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## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Tevye the Dairyman*  
by  
Sholem Aleichem  
(New York: Schocken Books, 1987)

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### **Author:**

Probably the foremost writer of Yiddish literature, Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) was a catalyst for its revival at the turn of the century. He is also "The Jewish Mark Twain," a folk artist who faithfully recreated the *shtetl*, village life of Russian Jews before modernity, anti-Semitism, and war destroyed that world forever.

Sholom Aleichem was born March 2, 1859. He grew up in Woronko, a Ukrainian village which he later recalled with affection. When he was 12, his father failed in business and the family moved to nearby Pereyaslav. A year later his mother died and his father remarried. The stepmother harrassed the children, and her curses, which Sholom recorded, became his first writing. He also composed *The Jewish Robinson Crusoe*, modeled on Daniel Defoe, and *The Daughter of Zion*, an imitation of a Hebrew novel by Abraham Mapu. [From *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 Vols. Gale Research, 1998.]

### **Summary:**

Of all the characters in modern Jewish fiction, the most beloved is Tevye, the compassionate, irrepressible, Bible-quoting dairyman from Anatevka, who has been immortalized in the writings of Sholem Aleichem and in acclaimed and award-winning theatrical and film adaptations.

And no Yiddish writer was more beloved than Tevye's creator. Sholem Rabinovich (1859-1916), the "Jewish Mark Twain," who wrote under the pen name of Sholem Aleichem. Beautifully translated by Hillel Halkin, here is Sholem Aleichem's heartwarming and poignant account of Tevye and his daughters, together with "Railroad Stories," twenty-one tales that examine human nature and modernity as they are perceived by men and women riding the trains from shtetl to shtetl. [From the book jacket]

### **Questions:**

1. There are different endings for the Yiddish and English film versions of the Tevye stories. What are these differences and what do they imply about the expected audience for each film?

2. We see effects of modernity on traditional Jewish culture as expressed through relationships developed by each of Tevye's daughters. Would the stories be as effective if Tevye had an equal number of sons with an equal number of problems? Why or why Not?
3. In *The Divan*, we saw a film about a daughter rejecting her father's Chassidic community, yet trying to please him through finding the treasured family divan. Are Tevye's daughters similarly motivated to please their father while simultaneously rejecting some of his ideas?

**Further Reading:**

There are scholarly studies of Sholem Aleichem in Hebrew. In English see Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (1943); Melech W. Grafstein, ed., *Sholom Aleichem Panorama* (1949); Marie Waife-Goldberg, *My Father, Sholom Aleichem* (1968); and Louis Falstein, *The Man Who Loved Laughter: The Story of Sholom Aleichem* (1968). General works include Sol Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature* (1964), and Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (1968).

Butwin, Joseph, *Sholom Aleichem*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.

Samuel, Maurice, *The world of Sholom Aleichem*, New York: Atheneum, 1986, 1970.