

A PIGEON AND A BOY

By Meir Shalev
Translated by Evan Fallenberg
First published in Hebrew by Am Oved, 2006
English translation published by Schocken, 2007
Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is the story of two great loves. The first is the love between a young pigeon handler nicknamed the Baby, and a Girl (as she is known) who works in a Tel Aviv zoo, set in 1948 during Israel's War for Independence. The second love, which unfolds a generation later, is that between a middle-aged Israeli tour guide named Yair Mendelsohn and his childhood friend Tirzah Fried, who serves as his contractor after his mother bequeaths him money to build a new house apart from his wife. The two loves—past and present—are intertwined with one another from the book's opening pages, when Yair hears about the young pigeon handler from one of his American clients. The climax of the novel, the pigeon handler's final hopeful dispatch, brings together this sweeping story about wandering passion and the longing for home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Meir Shalev was born in 1948 on Nahalal, Israel's first moshav, to a family of writers. He studied psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. One of Israel's most celebrated novelists, his books have been translated into more than twenty languages and have been bestsellers in Israel, Holland, and Germany. In 1999 the author was awarded the Juliet Club Prize (Italy). He has also received the Prime Minister's Prize (Israel), the Chiavari (Italy), the Entomological Prize (Israel), the WIZO Prize (France, Israel, and Italy), and for *A Pigeon and a Boy*, the Brenner Prize, Israel's highest literary recognition. A columnist for the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Shalev lives in Jerusalem and in northern Israel with his wife and children



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What do you think Shalev means when he describes the elderly tourist as “stout and suntanned as only Americans can be”? (p. 3) Aren’t Israelis stout and suntanned too? Later on, Shalev says, “Suntans were considered to be a sign of health and the fulfillment of the Zionist dream” (p. 34). What point is he making?
2. Shalev mentions several places where Yair takes his American tourists: the Burma Road, Kibbutz Hulda, the German Colony neighborhood of Jerusalem, Sha’ar Hagai, Mount Zion, David’s Tomb, Bab-el-Wad, Katamon. Have you heard of any of these places? What do you know about them? Have you visited any?
3. Consider how the American tourists whom Shalev guides are greeted by the Israeli government (p. 9). Is there any irony in Shalev’s description of their reception?
4. An idea that recurs throughout this book is the notion that “pigeons need to love their home; otherwise they won’t return to it” (p. 12). How can you read Shalev’s statement as a commentary on Zionism (particularly as explicated by Dr. Laufer in his speech to the kibbutz, p. 66)? Do any other images – from the Bible, or the Israeli national anthem, or Greek mythology, or anything else you have read – come to mind? And how do you read this statement as a commentary on the actions of the other characters, especially Yair’s mother Raya, Tirzah, and the young Yair and Benjamin?
5. What is the significance of the Mendelsohn family’s move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? What changes for them? Consider Yordad’s remark on Yom Kippur: “This is Jerusalem, not Tel Aviv. We need to be considerate of our neighbors” (p. 23). To what is he referring?
6. When they arrive at their new apartment on Bialik St. in Jerusalem, the young Yair asks his parents, “Is that the Bialik from the cemetery in Tel Aviv?” What does his question reveal about the relationship between memory and geography in Israel?
7. How does Shalev depict life on a Kibbutz? What are its advantages and disadvantages? Do you think the Baby might have fared better had he been raised in a different setting?
8. Consider the various foods eaten by the characters in this novel: The figs that Yair’s mother eats in Tel Aviv and that so delight Tirzah; the “lemon with tea” of Dr. Laufer; Liora’s lukewarm water with lemon juice, tea-hyssop, and honey. Are these Israeli foods, per se? What do they reveal about those who consume them?



9. Liora describes her brother as, “the only Hasidic Jew in the world who wears a tallis made by Versace” (p. 97). What is she criticizing? Yair, too, is critical of Emmanuel Kirschenbaum – what are his criticisms, and what makes him particularly resentful?
10. In general, would you say that the male or female characters in this book are stronger personalities? Who is the dominant one in the novel’s various couples: Yordad and Raya; the Baby and the Girl; Yair and Liora; Yair and Tirzah. Is Shalev making a point that is about something other than feminism?
11. Why do Yair and Tirzah have to be approved by a membership committee before they build their house? What sort of questions are they asked, and how do they respond? Do you learn anything about Israeli society from their interview?
12. The battle in which the Baby loses his life is the battle for the San Simon monastery in Jerusalem, which was a real battle in Israel’s War of Independence. Do you know anything about this battle? What do you learn about it from the novel?
13. Are there any moments in this book that strain credibility or break into the magical, and if so, when? Why do you think Shalev chose to write the book in this way?



REVIEW QUOTES:

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

"[A] stunning tale... This gem of a story about the power of love, which won Israel's Brenner Prize, brims with luminous originality."

--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"An excellent book [that] touches and breaks your heart and leaves you deep in thought about what was and what could have been."

--*Hatzofeh* (Tel Aviv)

"Shalev creates a world that has the richness of invention and the obsessiveness of dreams."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"Shalev has deftly layered Yair's story in such a manner that a refreshingly nuanced picture of Israel emerges."

--*The Miami Herald*

"Vivid characters and sharp dialogue... By working stories in the past and present against each other, Shalev brings into questions the validity, and the reliability, of memory."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"In homing pigeons, Shalev has found a motif that is replete with symbolism and scriptural allusion that he uses expertly, with maximum layered effect."

—*Ottawa Citizen*

"Brilliant... Universal in its scope and examination of human longing for a sense of roosting."

—*The Jerusalem Post*

"An exquisite creation, a work of quiet language that needs no shouting to attain its impact."

—*Chicago Jewish Star*

OTHER BOOKS BY RONIT MATALON AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH:

Esau (Harper Collins, 1993)

The Loves of Judith (Ecco, 1999)

Four Meals (Canongate, 2002)

