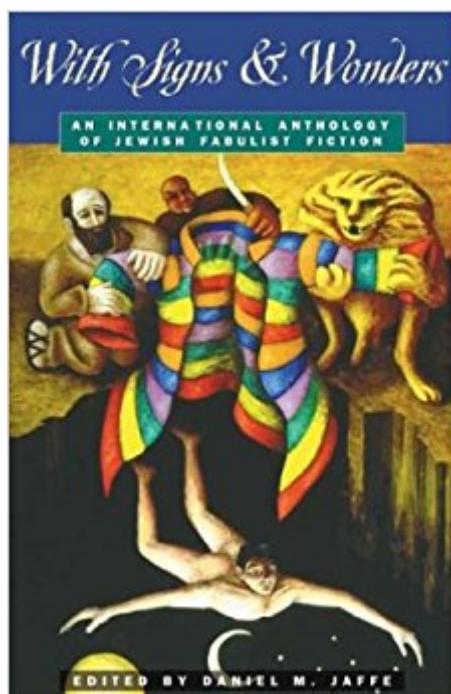


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# With Signs & Wonders: An International Anthology Of Jewish Fabulist Fiction



## **Synopsis**

Bringing together 24 contemporary writers from 19 different countries, this anthology captures the exuberant storytelling tradition of the Jewish people that which has been shaped by centuries of legends, folklore, and mysticism. These writers-from Central Asia, Iran, Morocco, Russia, Siberia, Israel, Latin America, Europe, and the United States-show the diverse strains of the Jewish fabulist imagination. Teeming with passion and humor and rooted in the triumphant and tragic history of a people, these stories illustrate the Jewish fascination with the mysteries of the imagination and the endless possibilities of life. Steve Stern, winner of the National Jewish Book Award, tells the humorous tale of a flying rabbi in Memphis, Tennessee. Dina Rubina, twice nominated for the Russian Booker Prize, evokes a heightened state of spiritual consciousness in her story "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden." Moacyr Scliar explores the struggle of a modern man who has been chosen to give living voice to the ancient prophets. Iranian-born Avi Shmuelian, whose work has been compared to that of Gabriel García Márquez, relates the adventures of an Iranian Jew wandering in a magical landscape that could come out of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Readers combing through this anthology can expect a rich assortment of 24 fanciful short stories, with just a few duds. All of the stories are "fabulist" that is, they cull from magical realism in the style of Gabriel García Márquez. In Joe Hill's delightfully creative "Pop Art," readers learn the sad story of a boy whose best friend is, due to a birth defect, inflatable; he can't talk, and his very life is

threatened by sharp branches, fork tines and other objects that might puncture him. In a tale that suggests what would have happened had Sholem Aleichem ever traveled to the American South, Steve Stern tells the saga of a flying rebbe from Tennessee. Fans who couldn't get enough of *Like Water for Chocolate* will relish Argentinean author Daniel Ulanovsky Sack's tale "Home Cooking." However, the collection, like most, is uneven. "Tsuris" (trouble), the tale of a quarrelsome student who demands his rabbi explain the dinosaurs, is flat and ill-suited to this anthology: the fabulist transformation here is simply that the student grows attentive. But on the whole, the quirky characters are captivating. Who can forget the curious Siamese twins who complete a minyan in American Joan Leegant's story "The Tenth"? Or Portuguese writer Moacyr Scliar's protagonist Benjamin Bok, whose various body parts are taken over by prophets? This creative collection is distinguished by its imaginative stories and international flavor. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Jaffe (UCLA Extension-Online), a short story writer, essayist, and translator, has collected a group of contemporary Jewish fabulist fiction. The 25 stories are written in seven different languages and come from many countries and cultures, among them Brazil, the United States, Israel, Russia, and Mexico. Biblical themes and modern despair are resolved in many of the stories by kabbalistic insight and reconciliation. A feminist strain, championing women's freedom to explore the world, also runs through the selections. Jaffe's introduction sets the tone and places the stories in literary context. Joe Hill's "Pop Art," a story of love and friendship, is brilliantly imagined. In "Rochel Eisips," Teresa Porzecanski (a writer from Uruguay) writes of loss, memory, and the unity of the Jewish people. Cyille Fleischman's "One Day, Victor Hugo..." is a charming short fable on life's meaning, and Yakov Shechter's "Midday" is a mystical meditation on political assassination. A diverse and imaginative group of stories, recommended for Jewish studies collections. Gene Shaw, NYPL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a delightful anthology with an intriguing title. As it appears, "fabulist" has to do with imagination, in this case Jewish, which raises each story to the level of a mystical adventure. For example, Tehila Lieberman's "Anya's Angel" with wistfulness and delicacy evokes a touching love story with many links to the infinite; Daniel Jaffe's own "Sarrushka and her Daughter" is a highly intriguing folk legend exploring extra-sensory powers in individuals. And here are, to my mind, the best six: Mark Apelman's "A Visitor's Guide to Berlin" is an amazingly powerful evocation of

Holocaust memories and an utterly convincing artistic emplotment of those memories, in their intensity and brutal reality, as inhabiting modern-day Berlin and claiming a reality that is more than real. Yakov Shechter's "Midday," a story about the search for meaning and about shaping one's own destiny, has a strong atmosphere of the numinous - the clouds keep darkening, the mystical intent comes more and more into focus - towards the resolution, still mysterious yet imaginatively satisfying. Joan Leegant's "The Tenth" is a powerfully imagined story of a rabbi whose faith, learning, tolerance, whose intellectual and spiritual endurance are challenged and tested by the appearance of an unusual candidate to complete a minyan. (A similar case of a rabbi who is tested by a rebellious pupil is treated flatly and unimaginatively by Steven Sher in "Tsuris," which only shows that what matters and what makes a story fabulous (excuse the pun!) is not the fabula but the quality of imagination and a way with language.) Ruth Knafo Setton's "The Cat Garden" is electrifying, memorable, descriptively evocative. The anthology ends with two of the strongest stories: Dina Rubina's "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden," which explores the semi-mystical ways in which our forefathers' inheritance follows its paths into the consciousness of the younger generation, does so with singular warmth and a sense of humor that makes everything vivid. Here the translator (who is Jaffe himself) does an exceptional job conveying an impression of a friendly, chatty narrator communicating real warmth and charm - and yet the story touches on the inevitably painful theme of the memories of our collective past. The last story in the collection is Steve Stern's "the Tale of a Kite," a marvelous fable humorously teaching us a lesson about human nature as well as making an eloquent case for the human need to believe utterly, unsceptically and completely. As in all anthologies, unevenness is the other side of variety. Given so many excellent stories it is a mild disappointment to have alongside some weak ones, such as Galina Vromen's "Sara's Story," Moacyr Scliar's "The Prophets of Benjamin Bok," Steven Sher's "Tsuris" and Cyrille Fleishman's "One day, Victor Hugo." These stories' weakness is, predominantly, in their defective imagination, which treats the supernatural realm as a source of tricks rather than of significance. In the middle stand stories such as John Shepley's "A Golem in Prague" - good, gripping writing that keeps the reader in suspense for something meaningful, yet the design of the story is incomplete, as if it is waiting to fill a mould not yet fully in view. To conclude - "fabulist" or "magical" or whatever we choose to term it, the common denominator in these stories is a wink of the numinous, a pull towards that extra significance which makes life gain a richer hue. This is, if we generalize, what connects the best fabulist stories with all truly good literature. Clearly, I feel enriched by having read this anthology.

Over the years, I have read quite a number of Jewish-themed and other anthologies. I certainly

expected this one to be of interest, but was taken aback at its freshness, its unique approach, its range and cultural sensitivity. Not only is the emphasis on spirituality and mysticism refreshing, but this book showcases numerous writers on the rise with whom I had not been familiar. I will now seek out their books. And so many translations of works that are simply not available in English elsewhere! This anthology introduced me to writers and literary cultures I'd known only marginally. Kudos to the editor. My favorite stories were those by E. Seltz of Israel (originally from Siberia of all places!), M. Scliar of Brazil, A. Muniz-Huberman of Mexico, and a few from U.S. writers--D. Jaffe (the editor), R. Knafo Setton, and M. Apelman. Contemporary issues of questioning the presence of spirituality in our lives, ancient historical themes, Holocaust themes, and as Mr. Jaffe says in his Introduction, several stories on the theme of Jew as other. (One would expect the Introduction to be a useful overview for college students, by the way.) Half men authors, half women authors, secular and religious perspectives, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi sensibilities. Quite a representative mix of global Jewish culture. And fine literature at the same time. A must read.

Others have praised the delightful stories in this rich volume, so I won't spend my time repeating--although I may well say that every good word spoken about this anthology is true. What I shall emphasize is how extraordinarily this book bridges various Jewish communities and sensibilities. Contemporary Jewish culture has become extremely fragmented during the last fifty or one hundred years. Then here comes a book including Jewish stories from nearly two dozen countries, showing that we all have so much in common despite our differences. Jews in Morocco can relate on these pages to Jews of Russia and Iran and Argentina and Mexico and Siberia and Finland and France and Israel of course, and so on. Ashkenazi and Sephardi and Mizrahi all together sharing the same quests. This book PROVES that we are a united people despite our petty differences. THIS book should be the constitution of the World Jewish Congress. THIS book brings Jewish diversity together in one volume. THIS book should be given to every bar and bat mitzvah around the world. Then we would be one people as in ancient times.

Originally, I located this book because of a story about the binding of Isaac, the kind of story you don't forget. But, in reading the other authors in this collection, I developed an admiration for the variety of Jewish fiction out there. The subtitle of this collection references fabulist fiction. Think of the surreal quality of Latin American writers (and many of these writers come from that part of the world) and you will have some idea of how the authors are preoccupied with time. Bottom line, this collection is fun to read and discuss with friends.

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