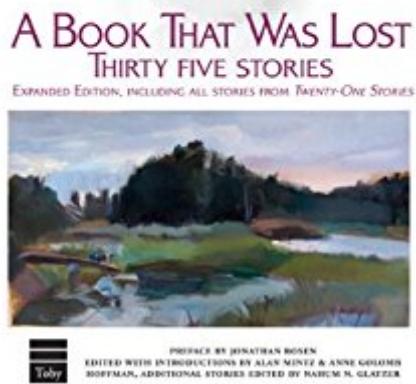


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A Book That Was Lost

S.Y. Agnon



Synopsis

This broad selection of Agnon's fiction introduces the full sweep of the writer's panoramic vision as chronicler of the lost world of Eastern European Jewry and the emerging society of modern Israel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This collection of stories by SY Agnon is interspersed with essays that illuminate how the stories are framed by his life. Born in Buzcaz in Galicia (the section of Poland ruled by Austria), Agnon made aliyah as a young man and settled in Tel Aviv. He returned to Germany to study European literature and then returned to Israel and spent the rest of his life in Jerusalem. The stories take place in Europe and Israel. A few are somewhat autobiographical, but most are part dream and part legend. The influence of Kafka is evident, as is that of Talmudic midrash, but these stories are different from anything else. Agnon's references are based in Jewish culture and history -- not that the history is accurate -- but these are not about real history; they are about history as transformed by the imagination, and Agnon's imagination is infinite. However, I hated the electronic form of the book and ended up buying a hard copy. The hypertexting features of the Kindle are limited, but the

hypertexting in this book is useless. Stories are listed by translators, rather than by title, which makes it difficult to find anything without paging through the book. In the print book there is a table of contents by title, so I don't know why the Kindle version is so clumsy.

How does one describe the Nobel Prize winner for literature? His work is great. I remember when I was studying the works of Agnon in graduate school that I was told that in Israel, while he was alive, he was so respected that the Israeli government placed a sign in the street where he lived that said: Please be quiet. Agnon is working. I remember also the professor saying that many of his stories have an almost mystical underpinning. It is like a man walking across a bridge as people normally do, and slowly he begins to rise and float in the air the rest of the way. This book contains 25 superb stories. In the first, "Agunot," for example, he tells about the impact of song upon a person. It is a love story that only Agnon could write. In "A Book that was Lost," he tells about a man who wrote a beautiful commentary on a commentary on the Talmud who mistakenly thought that what he wrote was already said by another man. So, although he spent 12 years on his book he did not publish it. Years later, it was discovered. Agnon tells what happened next. In "The Sign," he tells about the impact upon a man who now lives in Israel, who hears on the eve of a happy Jewish holiday that the Nazis had just destroyed his hometown in Europe and killed the people he knew. He is visited at the end of the tale by a famous poet, a man whose poetry he read every year on this holiday, who has been dead for centuries. This is when the story leaves the bridge and soars. True, the book is filled with references to Judaism and Jewish customs, but it can be enjoyed by everyone. That's why he won the prize.

I have read the English translation, and love it. Agnon's mystical surrealism is worthy of Garcia-Marquez. While being versed in Jewish traditions can be helpful, it is not necessary for appreciating this brilliant writer.

Agnon is an intriguing writer. The reader would have to know things about Judaism, but there is a glossary that is helpful. It is not really an easy read although it is easy on a superficial level, but there are many levels more.

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