

A Wish for the Impossible

Short Friday, by Isaac Bashevis Singer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 243 pp. \$4.95), contains short stories concerned with "the mystery of God's ways and the ordeal of man's life." Jonathan Baumbach, who teaches English at New York University, is author of a forthcoming study of the contemporary American novel, "The Landscape of Nightmare."

By JONATHAN BAUMBACH

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER is one of the last of the Yiddish storytellers, a traditional writer and moralist whose stories (sixteen in the present collection) seem to come out of some distant miraculous past, untouched by the accomplishments and horrors of our world and time. To say that Singer writes as if Joyce and James and Proust never existed is not to disparage his achievement, merely to acknowledge the curiosity of it. The supernatural is not a metaphor for Singer; our fantasy is his reality. These stories—fantastic, religious, nightmarish, lyrical, homiletic, comic, romantic, wise—, set mostly in some timeless medieval Poland, have at their best (their simplest) the purity of folk tales. Their innocence (or is it merely the guile of innocence?) is their art.

Singer is a master at telling a story. And his stories, for all their similarity of occasion and concern, are impressively various, though one is forced to add that they are not all equally successful. "Alone," the best realized of Singer's modern stories, has the movement and impact of an evil dream. As the hero tells us at the beginning of this Kafkaesque parable, "Many times in the past I have wished the impossible to happen—and then it happened." And so it does again. The narrator is granted his wishes, but so perversely as to make him aware of the nightmare of his deepest promptings.

Singer's world is haunted for good as well as ill. In "Esther Kreindel the Second" a good woman returns from death, her spirit inhabiting the body of a young girl, as a consequence of her husband's profound grief at her loss. The aggrieved hero of "The Fast," Itche Nokhum, lacerates himself as a penance because his wife has left him, and succeeds (in an uncannily touching dénouement) in effecting her return through the power and commitment of his love.

As one might expect from a religious moralist, Singer is at his strongest in dealing with the proliferations of evil. "Blood," the masterpiece of this collection, is a horror story about a woman, Risha, who derives sexual pleasure from the slaughter of animals, the passions for blood and for flesh merging in the obscenity of her lust. Her desire excited by the act of killing, Risha commits adultery with the slaughterer. The two form an unholy alliance. Her sins proliferate ("one transgression begets another") until she undergoes a metamorphosis, which in effect defines the condition of her spirit, and turns into a werewolf. Risha's obsessiveness is brilliantly handled by Singer; and, despite her moral deformities, he commands compassion for her, making us aware that her darkness is not separable from our own.

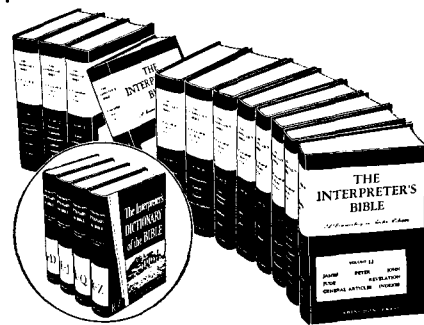
The most touching of these stories, "Taibele and Her Demon," is a comic love story about a teacher's helper, an impoverished clown, who pretends to be a demon in order to make love to a woman whose husband has deserted her. Eventually, despite the enforced terms of the relationship, Taibele falls in love with the "demon." ("Evil spirit though he was, he had treated her kindly.") When it becomes clear to Taibele that her demon is ill and dying, she prays to God for his life. "There are so many devils, let there be one more. . . ."

That Singer can be very bad on occasion ("Jachid and Jechidah," for example, is an extraordinary clinker) is an indication—a valuable one, I think—of the stature of his gifts. He is a writer of surprising resources of vision, who is willing to extend himself beyond the charted impulses of his talent. This collection—at least three of the tales are deeply memorable—is its own justification.

While most of the Singer stories have a clearly defined moral, others remain, within their homiletic framework, curiously ambiguous. There are unexpected reprieves for the fallen and unaccountable miseries for the just. "But," as Singer tells us, "God's ways are hidden from man," which is a blessing for literature. These stories deal with the mystery of God's ways and the ordeal of man's life. The best of them add to our pleasure and our knowledge.



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Elegant Way to Death

Chaos and Night, by Henry de Montherlant, translated from the French by Terence Kilmartin (Macmillan. 240 pp. \$4.95), analyzes the tragic last years of an anarchist veteran of the Spanish Civil War. Warrington Winters, a free-lance critic, teaches a course on the contemporary novel at Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn.

By WARRINGTON WINTERS

THE MOST urgent question that we ask nowadays concerning our fictional or dramatic tragedy is this: does it catharsize? That is, does it somehow—on a universal level—purge our congested emotions of self-pity and fear and so leave us cleaner and stronger than we were? Before applying this test to *Chaos and Night*, we should go back and refresh our memory of the author.

Henry de Montherlant—more or less the Gallic Hemingway, we may say—has devoted his life to elegant modes of administering and inviting death. Having killed his first bull at the age of fifteen, he sought combat and received wounds in the Great War. In the middle Twenties, severe illness caused by these activities inspired him to convert the art of the *corrida* to that of literature. In the Twenties and Thirties he glamorized the sport of killing men, women, and bulls. His tetralogy, *Les Jeunes Filles*, might well have been titled "How To Make Love Without Ever Getting Married." One of his plays, *La Reine morte*, actually carries the subtitle "How to Kill Women." For Montherlant, who never married, true love seems to exist not in marriage but rather in the noble comradeship of the battlefield and the bullfight.

Chaos and Night is no rehash, no collection of odds and ends. It is a major novel, Montherlant's first in twenty years or more. Conceived in the middle Fifties and written in the early Sixties, it is perhaps, like Hemingway's last works on war and bullfighting, his final commentary on the state of man. Despite his pseudo-disclaimer, it seems, in spirit, to be largely autobiographical.

Here we follow the last years of a Spaniard (Celestino Marcilla) who had killed his first bull at the age of fifteen, who had served courageously as an anarchist in the Civil War, and who had afterwards settled in Paris as a fugitive and futile political journalist. Now facing death, he must "desecrate, dishonor, destroy, trample underfoot everything he had ever loved"—friends, daughter, Spain, the revolution itself. "Since he himself was to disappear, everything else

must disappear, there must be nothing left after him, nothing for him to regret." Returning to Spain, he renounces faith even in the eternal verity of the *corrida*. After observing an ugly and inept performance in the arena, he suffers a stroke in his hotel. Like the bull, he crawls toward the door, vomiting blood, exuding excrement, and so dies alone.

Thus the bull is Everyman, "more and more duped, more and more vicious and more and more mocked, more and more both impotent and dangerous, ineluctably doomed to die and yet still capable of killing: such was the bull at the end of its life, and such is man."

As he himself has noted in an essay, Montherlant kills with the exquisite certainty of a Cordovan *faena*. Elegantly, he offers horror, chaos, and night. He universalizes but he does not catharsize. The only reassurance he can give us is this: "*El peor es siempre cierto*, 'the worst is always certain.'"

The Duchess Lay Dying

Unfinished Funeral, by Niccolò Tucci (Simon & Schuster. 192 pp. \$3.95), portrays a domestic tyrant who makes dying her life's work. Honor Tracy is a well-known novelist and author of travel books, including two about Spain.

By HONOR TRACY

THE THEME of this short, pungent novel is domestic tyranny, the protagonist an indestructible matriarch who rules by staging a deathbed scene whenever somebody thwarts her. Absolute power over her family is so essential to the Duchess of Combon de Triton that she will go to any extreme to give her deception an appearance of truth. Carefully and intelligently faking the symptoms of different diseases, she undergoes thirty-six major operations until the surgeons finally refuse to operate, and then she falls back on heart attacks and self-inflicted wounds. For thirty-three of the operations she refuses an anesthetic, alleging—for she is a pious fraud—that she has offered up her pain to the Lord in return for His keeping her dear ones well and happy.

Niccolò Tucci's study of strength-through-weakness is fascinating, but the idea is hardly new. The main interest of his novel lies in its brilliant indictment of the Latin family system, considered here in the aggravated form prevalent among the Spanish nobility. The system is to blame for the Duchess's monomania and is the real villain of the piece. Very early in life she learns that a woman