

**Reading Discussion Guide for *Enemies, A Love Story* by Isaac Bashevis Singer
Written by Josh Lambert and Lesley Yalen**

The Book

The literary critic Werner Sollors [pointed out](#) that it's a classic trope of American ethnic and immigrant fiction to give a protagonist competing love interests, each of whom represents a different cultural or ideological possibility. His examples include a story by the pioneering African American writer Charles Chestnutt, "[The Wife of His Youth](#)" (1898), and Abraham Cahan's short novel [Yekl](#) (1896), in which a Jewish immigrant who calls himself Jake has to choose between his flashy American girlfriend and the old-fashioned wife he left behind in the old country. He must choose, in Sollors's terms, between the demands of "consent" (what he wants) and "descent" (where he comes from).

The Nobel Prize-winning Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer goes one better than Sollors, Chestnutt, and Cahan in his 1966 novel *Enemies: A Love Story*. He gives Herman Broder, the novel's protagonist, not two but *three* wives to choose among. The problem is that while both "descent" and "consent" offered possibilities for some immigrants and minorities at the turn of the century—the struggle was to figure out how to balance those two forces or reconcile them—in the wake of the Holocaust, it's difficult for Herman to believe that any choice will lead to a meaningful life.

The situations of the Jewish immigrants who arrived in America after World War II were, in this sense, quite different from the situations of the millions of Jews who had come from the very same towns and cities a few decades earlier. We use different words for the former, calling them, not immigrants, but refugees, exiles, Displaced People, or survivors. For some members of this group—at least, for Singer's imagined member of this group, who lost his wife, children, parents, and community to the Nazis—the questions of tradition versus assimilation and desire versus duty were moot: How can you answer them when you've seen a world of meaningless carnage and destruction?

And so, Herman moves anxiously between, and is incapable of choosing among, three women, three options. The first is Yadwiga, a non-Jewish Polish peasant who worked as a maid for his family before the war. Yadwiga saved Herman's life, hiding him in a hayloft throughout the war, after which they married. Herman feels indebted to Yadwiga though also perpetually alienated from her. For emotional and sexual release, he goes to his mistress, Masha, a Jew and a fellow survivor, whose concentration camp experiences left her paranoid, unstable, and full of rage. She and Herman fight constantly, but each clings to the other like a life raft. In order to maintain his relationships with Yadwiga and Masha, Herman lies pathologically, heartlessly. The work he does, ghostwriting lectures and sermons for a two-faced rabbi, only deepens his deceptions. His life becomes a precarious dance, in the midst of which he discovers that his first wife Tamara—who he thought had been killed by Nazis—is actually alive and in New York. Although Tamara tries to save Herman from himself, her "resurrection" increases the tension in and around Herman as he moves headlong toward a crisis.

For many readers, *Enemies* was a first opportunity to see what Singer—most of whose previous novels were set in the villages and cities of Eastern Europe—would make of Yiddish-speaking Jews living in the postwar United States. (An earlier novel, *Shadows on the Hudson*, was also set in America, but that one wasn't published in English until after Singer's death.) While the book vividly depicts survivor-refugees living with their trauma, Singer was careful to emphasize, indeed in the very first sentence of the author's note that prefaces the novel, that he was not a Holocaust survivor himself. He had immigrated to the United States in 1935, four years before Germany invaded Poland. After the war, he found himself surrounded by survivors and refugees and profoundly affected by the destruction of the world he had left behind, but he was aware that he was in a precarious position, writing from the perspective of someone who had not experienced the war first-hand. He insists in his author's note that the novel is not an attempt to depict the life of a "typical refugee"—that he is not trying to speak for Holocaust survivors generally—but rather the life of one unfortunate man. He takes pains to tell readers that his characters should be read "not only [as] Nazi victims but victims of their own personalities and fates."

By the time Singer wrote *Enemies: A Love Story* in 1966, a full twenty years after the war ended, many stories about people who died in the Holocaust, and those who survived, had become popular in America: *The Diary of Anne Frank* had been published in English to much fanfare in 1952 and Ka-Tzetnik's searing, troubling *The House of Dolls* in 1955; William Shirer's massive *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and André Schwartz-Bart's epic *The Last of the Just* had been bestsellers in 1960. Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* had all been published in the US five years before Singer started writing *Enemies* and dealt with Jews' experiences inside the camps and the lasting trauma that survivors faced. What might have motivated Singer to add his voice to this growing field of Holocaust literature? What was left for his readers to learn about the experiences of refugees and survivors that they didn't already know, given that so many of them, especially his Yiddish readership, had lived through the worst themselves?

There are many possible answers to such a question. Maybe, having had success writing about Eastern Europe, he wanted to try his hand at a subject (the Holocaust and its effects) that—as the ensuing decades have shown, for better and worse—has perennial commercial appeal? Lore Segal, a writer and survivor, speculated in the *New York Times Book Review* that Singer was "trying to exorcise a demon of his own, perhaps a case of survival guilt." And, explaining why such a narrative might have pleased his audience, she noted that "many readers of the Yiddish press take a certain pleasure in reading about people's troubles...It is a form of catharsis, so one can laugh and cry and forget."

For whatever reason, or none at all, in *Enemies*, as in *Shadows on the Hudson*, Singer depicted the cataclysm of the Holocaust playing out in the apartments, streets, and cafeterias of New York City with the uneasy mix of faith and nihilism, of humor and seriousness, that characterizes his best writing. This tortured New York is a place where strange things happen—in *Enemies*, phantom Nazis invade a bathroom, ghost children speak to their mother, wives return from the dead, men marry their servants—and that's a reflection of the way Singer saw the world: a hopeless place where, nonetheless, anything is possible.

The Author

Many biographies of Isaac Bashevis Singer are available online, including one by the Harvard professor Saul Zarritt on the [Yiddish Book Center website](#); another in the [YIVO Encyclopedia](#); and one more [on the site of the Nobel Prizes](#). Janet Hadda's *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (1997) is an excellent book-length biography.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) To what extent do you find Herman Broder to be a sympathetic character, and why?
- 2) How would you describe Herman's relationship to Jewishness: Is he observant? Faithful? Disdainful? Detached? Something else?
- 3) What do you make of Herman's relationship to his employer, Rabbi Lampert, and to the established American Jewish community more generally? What does Rabbi Lampert represent in Herman's eyes?
- 4) Thinking about Werner Sollors' theory, mentioned above, what "cultural or ideological option" does each of Herman's love interests represent? What draws him to each of them?
- 5) Why does Yadviga stay with Herman despite his constant absence and obvious infidelity? What light does her connection and conversion to Judaism shine on Herman and on their relationship?
- 6) Describe the relationship between Masha and her mother. What kind of life have they made in America?
- 7) When Herman first learns that Tamara is still alive, he feels as though she has risen from the dead. And yet, "Apparently somewhere in his mind he had allowed for the possibility that this might happen, because he was not as shocked as he might have been" (p. 60). How do you interpret this? What do you make of Tamara and Herman's relationship? Why does Tamara reach out to Herman as a friend, and even embrace Yadviga, after the many ways he has abandoned her?
- 8) Masha and her mother are haunted by memories of concentration camps; Herman is haunted by memories of hiding in a haystack; Tamara is visited by her dead children. In what other ways does Singer bring the past into the present moment of the novel? How do his characters navigate between the past and the present?
- 9) What role do children and pregnancies play in the novel? What do we know about Herman's feelings toward the children he lost and toward the prospect of having more

children? What do we know about Yadviga, Masha, and Tamara's feelings?

- 10) What is each character's relationship to God and faith? Which characters have lost their faith in God after the Holocaust? Which have not?
- 11) By the end of the novel, "Tamara believed that Herman had either killed himself or was hiding somewhere in an American version of his Polish hayloft" (p. 280). What would an American version of the hayloft be? What do you think happened to Herman in the end?
- 12) Does it make sense to think of Herman, Yadviga, Masha, and Tamara as "immigrants" to America? What experiences do they share with other immigrants from their own era and from other times? What aspects of their experiences in America are unique?

Multimedia Resources

- 1) Singer's son, Israel Zamir, was interviewed by the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project. In this [excerpt](#), he talks about his father's translation process and why Singer changed some aspects of his texts as he translated them. Visit the Yiddish Book Center's website for [the full oral history interview with Zamir](#).
- 2) Singer gave two speeches when he accepted the Nobel Prize. Transcripts and recordings of these speeches are available [online in English](#) from the Nobel Prize foundation and [in Yiddish](#) on a blog called *Yiddish Word of the Week*.
- 3) *Isaac in America: A Journey with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1987) is a documentary film about Singer produced for [the PBS series American Masters](#) and directed by Amram Nowak. It is available [on YouTube](#).
- 4) For a scholarly study of *Enemies*, see Jan Schwarz, "I. B. Singer's Art of Ghost Writing in *Enemies, a Love Story*," in David Slucki, Gabriel N. Finder, and Avinoam Patt, eds., [Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust](#) (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 85-103.
- 5) Paul Mazursky directed a film adaptation of *Enemies* starring Ron Silver and Anjelica Houston in 1989. The film's trailer can be viewed [on YouTube](#), and the entire film can be rented and streamed [on Vudu](#).
- 6) View photographer Bruce Davidson's [portraits of Singer](#).
- 7) For those who can read and understand Yiddish, several of Singer's books, as well as audiobooks and lectures, are available on the [Yiddish Book Center website](#).
- 8) The [original serial Yiddish publication of the novel in the Forward](#) can be accessed in digitized copies of the *Forward* that are available through the Historical Jewish Press

The Yiddish Book Center's "Coming to America" Reading Groups for Public Libraries Program

pages of the National Library of Israel. Installments of the novel appeared on Fridays and Saturdays from February 11 to August 13, 1966.