



Only Yesterday

S.Y. Agnon , Barbara Harshav (Translator)

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Israeli Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon's famous masterpiece, his novel *Only Yesterday*, here appears in English translation for the first time. Published in 1945, the book tells a seemingly simple tale about a man who immigrates to Palestine with the Second Aliya--the several hundred idealists who returned between 1904 and 1914 to work the Hebrew soil as in Biblical times and revive Hebrew culture. *Only Yesterday* quickly became recognized as a monumental work of world literature, but not only for its vivid historical reconstruction of Israel's founding society. This epic novel also engages the reader in a fascinating network of meanings, contradictions, and paradoxes all leading to the question, what, if anything, controls human existence?

Seduced by Zionist slogans, young Isaac Kumer imagines the Land of Israel filled with the financial, social, and erotic opportunities that were denied him, the son of an impoverished shopkeeper, in Poland. Once there, he cannot find the agricultural work he anticipated. Instead Isaac happens upon house-painting jobs as he moves from secular, Zionist Jaffa, where the ideological fervor and sexual freedom are alien to him, to ultra-orthodox, anti-Zionist Jerusalem. While some of his Zionist friends turn capitalist, becoming successful merchants, his own life remains adrift and impoverished in a land torn between idealism and practicality, a place that is at once homeland and diaspora. Eventually he marries a religious woman in Jerusalem, after his worldly girlfriend in Jaffa rejects him.

Led astray by circumstances, Isaac always ends up in the place opposite of where he wants to be, but why? The text soars to Surrealist-Kafkaesque dimensions when, in a playful mode, Isaac drips paint on a stray dog, writing "Crazy Dog" on his back. Causing panic wherever he roams, the dog takes over the story, until, after enduring persecution for so long without "understanding" why, he really does go mad and bites Isaac. The dog has been interpreted as everything from the embodiment of Exile to a daemonic force, and becomes an unforgettable character in a book about the death of God, the deception of discourse, the power of suppressed eroticism, and the destiny of a people depicted in all its darkness and promise.

Only Yesterday Details

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Author : S.Y. Agnon , Barbara Harshav (Translator)

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From Reader Review Only Yesterday for online ebook

Jim Talbott says

This is probably the most accessible Agnon novel that I've read. In some ways I found it less affecting than *Guest for the Night* because I'm living in exile outside Israel rather than living in exile inside Israel, but when read together, they beautifully bookend the predicament of being a Jew. Whether to make Aliyah or not, and the impossibility of escaping exile in either case. It is, however, ironic that in Agnon's books, exile is heavily tinged with the misery of poverty, while today, our exile is tinged with the misery of excessive wealth.

Rachel says

DONE! Man, I don't think I've ever taken so long to get through a book, even when I wasn't reading as many a year as I am presently.

I didn't want to rush this novel, but I'm still concerned by what I might be missing. The language was, at times, archaic and infantile, and often featured long blocks of detailed, quoteless dialogue. The entire story was quite detailed, as we first dove into daily affairs of Isaac's Zionist life in Jaffa, and then his religious life in Jerusalem--over 600 pages total.

I have to wonder if the translation was difficult and even contradictory in some of its diction because Hebrew, when Agnon was writing in 1945, was both an old and a young language. The story itself takes place at the turn of the 20th century, when our protagonist, Isaac, leaves his observant, beleaguered family in Galicia, and under his youthful Zionist fervor, makes Aliyah to "the Land" in order to live out its principles.

It is quite striking that, through the fleeting prologue of traveling through Eastern Europe to get to the ship, and then through the book proper, there was little framing of the story under the auspices of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire or Ottoman Palestine. This story is very concretely about Jewish societies--particularly the modern, Labor movement with its workers' clubs, lectures and newspapers and burgeoning Tel Aviv in Jaffa; and then the much older Jerusalemite world steeped in religious study, prayer and faith. The ultimate message, though, is that no dream, when actually lived out, is really that simple.

Tacked on top of all of that is Agnon's modernist/folklorist conceit of Isaac's fateful encounters with the dog, Balak, who then takes charge of some chapters, and is generally the voice of exile from the Jewish people--Diaspora, essentially. Otherwise, the voice is told in first person plural--these aren't just one man's (or dog's) journey, after all, but a collective one, for Jews (specifically Ashkenazi Jews, though there is mention to Sephardim and others living in "the Land,") as we struggle for community and identity amidst persecution, alienation, a desire for a thriving homeland.

It's all very male-centric, of course. :P If I had my druthers, we might get more time with Sonya, the self-confident, if a bit lazy, modern-day Russian Jewish artist; and Rebecca, Isaac's ultimate mother-in-law, who had to put herself out in the world when her husband got sick and Distribution money dried up. And what about his poor sisters?? Well, I guess they had to stay pretty separate, since they weren't physically in the story. Alas.

I saw another review on GoodReads that labeled this as Agnon's most accessible work--oy gevalt! Be that as

it may, perhaps I should've eased into this writing style with a shorter novel first, but NOOOO---I had to go straight for the magnum opus. :P Guess I paid for my pretentiousness.

David says

As issues in Israel always are sizzling I was curious to explore this novel about an early Kibbutz pioneer during a time when Zionist ideology was fresh and liberating. In *Only Yesterday* Agnon writes about Isaac Kumer a pretty neutral character that floats around from place to place always surrounded by various existential debates. Set in the early 1900s, Isaac starts in Galicia, Ukraine surrounded by Zionists and anti-Zionists, many discussing the advantages and dangers of leaving Ukraine and immigrating to Israel. Without indicating much conviction Isaac decides that he will have more opportunity as a pioneer in Israel. After he arrives in Israel he drifts around looking for work between Jaffa and Jerusalem. In Israel he finds Socialist-Zionists in Jaffa at Petach Tikva, an early kibbutz, and he find religious Zionists in Jerusalem. Again, Isaac does not display much conviction simply drifting around for the sake of survival- he takes whatever job and training that is offered.

It is interesting to read about Isaac's concerns as his life progresses in Israel. As he travels around in Jaffa especially there is a sense that settlement is sparse and that as a new immigrant he has to compete with cheaper Arab labor as other Jewish Zionists stake their claim. The socialist and religious convictions of the people surrounding Isaac do not seem to influence his behavior, really he is most driven simply by finding job and places to stay.

The most compelling piece of the novel was a parallel story about Balak a dog who also drifts around Israel. He demonstrates a perspective of Israel in the back-alleys and has a more sinister outlook as he tries to figure out who to bother next. The book was so long I think it was most fascinating just reading about Balak. Although I can't quite pinpoint what exactly Agnon was allegorizing the abstraction was a great relief from Isaac's fairly aimless drifting. Given the constant debate and controversy surrounding Israel Balak the dog is a very salient symbol.

Jeffrey Cohan says

Jeopardy time.

Writers for \$400, Alex.

Answer: The only Israeli to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Who is Amos Oz?

Wrong. He's never won a Nobel, but he might someday.

Who is Isaac Bashevis Singer?

Wrong. He won a Nobel, but he certainly wasn't Israeli.

If you answered, Who is S.Y. Agnon?, you were correct.

As a lover of literature and a lover of Israel, I felt compelled to tackle Agnon's opus "Only Yesterday." And I'm glad I did, even if there were long passages in which I felt something must have been lost in translation.

There were three aspects of "Only Yesterday" that made an impression on me.

One, Agnon, despite the simplicity of his prose, does a masterful yet unsentimental job painting the fascinating scenes of early 20th Century, pre-state Israel.

Two, Agnon, despite being the most-decorated Israeli writer, also beautifully conveys the faith, the language, and the culture of Eastern European Jewry.

And three, Agnon tells a poignant, universal story. As the title suggests, and as all victims of tragedy know, one's life might have been a lot different only yesterday

Joel Palma says

One of the best works of fiction I've ever read!

My "triad" best novels have been broken... Now there are four: Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward", Tolstoy's "War and Peace", Mistry's "A Fine Balance" and S Y Agnon's "Only Yesterday".

First off, how I wish I could read and understand Hebrew- the beauty and lyrics of the English translation was prodigious- what more on its original language!

Two moods of experiences I had with the writing style:

First, it was written like you are meditating- the passages are so beautiful, allusive yet engrossing, lyrical (the rhymes on several chapters are just pure genius!), dense (yet each chapter did not give me a long- winded, dragging feel like, say, on my experience reading "A Little Life"). This book, in my opinion, is not a kind of book you bring to read while you're on a holiday.. This book is surely a tough choice if it's a required reading for your book analysis paper by your literature professor for the finals!

Second, the change of tone and style of writing about the "Balak, the Dog" chapters are stunning- surrealistic, philosophical, mythic. Yet the relation between the two characters, and Agnon's imagination to weave Balak's predicament and view, and the book's allegorical grip are truly what made this book a cut above the rest and significant.

I had 12 late night sleeps with this book and couldn't have been a more euphoric reading experience for me!

The plot is seemingly simple as you read the first 200+ pages, yet there's a direction, flowy, a build up. But this book is truly an epic- a story of vast historical scope, of biblical validity, of societal complexity, of humanity. The character of Isaac Kumer, considering all the other books I've ever read, is the most human- exposes us from our desires and weaknesses, idleness and failures, pride and love, loneliness and memory- the things we hide and deny even from the deepest recesses of our consciousness.. Balak, on the other hand,

is just...unforgettable...!!!

This is one of the very rare books that I will read again and again. I'm sure, it'll be more beautiful and revelatory the second, or third time around!

Six stars!

FiveBooks says

Writer Alon Hilu has chosen to discuss S Y Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, on FiveBooks as one of the top five on his subject - Israel and Palestine in Art, saying that:

"Shmuel Agnon is the only Israeli writer who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is still regarded as the best writer in modern Hebrew literature. This book takes place in Jaffa between the end of the 19th century and the start of the First World War. I read it three times to get the atmosphere and spirit of the place at that time"

The full interview is available here: <http://www.five-books.com/books/interviews/alon-hilu>

Paul says

I wanted to read a book that many consider to be Agnon's masterpiece, as well as others who claim it to be one of the finest examples of modern Hebrew literature. I was not disappointed at all. It took me quite a while to finish 'Only Yesterday' as apart from being particularly busy in recent weeks, I found that I wanted to read each page quite slowly, savouring the folkloric language and making sure that I had fully absorbed what the author wanted to say.

On the surface this is a tale of one man's passage to the Land of Israel from his home village in Austro-Hungarian Galicia. The pre-WWI Ottoman Palestine he arrives in is a world far removed from his naïve imaginings. Our 'hero' – Isaac Kumer – is a young and impoverished Zionist of the Second Aliyah. This was the period of renewed zeal amongst the (mainly Russian) Jews of the pogrom and persecution-beset old country, and although relatively small in number, the wide-ranging influence of its pioneers on subsequent generations in the founding of the State of Israel is beyond compare. Agnon charmingly weaves into his plot many historic (and also the future historic) figures alongside the fictional cast of many. Initially finding his feet in the bustling port town of Jaffa, Isaac eventually makes the trip up to Jerusalem. At either end of this journey Agnon lavishly portrays the fascinating world of these two very different towns – the former being coastal, politicised, and predominantly secular, the latter being of the interior, traditional and overwhelmingly orthodox. If nothing else, this book serves as a wonderfully valuable portrayal of a world now gone. The co-mingling of European Jews and their indigenous brethren, the urban and the rural, the liberal and the conservative, at a time when the very soul of the future Jewish state was in gestation, is fascinating to behold.

After many early setbacks in his attempts to find the work on the land that he had dreamed of [One disappointment of 'Only Yesterday' was the nearly complete absence of the Arabs of the country. An exception to this is in reference to those farmers preferring to employ the cheaper Arab labour to that of the Jewish immigrant. They're referred to in other places, but so scantily that I can only conclude that they did not figure largely in the day to day life at that time of either Agnon himself, or those contemporaries of the period that he is portraying.] – Isaac stumbles on another way to earn a living as a painter.

As his early years in the land are told – sometimes the narrator is from Isaac's point of view, sometimes detached from Isaac as an omnipotent observer, and sometimes in the lives of others altogether – the novel starts to develop simultaneously on several levels. As well as the tale of Isaac's days, the reader is aware of the question of being a stranger in a strange land. In Jaffa Isaac is a Galician among the Russians. In the fields he is a Jew among the Arabs. In Jerusalem he is a 'modern', or a Zionist, among the Hasidim. And so on. Questions of identity and purpose are constantly in Isaac's mind as he is also caught between the only two women he has ever known outside of his family – one in Jaffa and the other in Jerusalem.

Agnon has a great sense of humour and mischief as well, as we discover mid-story when he introduces an almost magical or Kafkaesque element in the guise of a stray dog. Balak, the dog, suffers the misfortune to be the butt of Isaac's tomfoolery in a moment of boredom. The repercussions of the joke are so consequential to the story that I can't say more. Suffice to say, in every chapter when Balak takes the lead, the reader is treated to an alternate view of the universe from a lonesome dog's perspective.

Agnon's writing is soaring and beautiful in as many places depicting the mundane and the ugly of everyday life as it is the wondrous and mystical. The imagery of his tale is powerful and will stay with me for a long time to come. An unforgettable story.

PS:

A description of the artwork on the cover: "Pinwheel Vendor" by Reuven Rubin (1923). It is taken from a catalogue for a Rubin exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art entitled "Dreamland". I include it as it is of some interest considering the publisher's choice and that it seems to express with great subtlety something of the story itself:

An Arab of Sudanese descent sits facing the sea while a Jewish pioneer stands beside him. The Sudanese man's pose, his elevated chin and the fixed gaze focused on a faraway point on the horizon create the sense of a character operating within the dimensions of "inexhaustible time" – time which is not measured in the units of "here and now" but by means of an hourglass in which the sand grains do not run out. The Sudanese man has so much time that he does not even bother to blow at his pinwheels. Sooner or later, the wind will come. If not sooner, then later. And if not later, then after later. The pioneer at his side stands barefoot like the natives and carries a hoe – a symbol of Zionist activism – on his shoulder, his back turned to the sea. The Sudanese man looks as if he could keep crouching on his heels for a long time. He is in no hurry, and patience is the trait ensuring his survival. He operates in another temporal sphere. By contrast, the "New Jew" – bearded and wearing a European hat – is full of movement and impetuosity. He has no time, and must begin his task.

Robert Wechsler says

Except for the last section, which follows the peregrinations of a dog ad nauseum (although still brilliant), the novel is close to perfect.

The novel is not about plot or even character, although there is a hero of sorts (other than the dog, who's more symbol than character), a young immigrant to Israel from Poland who stumbles into orthodoxy (and, of course, a woman).

The translation of this difficult novel is fantastic.

Nati Korn says

החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר "החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר" (החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר). החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר "החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר" (החלפתי את הספר הזה על ידי הספר).

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Cooper Renner says

A remarkable book. Written in a kind of casual inviting tone, slyly humorous, gently mocking and self-deprecating. In some ways a history--but in a very offbeat way--of the lives of young Zionists in Israel in the years just before World War I. Arguably a Modernist masterwork, arguably a sui generis masterwork. Sometimes Biblical in its rhythms, sometimes reminiscent of the classical epic.

Ami says

I thought to give Agnon a chance. I didn't like his stories that we learned at high school, so long ago, but high school duties are not a fair judgment, right?

Well, the book was reasonably good. The historic & cultural background were wonderfully described. The characters well developed. His Hebrew is delicious. The history described - Jewish immigration to Israel at the beginning of 1900 - is fascinating.

But, and it's a big but - the overall story is long and boring at too many parts. Now I understand why I didn't like him at high school. May read, not a must.

Harry Rutherford says

S.Y. Agnon is apparently a key figure in Israeli literature, and *Only Yesterday* is very much a novel about Israel. But it is my book from Ukraine for the Read The World challenge.

My reasons for assigning the book to Ukraine were basically pragmatic?—?there wasn't an alternative from Ukraine which sprang out at me, and I felt like reading something more contemporary for Israel?—?but it's quite fitting anyway. It's a novel about the early waves of modern Jewish settlers to Palestine at the start of the twentieth century, and although nearly all the action takes place in the Middle East, in many ways it's a story of eastern and central Europe. The various characters are still as much identified with their homelands?—?Russia, Hungary, and so on?—?as they are with any nascent Israeli identity. In fact the book's central character, Isaac, moves in an almost completely European world; the Arab population of Palestine is occasionally mentioned, but I can't remember a single named Arab character. The few non-Jewish characters seem to be European Christians.

Neither Ukraine nor Israel existed as independent nations when this novel is set; Isaac is a Jew from Galicia, in the Austro-Hungarian empire, who immigrates to what is then the British Mandate in 1908. It is obviously not a coincidence that S.Y. Agnon was also a Galician Jew who made the same move at the same date. The novel is clearly only autobiographical in a limited way, though, since Isaac is an unsophisticated working man rather than a bookish one.

This is the book I have been whinging about (1, 2) because of its sheer physical weight. And it may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I do think I would have finished it quicker and perhaps enjoyed it more if it hadn't been so unnecessarily bulky. But I still enjoyed it; it's humane and even quite funny, as literary novels go.

The human story of Isaac held my attention; I did sometimes start to lose focus with some of the more detailed stuff about Zionism and so on. There are so many people and organisations who get mentioned: writers, politicians, theologians, Zionist charities, settler organisations, religious groups. There wasn't too much of the book taken up by characters sitting around in cafés and having conversations about Zionism, but there was a bit, and I just got the feeling that generally in the novel there was a whole level of commentary and satire that I was missing because I didn't have enough context. Which is unfortunate.

But even if I didn't get all the nuances, I still thought that the ideological aspect was important to the novel. One of the striking things about it is the portrayal of people trying to create a new place from scratch. It's not a utopian project precisely, but all these settlers have made the difficult and expensive journey from Europe to Israel because of some idea or idealism, whether political or religious, and that idea may or may not survive contact with the reality. At the very least, the reality is unlikely to be exactly what they expected.

One of my reasons for reading it was that I was interested in a book set during that early history of modern Israel. But it's not a history book, and like all(?) good novels what makes it work is an interest in people, not in ideas. And it is a very good novel, and generally a readable and engaging one.

Leka says

Qualcosa di assolutamente personale

Che dire di questo libro che A.B. Yehoshua definisce *l'opera più significativa nella storia della letteratura ebraica del XX secolo*?

Apparirebbe, ogni parola, assolutamente inadeguata.

Tenterò allora di sillabare almeno che cosa è stato questo libro per me.

Di ritorno da Gerusalemme, un'amica me lo ha regalato per il mio compleanno, senza sapere che, poco prima del mio rientro, nel locale che deve il nome a questo romanzo, Tmol Shilshom (<http://www.tmol-shilshom.co.il/en/home/>), si erano festeggiati i 20 anni di apertura con una lettura continuata (l'edizione italiana ha 770 pagine di testo...) in tutte le lingue "disponibili" tra gli avventori.

L'edizione originale è del 1945, ed è davvero -a mio modo di vedere, appunto- una sorta di quaderno degli appunti di un bambino che scopre come usare le parole per descrivere la realtà. E che mentre la descrive la interroga anche, e che mentre la interroga si pone delle domande e cerca delle risposte. Così come le porrebbe un bambino. Ma anche con l'impietosità di un vecchio disincantato che sa che le risposte, quelle che mettono *pace* sono poche.

Con un *fraseggio* elementare, ricco di ripetizioni, con un discorso diretto inframmezzato a pensieri e a sogni, in modo che tutto si confonda - come nella vita reale spesso accade-, Agnon descrive, senza pietà, ma con molta *pietas*, la vita di quanti, come lui, *salirono* nella Terra guidati da un sogno e nella terra vissero i loro più terribili incubi.

Protagonisti assoluti, ma non solitari, sono Isacco Kumer e un cane, Balac (che, letto al contrario, calab, in ebraico significa, appunto *cane*), e l'incontro che cambia la loro vita e quella di molte altre persone, in un intreccio impensabile e impensato, ma così *comune*, nella vita comune.

Si è fatto leggere lentamente, questo testo. Troppe analogie, troppe corrispondenze. Una geografia conosciuta, fatta non solo di strade e quartieri -Gerusalemme e la vecchia Giaffa e la nascente Tel Aviv-, ma di percorsi del cuore.

Un viaggio, fatto di parole, abbozzate, sentimenti, sogni, incubi e desideri. Di morsi, metaforici e reali, per *capire* la vita e scoprire, invece, che questa scivola dalle dita senza risposta.

William Romsek says

The story of a young Jewish man's participation in the 2nd 'Aliya' or migration from Poland to Pakistan (today's Israel) in the early 1900's. A long, somewhat wandering epic. After the first couple hundred pages I thought, this is really good, it's going to be a Jewish "War and Peace". It then almost completely bogged down. The translation from the Hebrew was very literal and may have caused some of the slow going. Still, an informative tale of the Jewish people.

Scott Cox says

Israeli Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon's 600 page tome is one that I would like to re-read. It pertains to what is called the second "Aliya," Zionists that came to Palestine during the period between 1904 and 1914. The

only scene I remember is when the local stray dog had the label "Crazy Dog" painted on its back. This caused quite a stir as it roamed around town. I'm sure Agnon used this to symbolize the struggle for those who live in exile.

Keith Wilson says

Anyone with an interest in contemporary Israeli politics should read this epic novel by the Nobel Prize winning author, SY Agnon, despite the fact that it's set a hundred years ago, before the state was formed. It follows a young Galician Zionist as he "ascends the land of Israel." The translation I read seems to preserve the archaic feel of Agnon's original Hebrew.

Most of the tension of the book is centered around the conflict between secular Jaffa and religious Jerusalem. It's plain that the author's sympathies lie with Jaffa, but the tension pretty well prefigures modern Israeli tensions between the western looking secularists and a stubborn, parasitic orthodoxy.

Halfway through, the narrative is suddenly distracted by a stray dog upon which the main character has painted the words "mad dog". The poor beast goes from neighborhood to neighborhood, getting pelted by stones by people driving him off. I believe this is meant to be a metaphor for the diaspora Jews. Nonetheless, it was hard for me to return to the travails of the main character after this delightful interlude. I would've been happier if the whole book had been centered on the dog.

Carolyn says

I would like and online book group to talk about this book. I love it but it's slow going.

Zhenia Magarill says

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Jim Leffert says

Reading Only Yesterday in translation is not ideal. Still, a fair amount of the flavor of Agnon's style, including his frequent references to traditional Jewish sources, comes through. Only Yesterday is a lengthy satiric novel about the Second Aliyah—the movement of idealistic Jewish youth from Europe to Palestine during the 1905-1914 period.

Like Agnon, the protagonist, Isaac Kumer, comes from an Eastern European Orthodox family. In rebellion against his widower father, Isaac insists on going to Palestine to work the land. His indigent father goes into hock to grant Isaac his wish. Isaac's father makes this sacrifice to get Isaac out of the way so that he will no longer be a bad influence on his younger brother.

Once Isaac gets to Palestine, he finds that most Jewish farmers would rather hire Arab laborers than young Jews so that making a living tilling the soil is almost impossible. (This was a couple of years before the birth of the Jewish Labor movement and the creation of the first kibbutzim.) Eventually, Isaac becomes a house painter, an occupation that is not envisioned in Zionist romantic mythology. Settling in Jaffa, Isaac falls in love with a charismatic young woman but is unable to capture her affections. Eventually, Isaac relocates to Jerusalem. There he struggles to earn a living and eventually finds a mate but all does not turn out well.

This is the bare bones plot summary of a very extensive and multi-dimensional tale, which has spawned reams of analysis in books and dissertations. The book has a quasi fairy-tale quality and includes sections of considerable humor, including a poem written by a dog.

I will focus on one theme: Jaffa, along with its newly born child, Tel Aviv, represents the secular center of the Zionist enterprise. Jerusalem, by contrast, is the eternal Holy City, where religion is at the core of communal life. Isaac starts off discarding his family's religious tradition in favor of the pioneering life, but once he leaves Jaffa for Jerusalem, his religious impulses steadily reawaken. It's as if Isaac is a flesh and blood representation of the view that the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook (a friend of Agnon), espoused. Kook viewed the secular Zionist pioneers as containing within them the sparks of holiness that would ultimately lead to the revitalization of the Jewish people as a religious community.

Although Agnon's lead character finds his way back to Jewish tradition, Agnon aims sharp satiric daggers at the Jerusalem religious community of that time. In contrast to the pioneers toiling in the fields, the Jerusalem community lives a life of passive dependency on external forces. For example, their water supply often dwindles to the point of price gouging by water vendors. Each group lives apart from the others, with the Hungarians, for example, despising the Galitzianers like Isaac. A prominent and popular rabbi attributes disease outbreaks and droughts to insufficient religious fervor on the part of the populace (his sermon is a satiric masterpiece), and superstition substitutes for medical practice. Another rabbi takes pride in declaring meat unfit that other Rabbis deem kosher, to the dismay and economic detriment of his community.

Eventually, towards the end of the book, Agnon introduces a second protagonist, a dog named Balak. Balak is condemned to wander from one part of Jerusalem to another, feared and persecuted by the Jewish populace, because Isaac has painted the words "crazy dog" on his back. The lengthy dog sections provide us with an extensive canine perspective on Jerusalem's neighborhoods and population. Balak's presence also contributes to the plot through the role that Balak plays in Isaac's fate. Nonetheless, the dog is a odd addition to the story (and the explanation of his name Balak is especially odd, from an orthographic standpoint).

At the end of the novel, Isaac's wife and mother-in-law, apparently speaking for the author, question the community's belief in divine reward and punishment. As far as Agnon is concerned, Isaac's life did not proceed according to the working out of Divine justice, despite what the Orthodox say.
