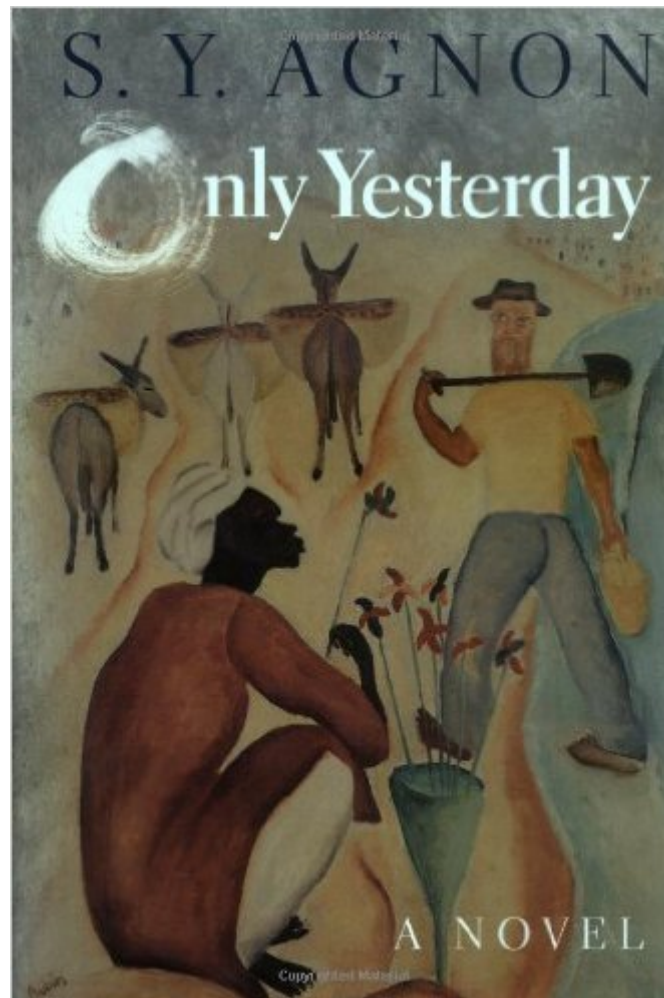


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Only Yesterday



Synopsis

Israeli Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon's famous masterpiece, his novel *Only Yesterday*, here appears in English translation for the first time. Published in 1945, the book tells a seemingly simple tale about a man who immigrates to Palestine with the Second Aliya--the several hundred idealists who returned between 1904 and 1914 to work the Hebrew soil as in Biblical times and revive Hebrew culture. *Only Yesterday* quickly became recognized as a monumental work of world literature, but not only for its vivid historical reconstruction of Israel's founding society. This epic novel also engages the reader in a fascinating network of meanings, contradictions, and paradoxes all leading to the question, what, if anything, controls human existence? Seduced by Zionist slogans, young Isaac Kumer imagines the Land of Israel filled with the financial, social, and erotic opportunities that were denied him, the son of an impoverished shopkeeper, in Poland. Once there, he cannot find the agricultural work he anticipated. Instead Isaac happens upon house-painting jobs as he moves from secular, Zionist Jaffa, where the ideological fervor and sexual freedom are alien to him, to ultra-orthodox, anti-Zionist Jerusalem. While some of his Zionist friends turn capitalist, becoming successful merchants, his own life remains adrift and impoverished in a land torn between idealism and practicality, a place that is at once homeland and diaspora. Eventually he marries a religious woman in Jerusalem, after his worldly girlfriend in Jaffa rejects him. Led astray by circumstances, Isaac always ends up in the place opposite of where he wants to be, but why? The text soars to Surrealist-Kafkaesque dimensions when, in a playful mode, Isaac drips paint on a stray dog, writing "Crazy Dog" on his back. Causing panic wherever he roams, the dog takes over the story, until, after enduring persecution for so long without "understanding" why, he really does go mad and bites Isaac. The dog has been interpreted as everything from the embodiment of Exile to a daemonic force, and becomes an unforgettable character in a book about the death of God, the deception of discourse, the power of suppressed eroticism, and the destiny of a people depicted in all its darkness and promise.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I wanted to read a book that many consider to be Agnon's masterpiece, as well as others who claim it to be one of the finest examples of modern Hebrew literature. I was not disappointed at all. It took me quite a while to finish 'Only Yesterday' as apart from being particularly busy in recent weeks, I found that I wanted to read each page quite slowly, savouring the folkloric language and making sure that I had fully absorbed what the author wanted to say. On the surface this is a tale of one man's passage to the Land of Israel from his home village in Austro-Hungarian Galicia. The pre-WWI Ottoman Palestine he arrives in is a world far removed from his naïf ve imaginings. Our 'hero' - Isaac Kumer - is a young and impoverished Zionist of the Second Aliyah. This was the period of renewed zeal amongst the (mainly Russian) Jews of the pogrom and persecution-beset old country, and although relatively small in number, the wide-ranging influence of its pioneers on subsequent generations in the founding of the State of Israel is beyond compare. Agnon charmingly weaves into his plot many historic (and also the future historic) figures alongside the fictional cast of many. Initially finding his feet in the bustling port town of Jaffa, Isaac eventually makes the trip up to Jerusalem. At either end of this journey Agnon lavishly portrays the fascinating world of these two very different towns - the former being coastal, politicised, and predominantly secular, the latter being of the interior, traditional and overwhelmingly orthodox. If nothing else, this book serves as a wonderfully valuable portrayal of a world now gone.

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