estimable of all is Kosoka, the slave reared in a region where witchcraft was practised, who loves Ben Dosa and begs to follow him as Ruth did Naomi--"thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God"--and wins both his acceptance and through his love a kind of Miltonic salvation: "He for God only, she for God in him."

Singer magnifies his spiritual themes by setting them against a background of anthropological evolution, the hunting culture giving way to the planters, the savage visiting civilization. But human nature does not advance. The cheating and greed Cybula sees in the civilized city merely convince him he was more pure living in the mountains. His savage roots never lose hold. When Kosoka asks Ben Dosa to make her a blood sacrifice to God, the Jew admonishes her to "be honest and do good," but when Kora begs Cybula to do the same to her, as he is her god, the krol takes his knife into his trembling hand and draws blood from her breast.

The novel's atmosphere, however, is so clouded and its irony so multi-layered, that we judge such actions only at our peril. While Ben Dosa, the man of God, survives with his woman by his side, and Cybula, the man with no god but death, plunges with his woman to a violent end, we cannot even then be certain who is meant to seem better off. Since almost four decades ago when we read in Singer's "The Family Moskat" that "Death is the Messiah. That's the real truth," there has often been in his work a thanatotic longing for the absolute release from tension and suffering found in death. It recurs frequently here as Cybula hears a voice within him cry out, "Death, the redeemer of all futile hopes, you are my true god! I will serve you until my last breath."

Behind Cybula's cry is the voice of the great pessimistic writer of our times, still after half a century writing of an Old World people in a dying language. "You don't feel happy about writing in a language when you know it dies from day to day," Singer once lamented. A dying language fits Singer's cast of mind, this writer who asserts, "Nothing will save us. We will make a lot of progress, but we will keep on suffering, and there will never be an end to it. We will always invent new sources of pain. . . . Being a pessimist to me means being a realist."

Bleak? Without question. Hopeless? Not as long as this Nobel laureate chooses to probe the meaning of existence with the power of conviction he does here. After Cybula is scraped from the rocks, a new Singer hero will try once more to find a way to live in this grim human landscape of cosmic chaos. As *King of the Fields* closes we somehow hear echoes of the ending to Singer's provocatively titled story "Runners to Nowhere": "Zinvel Markus flicked the ashes of his cigarette into a cup of cold coffee. He said, 'This is what human beings are, this is their history, and I am afraid this is also their future. Meanwhile, let's have another cup of coffee.' "