

FEATHERS

By Haim Be'er
Translated by Hillel Halkin
First published in Hebrew by Am Oved, 1980
English translation published by Brandeis University
Press, 2004

ABOUT THE BOOK:

The unnamed narrator of *Feathers* is a young boy growing up in Jerusalem in the 1950s and 1960s who later serves in an Israeli army burial unit in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Throughout, his closest friend and almost constant companion is Mordechai Leder, a neighborhood eccentric who dreams of founding a utopian colony based on the theories of the nineteenth-century Viennese Jewish philosopher Karl Popper-Lynkeus. With the narrator as his faithful disciple, Leder preaches the virtues of radical vegetarianism and a "nutrition army." The narrator is rebuked by his mother for spending all his time with Leder; his father, on the other hand, disappears periodically on botanical experiments meant to establish the identity of the Biblical willow tree. Moving back and forth in time, and unfolding in a series of vignettes, Be'er shows how Jerusalem is intimately bound up with the real and imagined lives of its inhabitants.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Haim Be'er was born in Jerusalem in 1945 and was raised in an Orthodox home. He completed his army service in the military chaplaincy. In 1966, he began working for Am Oved Publishing House, where he now works as editor. He has published three novels, one book of poetry, and one work of non-fiction. Be'er has received several literary awards for his poetry and fiction, including the Bernstein Prize, the Bialik Prize (2002) and the ACUM Prize for Lifetime Achievement (2005).



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. This novel refers to many famous Jerusalem hospitals, buildings, bookstores, cemeteries, and neighborhoods. What are some of the places that are mentioned in the story? Were any of them familiar to you before reading this novel? Do you know which of these places still exist, and which are no longer standing?
2. What is the atmosphere in Café Vienna, where Leder and the narrator spend much time together? Why do you think there was a café by this name in Jerusalem? What does this teach you about Jerusalem of the 1950s?
3. The characters in this book are shop owners, undertakers, and chemists, to give just a few examples. What does this teach you about the society and social class in the Jerusalem that Be'er depicts? Do you think of these as typical Jewish professions? Why or why not?
4. This novel has been described by critics as "death-obsessed." How is death a theme in this novel? Consider, for instance, the fate of the narrator's brother Reuven, Riklin's job as undertaker, and the concerns motivating the need for a nutrition army. Can you think of other examples? Why do you think death is so pervasive in this book?
5. Mr. Havkin, who runs a utopian farm outside Jerusalem, warns Leder, "Don't forget the story of Icarus," referring to the Greek myth in which the son of Deadalus flies too close to the sun, burns his wax wings, and drowns in the ocean below. What are some of the high-flying dreams of the characters in this book? Consider the dreams of Leder, Mr. Havkin, the Ringels, the narrator's father, the narrator's grandfather, and Haim Rachlevski. What is the fate of these characters and their dreams?
6. Can you identify any general differences between the men and women in this novel? If the men are dreamers, how would you describe the women? Who are the major female characters in this novel, and what is their relationship to the men in their lives?
7. In his introduction, translator Hillel Halkin points out that in spite of all the utopian dreams in this novel, Zionism is rarely mentioned. What is the role of Zionism in this novel? Consider, for instance, attitudes expressed towards Ben Gurion and Jabotinsky, and Ahuva's remark that the Zionists "knew and feared nothing in their shamelessly bareheaded skulls" (p. 182).
8. What is the subject of the Knesset debate that causes violence in the streets of Jerusalem? Why is the "fate of Israeli democracy" (p. 181) in question?



9. This book often refers to superstitious beliefs advanced by one or more of the characters. What are some of these superstitions? What do they reveal about the characters and their world?
10. How does Be'er present the relationship between observant and non-observant Jews in this novel? What tensions does he reveal? See, for instance, p. 182 and p. 232.
11. What is the attitude towards written texts presented in this book? Consider the newspapers used to wrap fish and olives and the fate of Leder and Tsodek's books, among other examples.
12. How does the narrator learn about Leder's final months at the end of the book? What realizations does he come to, and what discoveries does he make? What is the significance of the novel's final scene—in light of the book's subject, and in light of the myth of Icarus—in which the narrator learns that he has pulled the body of Leder's son out of the lake?
13. What role do feathers play in this book? When are they mentioned? Why do you think Be'er chose to title his book in this way?

REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of Be'er and his work? Do you agree with the claims they make?

"Written with lyrical grace and sparkling humor. Be'er has created a delightful jewel-box of a world."

--Booklist

"Haim Be'er offers us a phantasmagorical portrait of Jerusalem. Following on the footsteps of Bruno Schulz, he explores the tension between fanaticism and lunacy, between secularism and evasion, and between what's tangible and what's imagined. *Feathers* is as unsettling as it is rewarding."

--Ilan Stavans, editor of *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories*

"A powerful and complex tapestry of the interwoven memories of a boy from an Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem . . . built on dark humour and pathos."

--Dr. Glenda Abranson, University of Oxford

"Haim Be'er resembles the adolescent hero of his novel in wanting to preserve in hard-won modern Israel some of the quirky obstinacy of earlier European-Jewish utopians. As a result, we find in *Feathers* the quality that Saul Bellow calls characteristically Jewish – 'laughter and trembling so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two.'"

--Professor Ruth R. Wisse, Harvard University



OTHER BOOK BY HAIM BE'ER AVAILABE IN ENGLISH:

The Pure Element of Time (Brandeis University Press, 2002)



Renewing Israel in Jewish life