

Songs for the Butcher's Daughter by Peter Manseau.
Simon and Schuster 2009.

This is Peter Manseau's first novel, though it comes already garlanded with the 2008 National Jewish Book Award for Fiction, and it is a remarkable achievement. Remarkable, because for a first novel it is extremely fine and even more remarkable because it is an intensely Jewish book written by a non-Jew.

The subject of the novel is Itzik Malpesh, an ancient Yiddish poet living in New York but born in Kishinev in 1903 at Easter. Malpesh comes from a reasonably comfortable family, though not immune to the depredations of anti-semites and pogroms, and after the abduction of his father he sets out to journey to Odessa, where the girl who becomes his lifelong obsession and inspiration, Sasha Bimko, has journeyed with her mother after the murder of her own father, the eponymous Butcher.

A variety of mishaps and experiences ultimately see him land in New York, where he falls initially into the hands of an old Kishinev *landsman*, before making his way as an independent. Malpesh is obsessed by his memory of Sasha, and also by his poetry and the publication of his work; he is obstinate and selfish, but he is also witty and determined.

Malpesh meets the narrator of the story quite by chance, when the latter, a lapsed Catholic who works for the Jewish Cultural Organisation collecting and collating discarded books in Yiddish and Hebrew – and learning the languages along the way – goes to clear a library that is in a building scheduled for demolition. The narrator's journey through the retelling of Malpesh's life is interspersed with the memoir in a convincing way, and the book ends in a most satisfactory manner.

Having met Itzik Malpesh I feel I know him – for I have met many like him – and his story fits very well with the experience of many eastern European Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Song's for the Butcher's Daughter is a memorable and powerful book, and I shall eagerly await Peter Manseau's second novel.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh