

ONE BOOK, ONE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Join us as book groups and individuals read *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* and then come together to share insights and perspectives.

Wednesday, November 17, 7:30 PM

JCC of Central New Jersey

Wilf Jewish Community Campus

1391 Martine Avenue, Scotch Plains

\$18 per person

Reviews of *Song's for the Butcher's Daughter* courtesy of *Novelist*

Booklist:

*/*Starred Review*/* Fleeing violent anti-Semitism in Russia and then in Poland in the 1920s, Yiddish poet Itzik Malpesh stepped off the boat in New York at age 16 in the Golden Land, "alone, with nowhere to go and no way to get there." Now, in his 90s and living in Baltimore, he employs a 21-year-old religious scholar to translate his memoirs into English. Far from your usual immigrant journey to the promised land, the intricate narrative weaves together Malpesh's account of his "life and crimes," including his job scrubbing floors, with the translator's discoveries of the poet's secret life, then and now. Always on Malpesh's journeys what sustains him is the story of his birth during a pogrom, when Sasha, the ritual butcher's daughter, just four years old, chased away the killers and saved the baby. Ever since being told of the girl's courageous feat, his romantic obsession has been to find Sasha—until she arrives in America in the 1930s, a tough, beautiful, Hebrew-speaking Israeli, who despises Yiddish and the old ways and tells him what really happened. Rooted in the sharp, bittersweet Yiddish tradition reminiscent of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Manseau's thrilling tale of secrets and revelations captures the diversity among Jews, then and now, in shtetl, city, and kibbutz, and the elemental meaning of bashert, or destiny. Like the translator in the story, the writer Manseau is not Jewish. -- Rochman, Hazel (Reviewed 08-01-2008) (Booklist, vol 104, number 22, p39)

Publishers Weekly:

Known for *Vows*, his memoir of growing up the son of a former priest and nun, Manseau uses an alter ego to tell the story of fictional Yiddish poet Itsik Malpesh, born in the Moldovan city of Kishinev in 1903. Itsik's story is told through his Yiddish memoirs, which he helps a young American Catholic (working, like Manseau once did, as a Yiddish archivist) translate. Inspired by the image of Sasha, the brave butcher's daughter who was present at his birth, Itsik reaches America in young adulthood through haphazard luck, a taste for troublemaking and the inventiveness of a printer. Sasha continually inspires and confounds Itsik throughout his life, becoming an apt symbol for Yiddish humor, sorrow and idealism. As Itsik's darkly picaresque immigrant narrative unfolds, it competes with the translator's modern romance and with insights into the art of translation and the history of Yiddish. Occasional narrative missteps are not enough to undercut this rich, often ironic homage to Yiddish culture and language. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed June 16, 2008) (Publishers Weekly, vol 255, issue 24, p29)

Library Journal:

This debut novel enfolds the lives of 90-year-old Yiddish poet Itsik Malpesh and the story's narrator, the young translator of Itsik's memoirs, who is employed at a warehouse for Jewish books. Born in Kishinev, Russia, Itsik learns the story of a girl named Sasha Bimko. Four years his senior, Sasha—the butcher's daughter—bravely prevented an assault on Itsik's mother when he was born during a pogrom. Sasha moves away after her father is murdered, and as Itsik grows up, she becomes his poetic muse. After immigrating to the United States, Itsik writes love poems to Sasha while working in the infamous garment factories of New York's Lower East Side. When Sasha shows up during Itsik's highly publicized poetry reading, they immediately fall in love but are separated by a jealous misunderstanding; later, the narrator discovers that he has an uncanny connection to the couple. Although Itsik's life is cleverly narrated, he and many of the other characters lack depth, and many unfolding events push the story outside the realm of believability. An optional purchase.—David A. Beronä, Plymouth State Univ., NH --David A. Berona (Reviewed August 15, 2008) (Library Journal, vol 133, issue 13, p70)

Kirkus:

A young translator delivers an old man's last testament, the untold story of a talented Yiddish poet. A spiritual philosopher, memoirist (*Vows*, 2005, etc.) and founder of the literary site Killing The Buddha, Manseau has already delved into his own Catholic upbringing. In his debut novel, he reaches across cultures to compose a living, breathing portrait of a bad-tempered but charmingly eloquent poet and the young man chosen to bring his words forward in time. "One cannot write of memory without wanting to explain with every ink stroke all that was once unknown," says Yiddish poet Itsik Malpesh, who remembers his 90-something years with equal parts impish humor and profound melancholy. Malpesh's story is interspersed with that of his translator, a religion major who catalogues books for a Jewish cultural organization. A well-timed coincidence brings him to the door of the aged poet as well as Malpesh's stack of 22 notebooks chronicling his life. "To be the greatest," Malpesh chuckles, "One needs only to be the last." The translator's inexperience puts Malpesh's cynical voice into perspective, as the young man's clumsy first experiences with modern-day romance stand in stark, sometimes poignant contrast to Malpesh's recollections of his long journey. The poet writes of the violent pogrom that marked his birth in Eastern Europe and of the young daughter of local butcher Sasha Bimko who witnesses his arrival and plays a most momentous role in his later life. The emergent poet becomes a revolutionary journalist in Odessa before fleeing to Manhattan, where he becomes entangled with Jewish mobsters and works in the sweat shops of the garment district. It's only at the end of a long, long life that Malpesh finally arrives at his own version of a promised land. A terrific book with a believable protagonist who's given ample room to tell his tale. (Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 2008)

Author biography courtesy of www.petermanseau.com

Peter Manseau, author, *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*

Peter Manseau is the author the memoir *Vows*; the novel *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*; and most recently *Rag and Bone: A Journey Among the World's Holy Dead*.

He has won the *National Jewish Book Award*, the *Sophie Brody Medal for Outstanding Achievement in Jewish Literature*, the *Ribalow Prize* for Fiction,

and was short listed for *the Mercantile Library First Novel Award*. His books have published in eight languages and on four continents.

A founding editor of KillingTheBuddha.com and coauthor of *Killing the Buddha: A Heretic's Bible*, he is both a doctoral candidate in religion and lecturer in journalism at Georgetown University. He lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife and two daughters.

Study Guide: *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*

Courtesy of Simon & Schuster

Discussion Questions

1. "Now that I have read them all, I know the many ways in which the tale of Malpesh's life resonates with the events that led me to his door: a failed love affair, lies of faith, threat of scandal, and, most important, the promise of deliverance through the translation of words. (p. 7)" To what extent does the translator's involvement with Malpesh seem grounded in his own preoccupations and emotional needs, rather than in an exact rendering of those of his subject? When he writes of "deliverance through...translation," what kind of redemption is he looking for, and how does he achieve it in *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*?
2. How would you characterize Sasha Bimko's role in the birth of Itsik Malpesh? How does Malpesh's account of his birth compare to the reality that Sasha discloses to him as an adult? What does his own romanticized vision of his entry into the world reveal about Malpesh's personality? Why does the translator decide to include both accounts of Malpesh's birth in his translated memoir, despite their contradictions?
3. "In such an environment, not passing would have required a concerted effort. And, worse, it might have been disruptive. Why bother insisting I was not a Jew when such insistence would only confound everyone around me? (p. 41)" How does the translator's decision to conceal his true religious identity as a Catholic affect his interactions with his coworker, Clara, and with Itsik Malpesh, the subject of his translation? What does his decision to feign being Jewish reveal about his own comfort with his actual identity?
4. "[M]y secret learning came at a cost. How could I forget the daily labor I endured to remain housed within this new castle of the mind? (p. 63)" How does Itsik's deception of his family in order to learn how to read Russian compare to his

translator's deception of his employers to learn Yiddish? How does each man's discovery of a new language open up new worlds to him, and what do these worlds represent in terms of future possibilities, hopes, and dreams?

5. How is Chaim Glatt responsible for changing the course of Itsik Malpesh's life as a young boy in Kishinev, and how does that compare to his impact on Itsik, the young and naive émigré in New York, in his newly adopted persona of Charlie Smooth? What accounts for their seemingly irreparable connection to each other? To what extent is Itsik's implication of Chaim in the death of Hershl Shveig a kind of payback for Chaim's mistreatment of him over the years?

6. "Owing to my own relative ignorance when I first encountered his work, I did not mention any of the larger issues of accuracy...merely some incidents that, to my mind, strained a reader's confidence in his reliability. (p. 85)" How does the series of translator's notes that appears in the narrative of the *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* affect your reading of the life story of Itsik Malpesh? How did the translator's role in the narrative inform your appreciation of Malpesh? To what extent can you imagine this novel stripped of the translator and his story?

7. "Is my *bashert* then Sasha Bimko? (p. 52)" I asked. How does his idealized vision of Sasha Bimko as his destiny, his beloved, and his muse enable Itsik Malpesh to focus his budding ambitions as a poet? In what respects does Malpesh's attachment to Bimko seem to be grounded in a kind of self-preservation, as she is his one living connection to his birthplace and his family? To what extent does their eventual romantic involvement seem inevitable, and why does the resolution of that relationship in *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, draw in Malpesh's translator and his girlfriend, Clara?

8. How do the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Malpesh and Hershl Shveig's first encounter compare to their later involvement as adults? Why does Malpesh misinterpret Shveig's interactions with Sasha? What role do their religious differences of opinion play in Malpesh's inability to comprehend Shveig's innocence? How would you characterize the consequences of Malpesh's actions against Shveig? Why does the translator choose to relate this information in his translation of the memoir, rather than expose Malpesh to the authorities as a murderer?

9. "There is more to tell about how I came to be the translator of Itsik Malpesh, and about the great joke of the fates this arrangement would come to seem.(p. 6)" How do the translator and Malpesh seem fated for each other? How does the translator's

connection to Sasha Bimko, through his relationship with Clara, lead Malpesh back to his *bashert*? How does "the great joke of the fates" (p. 6) seem to be at play throughout *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, given the many quirks of coincidence that bring characters back into one another's lives?

10. Of the many characters who populate *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, which did you find most compelling, and why? Given the novel's simultaneous narratives -- the story of Itsik Malpesh, and the story of his translator -- did you feel that either story was more engrossing, or did both engage you equally as a reader? To what extent are these dual narratives able to be separated from each other, and what argument might the author be making about the nature of translation in their interconnectedness?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. In *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, families become separated by war, ethnic and religious violence, and longstanding disagreements. Many of them carry around fragments of their lost families in the form of letters, photographs, stories, and memories. How do you carry around your family with you? What historical documents, letters, images, and stories do you feel depict your relationship with the far-flung members of your family? If someone were translating your life into a book, what would be the essential pieces that would help him or her make sense of it? You may want to bring some of these pieces to your next book group gathering, to share the sense of belonging and separation that comes with being part of a family comprised of many generations.

2. *Oy vey!* Peter Manseau's book makes use of deep wordplay to explore the remarkable flexibility of the Yiddish language. Have you ever wondered how many words you know and use in everyday conversation that derive from Yiddish? Are there Yiddishisms you know that you aren't entirely sure of the meaning of? Visit the Yiddish dictionary online to enter words in either English, Yiddish, or Hebrew to learn more about your own Yiddish references:
<http://www.yiddishdictionaryonline.com>.

3. In *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, entire families are lost to one another in the course of their immigration to America. Today, tremendous digital resources exist to enable families to track their ancestors' arrivals to America. Accessing a database of some 25 million records of immigrant arrivals, the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation enables visitors to search (for free) by name or date of birth for long-lost relatives. Do you know when your family first arrived in this country?

Visit <http://www.ellisland.org> to begin your search for your ancestors. You may want to compare notes with your fellow book club members about your findings.

Links for Songs for the Butcher's Daughter

- Author Peter Manseau's Website
<http://www.petermanseau.com/>
- The National Yiddish Book Center
<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>
The Yiddish Book Center works to rescue Yiddish and other modern Jewish books and open up their content to the world. This real life archive serves as the basis of the warehouse in which *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter's* narrator first encounters the works of Itzik Malpesh. You may also enjoy reading *Outwitting History*, Aaron Lansky's "rollicking tale" recounting the Book Center's founding.
Can you add that in for me?
- Video with Author Peter Manseau discussing the evolution of this book:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE3zmZChK0I>
- Author Peter Manseau interview with NPR's Scott Simon
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99206222>
- Hadassah Magazine Interview & Excerpt
<http://www.hadassahmagazine.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=twI6LmN7IzF&b=5724115&ct=7809849>

Jewish Book Links

- JCC Reads
JCC Reads is a new signature program from JCC Association. Join other JCCs across the continent in reading the same books each year, uniting JCC readers into one large reading group.
<http://www.jcca.org/jccreads/>
- Yiddish Book Center's The Jewish Reader
Every month *The Jewish Reader* posts a new selection from contemporary and classic Jewish fiction, poetry and memoir, offering reviews, excerpts, and thought-

provoking questions. Add your comments to the conversation on the best of modern Jewish literature!

<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/jewish-reader>

- Jewish Book Council

<http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/>

Jewish Book Council serves to promote the reading, writing, publication, distribution, and public awareness of books that reflect the rich variety of the Jewish experience.

Check out their book group resources page:

<http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/page.php?189>

- Tablet Magazine

<http://www.tabletmag.com/category/books/>

Tablet is a daily online magazine of Jewish news, ideas, and culture.

- [JBooks.com](http://www.jbooks.com/) – The Online Jewish Book Community

<http://www.jbooks.com/>