

## The Essential Fictions

**Isaac Babel**

**Val Vinokur, Translator**

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*Babel's remarkable ability to portray self-preservation stands out.*

Born in Odessa and known for his tragicomic, often violent collages of Jewish characters, Isaac Babel is honored in *The Essential Fictions*, a generous volume of stories from translator and editor Val Vinokur. Together, these stories examine the seamy rooms and bold imagination of a master whose tricksters, students, aspiring writers, gangsters, and everyman narrators left a lasting impression on twentieth-century literature.

Written largely between 1916 and 1933, these selections braid autobiographical nostalgia with lurid scenes, death with impassioned observation, and modernism with flourishes befitting tall tales. Amid poverty and occasional glimpses of decadence, Odessa and its outskirts are crisply enlivened.

Babel's vision of the port city—which allows as much room for music as murder—weaves together incidents that highlight a hardened pragmatism. From a liar who reinvents himself through storytelling to siblings who plot against their father, these characters act on dark human instincts.

Despite the difficult paths that many of Babel's cast find, there's seldom cynicism behind the work. One of his legendary inventions, Benya Krik—a criminal dubbed “King” by his fellows—appears with an exaggerated delight that suggests fascination with extremes. When real threats occur, including a 1905 pogrom, they're embedded in artful scenes that turn the focus toward the narrators.

Babel's remarkable ability to portray self-preservation stands out. No matter their reasons, his characters possess a will to live that outstrips their harsh surroundings. Stories that might seem heartless in another historical context become fine examples of macabre humor here.

The Red Cavalry strikes a more serious tone that is further from romanticizing. Its stories, set during the Polish-Soviet War, take on the grim features of reportage. Amid savagery, noteworthy departures include “Pan Apolek,” the tale of a painter whose religious frescoes inspire controversy, and “The Cemetery in Kozin,” which lays a family's history bare in the span of a few paragraphs.

Vinokur, a poet and Guggenheim fellow, brings the gift of a rhythmic translation. A century later, Babel's voice continues to unsettle and beguile.

KAREN RIGBY (November/December 2017)

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