

Cahan, Abraham (1860-1951)

Encyclopedia Article

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The flowering of Jewish-American fiction in the 1950s and 1960s had its origin in the pioneering work of Abraham Cahan: immigrant, socialist, journalist, and fiction writer. With William Dean Howells' assistance, Cahan published *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Imported Bridegroom* (1898). But it is *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) that is his masterwork. Using Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham* as his model, Cahan explores an entire industry (ready-made clothing) and immigrant experience (Eastern European Jews) by focusing on a single character and his bittersweet ascent from Russian rags to Manhattan riches. A major work of American literary realism, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is also an example of reform-minded Progressivism and began as a series of sketches in *McClure's Magazine* alongside the work of muckrakers Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell. Although he is best remembered for this one novel (rediscovered in 1960 thanks to the popularity of a later generation of postwar Jewish-American writers), Cahan's most influential act was the founding of the world's leading Yiddish newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, in 1902.

Further Reading:

Chametsky, Jules. *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1977.

Marowitz, Sanford E. *Abraham Cahan*. New York, Twayne, 1996.