



## Scum

*Isaac Bashevis Singer*

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## Scum Isaac Bashevis Singer

An authentic literary great, Singer was an author whose extraordinary talents won him a worldwide audience. And with this impressive novel, he proved that he was at the height of his creative power until his recent death at age 86. Scum evokes the teeming life of 1906 Warsaw's backstreets. Max Barabander, distraught over the recent death of his son, flees the life of wealth and respectability he has attained in Buenos Aires, to return to the poverty and shadows of his youth spent in Warsaw. He fears impotence which leads him to the pursuit of mindless sex with five different women who view him only as an escape from their drab lives. The author recalls the teeming life of 1906 Jewish Warsaw in this impressive novel of changing mores and values. . .

## Scum Details

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## Liedzeit says

Max Barabander, der in Argentinien erfolgreich gewordene Ex-Gauner und Immer-Noch-Schlawiner (naja, ob es das trifft, der Ausdruck kommt im Buch nicht vor - Original ist Shoym - Scum?) reist nach Warschau, eigentlich will er von da weiter in ein kleines Kaff, um das Grab der Eltern zu besuchen. Er ist 46 und in einer kleinen Krise. Impotenz. Außerdem ist sein Sohn gestorben und mit seiner Frau versteht er sich nicht mehr so recht. Die Krise bringt ihn dazu, der unschuldigen, jungen Arzele nachzusteigen - er stellt sich als Witwer vor. Aber eigentlich ist keine Frau sicher, oder er nicht vor ihnen. So schlimm ist es mit der Impotenz nicht, und während er die eine heiraten will, macht er Pläne mit einer anderen, ein Bordell mit polnischen Mädels in Buenos Aires aufzumachen. Wie ernst er das alles meint, weiß er selbst nicht. Am Schluss bringt er die aus Versehen um, wo er gerade neue Lebenspläne mit der netten Geisterseherin gemacht hat. So kann das gehen.

Sehr gut, aber nicht auf einer Höhe mit Jakob. Sehr einfach erzählt, aber ein echter page turner.

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## Ivana says

Žitatelj prati tijek misli glavnog lika Maxa Barabandera te njegov boravak u Varšavi u ljeto 1906. Naslov romana "Ništarija" govori sve o njegovom karakteru. Max je bivši poljski kriminalac koji se obogatio u Argentini te ondje osnovao obitelj. Nakon što mu umre sin i ne može više pronaći zajednički jezik sa suprugom, odlazi na putovanje Europom. Žitatelj ga prati tijekom boravka u Varšavi gdje se zapliće u laži i spletku. Rekla bih da je pouka ovog romana da uvijek može bježati, ali od sebe pobjeći ne može. Roman može biti zanimljiv nekome tko želi više saznati o židovskoj kulturi u Poljskoj početkom 20. stoljeća i o položaju žena u to vrijeme.

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## Matt says

Despite the fact that this book has gotten bad reviews, it won a Pulitzer Prize.

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## Hotrats says

Ah, to read literature. I love how Singer evokes the smell and feel of long ago Poland.

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## Megan says

Truthfully, I can never pass up a vividly written séance scene.

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## **Jason Williams says**

Ahhh . . . I don't know. This was my second stint with Singer, after perhaps the most beautiful story ever told in 'Gimpel the Fool.' I guess it's interesting to read a Jewish author, in 1991, going back to turn-of-the-century themes of Zionism and anti-Semitism wrapped around the aimless deeds and ruminations of a modern individual (who happens to be Jewish) living in the penumbra of modern cosmopolitan life -- the importance of insisting on urban anonymity in pre-cosmopolitan Warsaw was a recurring theme. We certainly can't accuse Singer of some teleological 'omens of the holocaust' themes that we might find if, say, Norman Podhoretz had written this book. I like tales that feature the struggles of modernity versus heritage, Jewish or not. But what are we to make of this one? It means less to me given that this story was written so long after the fact. But it means something to me that this nomadic, diasporan figure ultimately succumbed to a single fate after toying with so many possibilities in a search for re-definition.

Maybe Singer just got tired. I think he wanted this to be richer and more intricate. I guess I'll just throw it into the Jewish diaspora and identity studies pile. After all, Max did in fact re-learn to be proud of his Jewish-ness.

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## **Seán says**

Feels like the enfeebled effort of a once-great storyteller.

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## **Robert Wechsler says**

As dark as its name. I was fascinated.

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## **David Gross says**

The master storyteller.

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## **David Flett says**

An amusing farce, with a good cast of characters. A man who won't avoid his fate.

Cela's 'family of Pascual Duarte' leaves this in its shadow.

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## **Wessel van der Merwe says**

The interesting part for me is not the man's relationships and sexual dilemma because of his son's death and his wife that is no longer interesting in him, but the main character's way of arguing and talking to himself all

along even in conversations with people - sort of sharing his thoughts with you as the reader. The second interesting thing is the sharing of so many small traditional Jewish practices. The setting 1906 - forecasting the way of things to come after the wars - obvious from the author's side a speculation of that time or not - one cannot tell if he had any reality check on it; the fact remains it was written much later and therefore a reflection of the time. Nevertheless ingeniously put together. Another deduction from the book is that there is a definite and real consciousness of a real God among Jewish people! The dream while he was sleeping and had so many times in his life was a self-fulfilling prophecy except that this dream was a nightmare! It had no good ending in the dream and happened like that in reality - this cannot be any normal person's desire. Is it possible? Scum - very appropriate. It is a second novel of the author in a similar vein...

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### **Kevin Hirth says**

This is a strange book I found browsing in a bookstore so long that the owner offered me a discount just for bringing it to the register, something about it stands out, maybe the title - SCUM. The main character I can relate to, having survived something traumatic he wants to go crazy to feel alive, and gets himself all tangled up in his own nonsense (in a wholly deliberate and irresponsible way) in the distant and forgotten land he came from and has since tried to forget. The story blew by and I feel like there would be more to find should I read it again. I don't know what parable (likely many) this compares to but Max interacts with a number of different women that seem to each represent something specific, a couple are pure, a couple are not, a couple are just as lost as he is, and throughout the novel you realize he knows exactly what kind of trouble he's getting himself into even though he constantly tries to convince himself he can't stop, it's as if he wants exactly what he's asking for. To me it is like Max has already died or resolved himself to death. Perhaps it is supposed to be like the gauntlet of ghosts you must pass through after death as described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Tight story, interesting characters, and a strange type of page-turner. Max almost finds the oasis of hope he is looking for but he never quite makes it there. The author seems to be having fun just easily winding you up along with his ill-fated characters. I'll be reading more by Singer.

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### **Jeremy says**

Another stunning tale from a master storyteller. Singer has a unique power to make a forgotten world real and immediate

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### **Elise says**

I had read collections of Singer's short stories before reading this book, and I have always considered myself a fan of his unique and colorful storytelling quality, which is always delightfully infused with supernatural and magic realist elements. "Scum" is the first novel of Singer's I have read, and while it probably won't be my last, I feel lukewarm about it. The protagonist, Max, in spite of the fact that he is grieving the loss of his teenage son and subsequent alienation by his wife, Rochelle, in Buenos Aires, is difficult to feel sympathy for and to care about. Thereafter, Max returns to Warsaw, his hometown, essentially to get laid and to avoid eating a meal alone...ever. On his self-destructive path to hell via Warsaw's seedy underside, he encounters colorful characters as despicable as himself, and I am reminded of the funny saying that men think with their schlongs. Now imagine an impotent and narcissistic man. If the saying is true, and in Max Barabander's case it seems to be, he doesn't think at all. Some of the things he does in this novel are so incredibly stupid that

they don't ring true, especially if this guy is supposed to be street smart. I was also disappointed in the lack of Singer's magic, which was missing from this gritty tale, except for the seance scene, which is admittedly what kept me reading (that and the 1906 Warsaw, Poland setting). "Scum" was dark, sad, and at times darkly humorous, and this about sums it up: "Max sat up. Was this love? Yes, it was love. For the second time in his life, Max had fallen in love with a whore" (Singer, 176). That made me laugh a little, just like everything else in this book, which I liked \*a little\*.

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## **Txe Polon says**

Mi sensación es muy similar a la que experimenté leyendo *El mago de Lublin*, quizás la obra más conocida de Singer. *Escoria* tiene un buen planteamiento y una sugerente descripción de la sociedad y del ambiente en el que se sitúa la trama, pero la historia en sí, centrada en un personaje que me cae mal, no consigue atraparme ni interesarme. Es como un ejercicio estilístico de recreación de una época y una manera de vivir, pero en el fondo creo que le falta alma para que el devenir de los personajes te llegue emocionalmente. Más que con los dilemas del personaje, me quedo claramente con el ambiente que se respira en el barrio judío de aquella desaparecida Varsovia.

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