



The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye (Jewish Encounters Series)

By Jeremy Dauber

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Part of the Jewish Encounters series

The first comprehensive biography of one of the most beloved authors of all time: the creator of *Tevye the Dairyman*, the collection of stories that inspired *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Novelist, playwright, journalist, essayist, and editor, Sholem Aleichem was one of the founding giants of modern Yiddish literature. The creator of a pantheon of characters who have been immortalized in books and plays, he provided readers throughout the world with a fascinating window into the world of Eastern European Jews as they began to confront the forces of cultural, political, and religious modernity that tore through the Russian Empire in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

But just as compelling as the fictional lives of Tevye, Golde, Menakhem-Mendl, and Motl was Sholem Aleichem's own life story. Born Sholem Rabinovich in Ukraine in 1859, he endured an impoverished childhood, married into fabulous wealth, and then lost it all through bad luck and worse business sense. Turning to his pen to support himself, he switched from writing in Russian and Hebrew to Yiddish, in order to create a living body of literature for the Jewish masses. He enjoyed spectacular success as both a writer and a performer of his work throughout Europe and the United States, and his death in 1916 was front-page news around the world; a *New York Times* editorial mourned the loss of "the Jewish Mark Twain." But his greatest fame lay ahead of him, as the English-speaking world began to discover his work in translation and to introduce his characters to an audience that would extend beyond his wildest dreams. In Jeremy Dauber's magnificent biography, we encounter a Sholem Aleichem for the ages.

(With 16 pages of black-and-white illustrations)

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Editorial Review

Review

“Dauber’s story rivals those told by his subject: it is a rollicking narrative of fortunes won and lost, of bouts of wanderlust and bursts of good luck followed by trails of emotional upheaval. Sholem Aleichem emerges from these pages as a far more complex character than posterity would have us believe. At the heart of this book is a thoroughgoing and ultimately successful attempt to give equal time to Sholem Rabinovich: to apprehend the man and his work as part and parcel of a modernist project rather than a throwback, to situate him against the roiling background of change rather than safely ensconced in a cocoon.”

—*The New Republic*

“All encompassing and sprightly written, dotted with stories that illuminate its subject. It elegantly combines the facts of Sholem Aleichem’s life with his life’s work, and will no doubt inspire readers to further explore the master humorist’s oeuvre.”

—*Hadassah Magazine*

“What makes Dauber’s book an ideal introduction to Sholem Aleichem is the way it judiciously places the writer at the forefront of ‘an emergent sense that Yiddish literature could and should be literary.’

Comprehensive, prodigiously researched . . . a life related in riveting detail.”

—*Haaretz*

“Dauber celebrates his hero’s ups and downs—from rags to riches and back again, and then again forth—in terms that mimic the chatty narrative of . . . so many of Sholem Aleichem’s tongue-in-cheek tales of lovable rouges and fools.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Dauber is superb at situating the writer within his literary and historical context.”

—*The Atlantic*

“Dauber’s excellent *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* is a biography of the day-to-day life of a writer and an examination of the meaning of his works.”

—*Commentary*

“With an eye for interesting detail, Dauber takes us year-by-year through the life of the writer who entered this world as Sholem Rabinovich. [An] engrossing biography . . . graced with an occasional glint-in-the-eye touch.”

—*Moment*

“Dauber brings the ‘Jewish Mark Twain’ to life.”

—*The New Yorker*

“A must for every Jewish bookshelf, this is the definitive biography of the Yiddish writer. Dauber knows the territory, and situates the writer in a time of upheaval and transition.”

—*Forward*

“The first comprehensive biography of the giant of Yiddish literature. . . . Beautifully written.”

—*The Jewish Week*

“Could it be that we are just another invention of the man who called himself Sholem Aleichem? Revealing the many worlds contained in one man, Jeremy Dauber has managed to shine a light on what it means to be us: to be a Jew in this place and this time. It’s an experience that might be almost painful if Dauber’s book weren’t so funny, sharp, profound, and utterly alive.”

—Nicole Krauss, author of *The History of Love*

“Sholem Aleichem’s life was as improbable and dramatic as any of his stories, and in this first comprehensive English-language biography of the greatest Yiddish writer, Jeremy Dauber marvelously brings the adventure to life. If you want to learn how European Jews first entered, laughing, into the horror and majesty of modern life, start here.”

—Dara Horn, author of *The World to Come* and *A Guide for the Perplexed*

“Two hundred thousand people turned out for Sholem Aleichem’s funeral in 1916. He was the most beloved writer the Jewish world had ever known, yet somehow it’s taken almost one hundred years for a proper biography to finally appear. Fortunately, Jeremy Dauber’s account was worth waiting for. *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* is original, comprehensive, insightful, and riveting. We all owe Dauber an enormous debt of gratitude.”

—Aaron Lansky, president, Yiddish Book Center and author of *Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books*

“Dauber brings to his task a comprehensive knowledge not only of Sholem Aleichem’s life but also of the contexts—historical and literary—in which he wrote and thrived. His prose is swift, clean, and clear, and the portrait that emerges is sharply focused.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“Sholem Aleichem invented Tevye and his daughters, but if you think *Fiddler on the Roof* is the only reason we should remember him, just wait until you read *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem*. In a warm and witty style suited to his subject, Dauber tells the story of the writer known as the ‘Yiddish Mark Twain’ and shows why Sholem Aleichem is one of the most important figures in modern Jewish culture. His story encompasses riches and poverty, revolution and emigration, Russia and America, literature and theater and journalism—all the opportunities and pressures of Jewish life in the modern world. This is the major biography Sholem Aleichem deserves.”

—Adam Kirsch, author of *Why Trilling Matters*

About the Author

JEREMY DAUBER is a professor of Yiddish literature at Columbia University, where he also serves as director of its Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies and teaches in the American Studies program. His previous books include *In the Demon’s Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* and *Antonio’s Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*. He lives in New York City.

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Chapter 1

In Which We Begin Near the Very End

1915–1859

The Bronx, late 1915.

Late at night, the man the world knows as Sholem Aleichem wanders the streets, remembering. He is fifty-six but, to our eyes, looks older: almost seven years of battling tuberculosis has taken its toll, and though he has had periods of good health, he has gotten sicker and sicker while in New York. The noise and chaos of the city have never agreed with him; he has never quite managed to find his footing in its booming Yiddish literary and cultural life—not now, and not when he was last here, almost a decade ago. He misses the warmth of the Italian Riviera; he misses his friends from Russia, separated not only by distance, but by war (the United States has yet to commence hostilities, but he has seen trainloads of refugees and sailed through mine-infested waters; he is well aware of the Great War). A still greater personal tragedy, the death of his oldest son, has just devastated the family, and he has recently composed his will.

Always an insomniac by nature, given to writing late into the night, he leaves his apartment at 968 Kelly Street, right off Westchester Avenue and a block from the 163rd Street subway stop, and walks the neighborhood, a little like his beloved Dickens used to do, spending his time in the past, trying to recall his life's details for his autobiography.

From near the very beginning, he had known his life would make good copy. Twenty years earlier, he'd told his good friend, fellow writer, and sometime competitor Mordkhe Spektor that he would write a lengthy account of his first twenty years; "a man's life [is] the finest novel," he wrote him, "and mine is rich with episodes, characters and types." But life—that rich, varied life—had gotten in the way, and he had put off recording it until 1908, when a grave illness provided him, as he put it, "the privilege of meeting his majesty, the Angel of Death, face to face." Writing an autobiography and making a will were almost the same thing, he once said, and though he composed a few chapters on his sickbed in Italy, he pushed it off as his health improved, preferring, as he so often did, to concentrate on looking forward rather than back. He wrote a critic four years later that he felt so young, so vital, that he would never finish an autobiographical account; there would always be more to the story.

But other factors intervened, which we'll return to in their proper time, and in three short but eventful years that vitality had waned: the work once titled *Step by Step*, with its sense of movement, energy, forward progress, was being serialized in the Yiddish press under the title *From the Fair*. Explaining the choice of name, especially the preposition, he wrote: "A man heading for a fair is full of hope. He has no idea what bargains he will find and what he will accomplish .?.?. don't bother him, he has no time. But on the way back he knows what deals he has made and what he has accomplished. He's no longer in a hurry .?.?. He can assess the results of his venture."

Though he was still writing, he had, in his mind, already left the fair behind.

Users Review

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Kelly Neidig:

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