

nor Moroccan,” as one of Bouyeri’s contemporaries described people like himself.

Like other Europeans, the Dutch have never made it easy for outsiders to feel at home. What might once have appeared, to them, anyway, to be generous—inviting huge numbers of foreign workers to a safe land where they could provide for their families—now can seem more like using, but *heedless* using. For decades, European countries carried on as if they could avoid the consequences if those workers stayed, which of course they did. Now, as French scholar Olivier Roy has noted, Islam is a Euro-

pean religion.

Theo van Gogh knew “the dangers of violent religious passions,” Buruma writes, but still acted “as though they held no consequences for him.” Yet there was charm in the way Theo spoke his obscene, unruly mind and then tottered off on his bicycle. His kind of insouciant candor is another victim of the age, and perhaps the most poignant aspect of “Dutchness” that now appears lost.

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IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

A Life in Translation

MY FATHER LIKES TO TELL two stories about the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. In the first, Singer is speaking to a group of students in New York City. Just as a shoemaker thinks of life in terms of shoes, he says, so a writer thinks of it in terms of writing. To Singer, God was, of course, a writer. “And what is God’s book?” my father remembers Singer saying to the stunned students. “Life itself. And one thing you have to admit about God’s book. It’s *interesting*. You always want to know what happens next.”

In my father’s second story, the 65-year-old Singer is glimpsed at a Holocaust memorial service on Earth Day, in 1970. He is sitting silently in the back, listening to survivors talk. Both of my father’s versions of Singer—the man who couldn’t stop thinking about God, and the writer who remained curious all his life—emerge in journalist and *Le Monde* literary critic Florence Noiville’s lovely and often disturbing take on the life of this master of the tale.

ISAAC B. SINGER:
A Life.

By Florence Noiville.
Translated by Catherine
Temerson, Farrar, Straus,
& Giroux. 192 pp. \$23

Though many Americans graduate from college without having read him, Singer (1904–91) is widely considered both a major writer of fiction and an important chronicler of European Jewish life, especially the vanished world of the shtetl, the village of the pious and usually poor. He emigrated to the United States from Poland in 1935 but persisted writing in Yiddish, even after most Yiddish speakers were killed in the Holocaust.

In America, Singer lived for years in the shadow of his older, successful-writer brother, Israel Joshua Singer, and eked out a living as a freelance journalist and contributor to the Yiddish newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*. He didn’t publish major work until he was 40, but from then on his production was startling. In all he published 14 novels, 16 children’s books, 10 works of nonfiction, two plays, and several hundred stories. His major works include *The Family Moskat* (1950), which was his first novel published in English, as well as *The Magician of Lublin* (1960), *The Manor* (1967), *The Estate* (1969), and *Shosha* (1978). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. The film musical *Yentl* is based on one of his short stories.

As Noiville reveals in her first sentence, Singer

disdained biographies as a means of understanding a writer. Perhaps Noiville means to signal, by this admission, that her attempt to bring Singer to life will lead to many dead ends. A scant 120,000 of Poland's three million Jews survived the Holocaust. Sixty years later, Noiville searches for the house where Singer was born, in Leoncin, 20 miles northwest of Warsaw; all that remains on the spot is an orchard. The section of Warsaw to which the Singer family relocated, memorialized in his books as the place where the thieves, the pimps, and the prostitutes were never too far from the virtuous, is gone too.

No one, Noiville discovers, wants to live on the street named after Singer in the town of his birth. Anti-Semitism runs deep. But a lot of people hated Singer the man as well. He left a five-year-old son in Poland and didn't see him again for 20 years. He lovingly described his mother in prose—but didn't write to her for a decade. He thrived on juggling the attentions of numerous women, and apparently demanded total devotion from his associates. Saul Bellow launched Singer's career in English with a beautiful translation of the short story "Gimpel the Fool," published in *Partisan Review* in 1953, but Singer failed to acknowledge this debt. Other Yiddish writers despised him, possibly because he alone managed to have an illustrious career in the English-speaking world. There is plenty of grumbling, too, that Singer's work in English has been sanitized from the Yiddish original.

I grew up hearing my father read Singer's magnificent short stories aloud. Whatever his personal shortcomings, Singer clearly loved every one of his characters. Noiville's book, translated from the French by Catherine Temerson, is eloquent, funny, and moving: a tribute to the art and importance of translation and to the life of Singer, who reached so many through devoted translators. And as Singer might say, a translation of a life may be as close as one human being can get to understanding another.

—Aviya Kushner

Long, Strange Trip

HOW DID A 2,448-MILE-LONG highway across some of the country's most unforgiving and sparsely populated territory become the road Americans think of when they dream of *really* going somewhere?

That's the question geographer Arthur Krim takes up in a book that is neither traditional road guide nor comprehensive history, but an account of the real-world origins of Route 66 and its development into a national symbol of democratic freedom, boundless promise, and westward-rolling self-exploration.

Following the pattern of Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (1965), Krim begins by examining the "idea" of Route 66 in its many prefigurations, from Native American footpaths to emigrant wagon trails to 19th-century railroads. Then he describes the "fact" of the road, its physical presence as a series of two-lane regional auto trails across Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, the Texas panhandle, New Mexico, Arizona, and California that became a single highway when the federal system of numbered routes was established in 1925. Finally, Krim turns to the symbolic importance of the road, as reflected in such disparate cultural artifacts as John Steinbeck's Dust Bowl novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and a 2000 billboard advertisement for Kmart's Route 66 clothing line.

In that third, and longest, section of the book, we learn just how large Route 66 has loomed in the American imagination. Bobby Troup, discharged from the Marines after World War II, made a seven-day trip with his wife to Los Angeles in February 1946, following U.S. 66 all the way from St. Louis to California. By April, Nat Cole's trio had recorded three different versions of Troup's "(Get Your Kicks On) Route Sixty-Six!" the postwar anthem that effectively changed the name of 66 from "highway" to "route" (always pronounced with an eastern inflection: "root"). In the 1969 biker film *Easy Rider*, an acid-dropping

ROUTE 66:

Iconography of the American Highway.

By Arthur Krim.
Center for American Places. 220 pp. \$35