



PROJECT MUSE®

A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories (review)

Lev Hakak

Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 14, Number 4, Summer 1996, pp. 157-160 (Review)

Published by Purdue University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.1996.0083>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/473407/summary>

of Grossman's characters, and the arrested violence is replicated here. The father takes it upon himself to renovate the apartment of a neighbor, a genteel single woman of taste. The result is an arrested but ferocious attraction between the virile father and the fading fragile woman. Having been dominated by his wife throughout their marriage, the father falls in love with the neighbor as his only voluntary act since arriving in Israel. His wife, like a hawk, watches the playing out of this dangerous amatory episode. The father's sexual power is entirely encompassed in demolishing the walls of the woman's apartment, now left entirely ruined, after the Fieldingian orgy of destruction.

The complexity of the characters is reflected in the language provided for them by the author. The son's highly cultured Hebrew co-exists with the broken language of the father and his use of Yiddish. The family has its own language which Grossman creates with stunning verisimilitude.

In her rage, the mother claims that the boy's stunted growth is of his own volition, and despite the grotesque element in this claim, there is a germ of truth in it. The agony of growing up, the element of being defiled by violence, sex, and dependency, have frightened this lyrically sensitive child, who is afraid of change and yet craves it. He has fallen in love with one of the girls in his class, only to see his best friend take her away. This act of betrayal is insufferable. The last scene finds the boy trying his Houdini act in an abandoned refrigerator in the valley. Going through an epiphanic experience, and no longer eager to impress others, he becomes, like the hunger artist of Kafka, both the performance and its public.¹

Gila Ramras-Rauch
Hebrew College, Boston

A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories, by S. Y. Agnon, edited with introduction by Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. 436 pp. \$27.50.

In 1970, four years after Agnon won the Nobel Prize for literature (1966), Schocken Books published an anthology of S. Y. Agnon's short stories, *Twenty-One Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer. About one-half of the stories included in that selection appeared in the translation for the first time. The selection also included an "Editorial Postscript" composed

¹This review was first published in *World Literature Today*, Spring 1992.

of a brief presentation of Agnon's work, and also one paragraph per story in which the editor attempted to point to some key element in the story—motifs, symbols, structure, etc.

Now, in 1995, Schocken Books published a new anthology of Agnon's work, *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*. Agnon died in 1970, during the final preparation of the 1970 selection for press, and while the 1995 anthology cannot possibly include works that Agnon wrote after the publication of the 1970 selection, the 1995 selection can and in fact does include posthumously published stories. Since Agnon's death, his daughter Emuna Yaron became responsible for the publication of a significant portion of Agnon's work. It is, of course, intriguing to see how a quarter of a century (1970–1995) of literary activity in our ever-changing world influenced the 1995 selection.

The 1995 anthology is about 150 pages longer than the 1970 one. It includes 25 stories, 11 of which appeared in the 1970 anthology and are translated by the same translators, with the exception of replacing Gershon Schocken's good translation of "The Lady and the Pedlar" by the excellent translation by Robert Alter of the same story. In this context of comparing the two translations it is my general observation that when one researches or closely teaches a text (as Alter does), one may encounter very fine points which do not stand out as clearly when one translates a text.

I will address four points regarding the 1995 anthology: the stories that are included in both the 1970 and the 1995 anthologies; the stories that were included in the 1970 anthology but excluded from the 1995 one; the newly included stories in the 1995 selection; and the contribution of the editors to the 1995 anthology, not only in terms of selection but also in providing useful introductions and notes for the reader.

When it comes to selecting from Agnon's work, an editor cannot go wrong in choosing any of Agnon's stories. "The Tale of the Scribe," "Fable of the Goat," "Agunot," "The Kerchief," "To the Doctor," "A Whole Loaf," "From Lodging to Lodging," "The Doctor's Divorce," "The Lady and the Pedlar," "On the Road," and "At the Outset of the Day"—all these stories which appear in both the 1970 and the 1995 selections are world literary treasures.

Regarding stories that were excluded from the 1995 selection, one must sympathize with the hard task of the editors, who had to decide what to include and what to exclude of these treasures. One may feel pain encountering the exclusion in the 1995 anthology of such stories as "To Father's House," "The Document," "The Orchestra," and "Friendship." I would have a feeling of loss if I taught a class in modern Hebrew literature in translation without "Metamorphoses," for example, another story which

is included in the 1970 selection but not in the 1995 one, and to which my students relate with attachment and enthusiasm, as if it happened in Los Angeles the day we read it, as if it were not published in 1932 and were not set in Germany. (About this story and other literary works of Agnon see my book *Equivocal Dreams* [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing Co., 1993].) Some of these excluded stories are very short and would consume an insignificant number of pages in the new anthology, but again, it is understandable that the editors had to make practical choices. One also must remember that the editors did not intend to present an anthology of the best of Agnon (and who is to decide what is "the best?") but ". . . in accordance with a principle of overall excellence, to find a plan of organization that would deliver the best of Agnon in meaningful categories" (p. 5). Most of the stories contained in the 1995 anthology were published in volumes 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 of *The Collected Works of Agnon*.

Of those stories which did not appear in the 1970 anthology but are included in the new one, one has to pay special attention to five stories taken from the 1973 compendium *Ir Umeloah* (A City and the Fullness Thereof [Tel Aviv: Schocken]): "Buczacz," "The Tale of the Menorah," "Pisces," "The Sign," and "A Book That Was Lost." The inclusion of these posthumously published stories merits the editors' proud statement that the present anthology breaks new ground (p. 16). As to stories which were available in 1970 but were not included in the 1970 selection and are included in the present anthology, one must recognize the great service to the English reader who may now have for the first time easy access to "Hill of Sand," "Knots of Knots," "Between Two Towns," "Paths of Righteousness, or the Vinegar Maker," "The Tzaddik's Etrog," and other stories. Most of the newly included stories were already published in English translation in various periodicals such as *Ariel*, *Conservative Judaism*, and *Commentary*. This anthology will be an important part of any modern Hebrew literature class in translation. The editors successfully fulfilled their task of introducing Agnon's short stories to the English reader.

As to the contribution of the editors in their introduction and notes, one has to remember that the available scholarly publications about Agnon are overwhelming in terms of quantity and quality. For example, in 1978—only eight years after the publication of the 1970 anthology—the bibliographical supplement of *S. Y. Agnon: Studies and Documents* (edited by G. Shaked and R. Weiser [Jerusalem: Bialik Institute]) presented (pp. 303–334) 709 Hebrew articles published in 1970–1977 about Agnon's work, and this was, of course, only an update to Johanan Arnon's 1971 *Bibliography on Samuel Yosef Agnon and His Work* (Tel-Aviv: Aticot) and to Yonah David's 1972 *Books and Essays on S. Y. Agnon and His Works*:

Bibliography (Jerusalem: Tamir Publishers). The editors of the 1995 anthology wisely chose lucid selective information for their articulate introduction. The short glossary of recurrent terms from Jewish life (pp. 427-432) may be useful for the student, offering assistance to the reader who is not rooted in Judaism (it includes, for example, "challah," "Eretz Yisrael," "Hanukkah," "mitzva," "Passover," "Purim," "Torah," and less-known terms). In the notes (pp. 410-426) to particular references in the individual story the reader will find allusions and other clarifying remarks.

The stories are organized in categories of six sections: The Signature Story, Tales of Childhood, The Artist in the Land of Israel, The Ancestral World: The Epic Life of One Town, Stories of Germany, and The Search for Meaning. The general introduction (pp. 3-29) provides background for each category and connections between Agnon's literary work, the Jewish historical events of his time, and his biography. In addition to this general introduction, there is an introduction to each one of the six categories, which is designed to help the student focus on important elements in the stories and are not intended to replace close detailed interpretation of the text.

The editors, Alan Mintz, a professor of modern Hebrew literature, and Anne Golomb Hoffman, a professor of English and comparative literature, both continue the praiseworthy tradition of this country to produce scholars with great passion for and deep understanding of Hebrew language and literature. In conclusion, I will quote Robert Alter (in his book cover endorsement), another fruit of this land, a scholar of modern Hebrew literature who has made remarkable contributions to it: "S. Y. Agnon is the single modern master of Hebrew fiction, and this new collection gives American readers a nice sampling of the originality and complexity of his work."

Lev Hakak
 Department of Near Eastern
 Languages and Cultures
 University of California, Los Angeles

Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible—Form and Content: Collected Studies, by Shemaryahu Talmon. Jerusalem: Magnes Press; Leiden: Brill, 1993. 317 pp.

Ten of Shemaryahu Talmon's erudite and wide-ranging essays, most of them supplemented and reworked since their original publication, are