



Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son

Sholom Aleichem , Dan Miron (Introduction) , Aliza Shevrin (Translation)

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Tevye is the compassionate, lovable, Bible-quoting dairyman from Anatevka, and *Tevye the Dairyman* is a heartwarming and poignant account of life in turn-of-the-century Russia. Through the workaday world of a rural dairyman, his grit, wit, and heart, his daughters' courtships and marriages, and the eventual menace of the pogroms, Sholem Aleichem reveals the fabric of a now-vanished world.

Motl is the clear-eyed, spirited, mischievous boy who narrates *Motl the Cantor's Son*, a comic novel about his emigration with his family from Russia to America. It is a journey that mirrors a larger exodus, telling the story of the disintegration of traditional Jewish life and the beginning of a new chapter of Jewish history in America.

Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son Details

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From Reader Review Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son for online ebook

Olivia says

I'm giving 5 stars solely because of *Tevye the Dairyman*, which I adored. Tevye--inherently likable and inherently untrustworthy--grants us a view of his world, including the lies he tells himself. It is in the half-truths and omissions, often hidden by gut-busting humor, that the story gains its incredible vitality and bite. Through his telling, we begin to see Tevye in his entirety, flaws and all, and like with a friend, we feel what he feels. By causing us to be so dependent on Tevye, Aleichem creates a work that is both rooted in cultural and temporal specificity and universally human.

Motl the Cantor's Son is not as noteworthy. It's important to note that it's unfinished, so who knows what it would have looked like had Aleichem lived to complete it. As is, it has some brilliantly funny moments, but grows stale in the second half.

Michael Butchin says

Most people think they know Tevye the Dairyman from Sholem Aleichem's stories. But they probably don't. What most of us remember is the character Tevye from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, and we probably remember either Zero Mostel or Chaim Topol in the starring role. But this is not actually the Tevye of Aleichem's stories.

In the musical, and in the movie, we get to know a pleasant, if worn down fellow, one who's trying to make a living, to support his wife and five daughters. He's warm and friendly, and generous and kind. However, the character we see on stage is actually an amalgam of Tevye's better points. A softening and an improving of the character that Sholom Aleichem actually wrote about.

I highly recommend a good translation of the collected stories about Tevye the Dairyman, from whithersoever you can obtain one. I recommend the volume *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*, translated by Aliza Shevrin and published by Penguin.

Tevye, as written by his author, is not the same pleasant person we know from popular culture. While he does embody the same mixture of comedy and tragedy, he is far less friendly, and far more self-important. Tevye thinks very highly of his own scholarship, which, one sees over time, is the kind of intellectual pride that a child, or a fool who has learnt a few things and now thinks of himself as a Great Thinker. Whenever someone tries to engage Tevye in conversation, he responds with partial quotes from the Torah and the commentaries, as he thinks apropos to the situation. He evades queries with queries of his own, and often tries to build himself up in the eyes of his interlocutors, that they, too, might come to see how clever and learned Tevye is. This attitude just as often frustrates and angers those trying to talk to him. Even a simple "Hello!" can be an occasion for Tevye to show off his "scholarship."

He is almost misogynistic, and he is also inordinately proud of his seven daughters, taking opportunity to boast of their beauty, their intelligence, and their boldness of spirit. Yet because of his own intellectual vanity, he seems unable to really connect intimately with his family as he might like. It's as if he is so busy pretending to be what he is not, that he never understands how to simply be who he is. He has an unshakable confidence in himself, and although he is hard working, he does not believe that he can ever really improve his lot in life. For Tevye, success is not influenced by one's own efforts, but all is left in the hands of

HaShem.

In the books, Tevye has seven daughters, as opposed to the five mentioned in the play. And their stories, though similar, are not nearly so happy. While Tzeitl does get to marry Motl Kamzoyl, and has several children with him, he dies of tuberculosis, leaving Tzeitl a widow who returns to live with Tevye. Hodl does run off with Fefferl—Perchik—but the books do not fully tell what Perchik has been up to. While the movie, especially, portrays Perchik as a communist revolutionary who wants to improve life for all men, the books only allow us to see through Tevye's eyes, and with his understanding. Or lack of it. And Tevye's shtetl mindset cannot conceive of the wider world as his children see it. Yet, he likes Perchik because he can have arguments with him, and as in the play, Tevye sees Hodl off when she goes to him in Siberia.

Chava does fall in love with a gentile and marries him. But it Tevye finds out from the priest himself, without Golde's intermediating. We see that the priest and Tevye have a longstanding relationship in which they discuss theology, and the priest regularly tries to convert Tevye, being somewhat fond of him (even if he is a Jew). When Tevye is informed of Chava's fate, it seems as if she had been taken away by the gentiles of the village. And later, when Tevye, on his way home from making his dairy run to the neighboring town of Yehuppetz, sees Chava on the road, trying to explain to him, he stops his ears and runs, believing that the Devil was whispering in his ear, trying to play on his natural affection for his daughter.

Shprintze becomes enamored of a local fellow, a wealthy young wastrel, and he falls in love with her. Later on, Tevye is summoned by the boy's uncle, who tries to buy him off. As it turns out, the boy's family didn't want their heir to marry, or be associated with, the daughter of a lowly dairyman. Shprintze drowns herself. And there is even some question, given the situation, as to whether or not she might have been pregnant.

Beilke allows herself to be married off to a wealthy boor, because she wants to be able to help her father and sisters as the wife of a rich man. Eventually, however, the money runs out, and Beilke and her husband flee to America to make a living.

In the end, the pogroms come to Tevye's village, and he must leave. His wife Golde has already died, and he goes with Tzeitl and her children, and (although it is left unclear) Chava, who returns, because she would share her people's fate.

The stories are memorable, and charming, and wonderful, as only Sholem Aleichem can write. But the character Tevye is certainly not who we think of nowadays.

I strongly urge you to read the stories and tales of Tevye the Dairyman.

Elaine says

This Sholom Aleichem is amazing -- I've read two of his books in the last couple of months and I laughed and cried and learned so much from each of them. The greatest disappointment is that (and this may be a spoiler) -- the author dies before he finished Motl the Cantor's Son, right in the middle of a chapter, so we are denied meeting more quirky characters and seeing Amerikeh through the eyes of the 9-year-old immigrant boy, Motl. Most valuable is Motl's description of leaving the shtetl (packing and deciding who is going and who is staying), crossing (illegally) the border out of Russia into no-man's-land -- is it Poland, Lithuania? depends on what year and which border, trying to find accommodation in Germany, Antwerp and Whitechapel, London, dealing with Mama's trachoma (how to cure it, whom to bribe), how to survive with little or no money or possessions. The ocean crossing and the new life in New York have been written about

elsewhere (tho not as vividly, in my opinion), but the earlier part of the journey is rarely documented. A delightfully wry and reliable narrator is this little kid Motl, casting his curious eye on family members and immigration officials alike.

Alejandro Canton-Dutari says

Sholem Aleichem and his story Tevye the Dairyman are related to the popular Broadway musical and movie Fiddler on the Roof. The translation from Yiddish is good, though many words in such language that remain in the English text may deter the reading flow for those who are not familiar with them. There is a glossary at the end.

The stories give us some light into the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the XIX and early XX centuries. I enjoyed learning some historical facts such as Ellis Island being known as Castle Garden, which quite reminded me of going through US airport customs after 9/11 with its interrogation rooms. Things seem to have come full circle in a bit over a century. "We're locked up. We can only through the bars. We're like convicts or beats..."

The characters in both stories will become dear to your heart, hopefully.

Natalie Williams says

I thoroughly enjoyed this satirical voyage through the lives of two slightly exaggerated Jewish males . . . indeed, I can see why they call the author the, "Jewish Mark Twain". If you can get through the introduction, give yourself time to because a great deal is explained as to the why's and wherefore's of these tales . . . Tevye is a stubborn curmudgeon in many ways who will not see his part in his own undoings and yet he evokes sympathy due to his general good outlook, albeit tinged with a large dose of fatalism, and his ability to tell a good story. Motl, on the other hand seems to be almost the spirit of the new Jewish philosophy that came about during the diaspora, he envelopes that liberating spirit and it was maddening not to be able to read about how it all turned out for him and his family in America . . . then again, maybe it's for the best as the reader can imagine the ending they'd like this way.

Tobias says

Wish it hadn't taken me quite so long to get to these. Some of these stories are real gems. Of course, it's impossible to read the Tevye stories without thinking of Fiddler on the Roof, but what surprised me is how faithful Fiddler is to the spirit of the stories, the same mixture of pathos and humor. I think the difference is that Aleichem was writing while pogroms were still driving Jews from Russia, whereas Fiddler was being produced by and for the grandchildren of those Jews living comfortably in America. Same material, different context. Also, I think it's impossible to watch Fiddler without thinking of the destruction of European Jewry, which Aleichem could not have known was coming. Also, a note on the "Motl" stories. i found them slow going at first, but I don't think I've read anything quite like the account, as told by an adolescent boy, of a Jewish family trying to make its way from Russia to America, going through Ellis Island, and building a life in Manhattan.

Chrisanne says

Advertised as the Jewish Mark Twain and the basis for Fiddler on the Roof I was eagerly curious to get ahold of a copy.

After reading the Tevye sections I still didn't know what to think. The tone was wry, the culture obvious (I think I missed a lot), the eliminated stories were so heart-rending, and the ending so typically Tevye that I felt like I was living through the confusing 2016 election again. ;)

Highly recommended. Still in awe that somehow this classic turned into yet another classic. Neither better than the other in my opinion.

Howard says

This is the classic Yiddish tale by Ukrainian Aleichem (1859-1916) written between 1894 and 1910. I wasn't aware that this is the story from which the famous 'Fiddler of the Roof' (and my favourite musical) came from.

Tevye is a poor Jewish dairy farmer who tells Sholem, himself, his family tale in simple yet poignant language. He has 6 or 7 daughters by Golde and needs to marry them off – you probably know that in descending age they choose less and less acceptable partners rendering Tevye seemingly powerless to events and certainly as a pogrom approaches. The sad tale unfolds with the Jewish faith and Tevye's view on life and God taking centre stage. The tale is remarkably similar to the musical but significantly explains how he got his cows/farm and more importantly has a fourth daughter after Chava. The differences and similarities make this a really good read, but it is still excellent as a novel on its own merits for the stylish feeling of empathy you get for Tevye's lot.

Quotes

"So I went out and greeted them with a hearty sholem Aleichem. "Welcome", I said "What are you doing here, my dear neighbours? What good news do you bring?. The mayor, Ivan Poperilo, stepped forward and said without any preliminaries, "We have come here, Tevye, to beat you up"

"There is a God above. I am not saying my God or your God, I am speaking of the God of all of us, who sits above and sees all the wickedness that goes on down below"

I loved the musical and love the book in equal measure.

The book also includes the unfinished novel "Motl the Cantor's son". This was also written by Aleichem. It is actually the larger proportion of the book. It too is told in first person by Motl, a young boy of about 8. He loses his father early on and he takes us on his journey, with his ever tear full mother and married brother, to America.

I don't think it particularly matters that the story does literally end mid chapter since there has been an awful lot of story before hand. The tale depicts the emigration of the poor Jewish family and their subsequent efforts to make a living.

Emma says

I was fortunate enough to run into this book thanks to another book blogger. This is delightful, well written, funny, and witty.

The first story will be very familiar to you if you have watched *Fiddler on the Roof*, though you will never find in the whole story the word TRADITION!! LOL!

The second story is told from the mouth of a kid, who has great eyes, and comments on everything and everyone. It is every interesting to see how the author manages to mix the tragic and the humorous, while recounting the exodus from Russia to an American ghetto, never without respect, never mocking. When humor never becomes irony, I say: great job! I was only disappointed to get to the end without end: the author died at the beginning of a new section, without having time to finish his book.

original post:

<http://wordsandpeace.wordpress.com/20...>

Emma @ Words And Peace

Antonomasia says

Penguin Classics edition, translated by Aliza Shevrin

This edition's annotation system is uniquely irritating among Penguin Classics, making the text of the Tevye stories a trial to read. I read the later and inferior unfinished novel, *Motl the Cantor's Son* first, to put off dealing with it. Tevye narrates in first person (when *Fiddler on the Roof* follows him around the village as he talks, it reflects this) – and his speech is peppered with his own free and easy interpretations of the scriptures. Both Tevye's interpretations and the original quotes have been incorporated into the body of the text. They're not footnoted. They aren't even in brackets, for goodness' sake. They're part of the same sentence as what he's saying. There are usually italics, but their use always doesn't make clear what's the actual quote and what Tevye sees it as, and even then, there aren't always two versions of the same idea, so you don't know what is and is not glossed. And italics are sometimes used for other things as well. I can't imagine how this presentation is useful; surely the only people who might not struggle with it are those who know their Torah inside out, but then they could spot his misinterpretations by themselves. I wondered if the system originates in a Jewish textual tradition. Anyone? If so, it may not be the best choice for a general imprint like Penguin as it's inaccessible and unintuitive for readers who have never been observant Jews. Likewise the glossary of Yiddish, Russian and Jewish terms could have been better: some are very well known, info on others is skimpy, and it doesn't mention more obscure words that are in the text. [A lot of us think the notes in classics were better when we were younger. Is that an abstruse symptom of ageing?] Anyway, I tried to get as much as I could out of the book despite struggling with the unusual annotation.

In some other posts, I've mentioned that whilst I was growing up, I got so tired of hearing about things related to the Second World War that then, for about 15 years, I read and watched practically nothing related to it. And because of that break, there are aspects of it which were then unfamiliar, which now seem almost new and strangely emotive. Once I'd seen too many pictures of heaps of dead people's glasses and shoes and they ceased to have an impact. But late last year I read a bit about the destruction of shtetl culture and the decline of the Yiddish language, and can't think of these things without sadness about what, and who, was lost. I find endangered languages very sad anyway, but this is a sadder story than most because of the scale of deliberate human destruction: before the war there were 11-13 million Yiddish speakers; about 5 million were killed in the Holocaust, and most of those who weren't migrated to countries where they needed to speak other languages to get by; most contemporary estimates of Yiddish speaker numbers are more than 15

years old and included a lot of elderly people.

Reading a book like this one is partly about seeing that shtetl culture from the inside, whilst it still existed. Aleichem wasn't entirely positive about it, however – he could see it stifling some people, some aspects of progress. (It needed peaceful change, not the one it was subjected to.) The book isn't, however, as emphatic as *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the whole plot is a retort to Tevye's opening song about Tradition: that structure surely a reflection of the time of the musical's and film's production - the Western 1960s and another dismantling of traditions.

Motl the Cantor's Son

I'd have probably enjoyed this at age 10-11, when I read a lot of Victorian & Edwardian children's classics. Sholem Aleichem is frequently compared to Mark Twain; it's a long time since I've read Twain, but the boy narrator, simple style, and adventures, some of which don't seem all that big to an adult, produce echoes. Nine-year-old Motl's narration doesn't always sound like a boy - often it has the confident voice of an adult author - yet the child's limited perspective on people and events is retained. There was frustratingly little insight into the grownups, who end up defined by a handful of habits: Motl's mother's frequent crying, or his elder brother Elyahu who continually wallops him and sets up various small business ventures. Another of the less pleasant, yet historically interesting, notable features of *Motl* was child characters learning sexism from adults via cumulative remarks. I'd guess that the extended-family group must be held together by some degree of warmth and communality, but a lot of what ends up on the page is bickering. This is the kind of thing a young reader would be less likely to notice: for them it's fair enough if adults are background noise; what they care about are the other children.

Earlier in this two-part unfinished novel, the stories were too short to hold my interest; they became involving when they later extended over several chapters: especially Elyahu's (and the whole family's) madcap business enterprises based on advice in an early self-help manual; the emigration journey across Europe; and more jobs and business ideas when they finally reach New York. It was great to hear about all the places in Europe they passed through, what they were like at the time, and how the family was treated by different countries' charitable bodies who aided refugees. (Even more interesting if your forebears followed similar routes.) This family's stops include Vienna and Antwerp - and a while in Whitechapel. If you've been to that area of London, this chapter is great for seeing a historical side of it less familiar than the usual Ripper and Krays material.

Ellis Island is one of those terms that, to non-Americans who feel bombarded by American culture, can seem hackneyed despite not knowing the full background. *Motl* tells the early 1900s immigrant's experience of it in excruciating detail, the hanging about, the dehumanising procedures, the anxiety over sponsors and separation from people.

As Motl himself gets used to life in America, he can't be bothered hearing about pogroms. It was strikingly similar to Philip Roth's Portnoy not wanting to know about the war and the Holocaust – both want to forget historic fears and get on with their lives as Americans: Motl and his friends looking set to become lower middle class businessmen, and Portnoy from the following generation, increasingly integrated as part of an intelligentsia.

Tevye the Dairyman

I didn't find Tevye quite as blameworthy a character as intro suggests (esp re his daughter Shprintze, who is, incidentally, absent from the film), yet he is hardly as straightforwardly "warm and wise" as the blurb says either; the film even makes him a more complex and contradictory personality than that - good for a chat around the village, but clearly less fun at home.

Curiously, the introduction describes *Fiddler on the Roof* as one of the schmaltziest musicals. Was the writer enjoying a pun for its own sake? Despite my love of many things camp, I don't generally get on with

musicals and I think I know a schmaltzy one when I see it. The IMDb reviews, too, are full of people saying, 'I don't like musicals but...' *Fiddler* seems to me a very New Hollywood variant: it addresses more difficult and delicate subjects than old-style productions did, even making a Russian Communist a minor hero; it's more gritty than pretty (and don't the people look remarkably ordinary compared with contemporary film stars?); and circumstances are such that everything can't quite be alright in the end, even if it looks as if it will be for some characters. [Tevye may be off to New York, but Chava's half-Jewish kids in Cracow - what fate awaits them in 40 or 50 years?]

I'm writing this paragraph in June, expanded from notes made in January; the following now gives me *deja-vu*, after saying similar about one other book I finished this year. Tevye is an outstanding example of an unreliable narrator: the narrative has an openness that allows the reader to see what other characters are really like rather than guess about distortion through Tevye's view. (His wife Golde, who has more personality in the book than on screen, comes across as an intelligent and capable woman who probably would have been very successful in an age where she'd have been able to work for herself after divorcing this fool of a husband who doesn't respect her better judgement.) Tevye's exuberant garrulousness carries the story along; what would make him irritating as a real person makes him fun to read. 'Only a writer would value him,' quotes the introduction; but the reader is able to press pause on his chat any time by putting the book down, and you can't do that with acquaintances, much as some people would like to. Still, it's unusual, and a considerable skill, to make a narrative style so outright enjoyable where the narrator would grate in reality. There's quite some skill in recreating that for translation too, although quotes in intro indicate that, unfortunately, a lot of wordplay has been lost in translation. Film-Tevye isn't quite such a chatterbox, or as much of a Walter Mitty or a crawler to authority - toning this down makes him more watchable for the audience he is more literally talking to. His silliness comes across on the screen in other ways - he tries to assert his dictatorial authority to little effect, and on one occasion looks like a toddler having a tantrum instead. He looks more of an old fashioned dad character than the holy fool he sometimes seems in the book (it's a Christian trope, but also a Russian one, so maybe...) He's not the outright creepy sort of unreliable narrator: he simply lacks self-awareness, and has traits which are variously old-fashioned, and/or a nuisance to his family in other ways.

Are the Tevye stories sadder and more moving for the post-WWII reader? Tevye and others still have implicit hope things will be okay more or less where they are, in Ukraine. (He doesn't emigrate to the USA in the book, although Sholem Aleichem did.) We know that, whilst he's less likely to live to see the war, his children and their children may well. I, like many, am tired of the excess of modern novels about the war, yet I felt such dread and sadness for these characters and their inevitable obliviousness to the short time they and their world had remaining. The film foregrounds the dread by making threats of violence against Jews, encouraged by the Tzar's officials, a part of the film almost from the start - whereas on paper Tevye and his fellow villagers' existence have long phases of not thinking about this danger; after all, things have been tolerable where they are for a long time. They are rudely interrupted, it seems, rather than having it hanging over them continually.

I usually look at multiple translations before deciding on one, but in this case it was impossible as Sholem Aleichem books aren't widely available in the UK. Ignoring the annotation issue (not easy) this one at least flows well, and has a strong personality. There may be room for improvement, if someone can translate the wordplay more effectively - dimensions of these stories appear to be absent in English. The *Tevye the Dairyman* stories are pretty enjoyable for themselves as well as being historically interesting. *Motl the Cantor's Son* had its moments, even a couple of laugh-out-loud ones, but it was one of those classics that interested me more as a historical document than for outright entertainment value.

Tamara Dahling says

If you've seen Fiddler on the Roof, then reading this book is a must! It's short vignettes told by Tevye telling his friend about his life, his family, his loves, faith, and frustrations. A good, touching book.

Czarny Pies says

La comédie musicale "Le Violon sur le toit" est basée sur l'anthologie de contes de Shalom Aliechem, "Tévié le laitier". Laquelle est la meilleure? Évidemment c'est la comédie musicale. De la même manière, on peut dire que "La Traviata" de Verdi est meilleure que "La Dame aux Camélias" de Dumas. Cependant, la pièce de Dumas est aussi excellente et mérite d'être lue. Alors je recommande fortement "Tévié le laitier" qui est excellent et qui aborde bien des sujets qui sont absents du "Violon sur le toit."

"Motl", la deuxième oeuvre dans ce volume est un très long fragment d'un roman inachevée qui décrit le parcours d'une communauté de juifs qui quittent l'empire Tsariste avant la première grande mondiale pour s'installer à New York. "Motl" a un certain intérêt pour des gens qui veulent comprendre l'expérience d'immigré juif au début du vingtième mais sa qualité littéraire est minime. On n'a pas besoin de lire. Avec "Tévié le laitier" on en a pour son argent.

Edward says

Introduction & Notes

Suggestions for Further Reading

A Note on the Translations

--Tevye the Dairyman

--Motl the Cantor's Son: Writings of an Orphan Boy

Glossary

Jonathan Hobdell says

I love this because it gives insight into many things: life in that Jewish part of Russia at the time, life in general, the Jewish view of the world and living life, and of course this is the book that inspired the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof".

Ushan says

After rereading *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow, I decided to also reread this classic novel about emigration to America in the early 1900s, which I read in Russian translation as a child. The breadwinner of a family living in a fictional majority-Jewish village in what was probably the Ukraine dies of tuberculosis. His widow and two sons slide into abject poverty. The elder son marries a rich man's daughter only to see his father-in-law

go bankrupt; his get-rich-quick schemes all come to naught. The family sells the half of the house it still owns and decides to emigrate. It illegally crosses the border between the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary, and goes from Brody (a border town) to Lemberg (now Lviv) to Krakow to Vienna to Antwerp to the East End of London, and eventually to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It subsists first on the proceeds from the sale of their property and then on charity. Once in America, the members of the family get stable if non-prestigious jobs, and eventually buy a convenience store. The author died before he could finish the novel.

All of this is told from the point of view of the younger son, a boy who is 9 at the end of the unfinished novel, naive but observant. At the beginning a calf is the boy's only friend, lost when the calf is slaughtered; at the end, the boy Americanizes his name and goes to a Charlie Chaplin movie. In the middle there is poverty and emigration, which the boy (really, the adult author) describes with his characteristic tragicomedy. It is a very humane novel.

This book also has the author's *Tevye the Dairyman*, which the Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof" is based off of, which I didn't feel like reading.
