

BEAUFORT

By Ron Leshem
Translated by Evan Fallenberg
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Zmora Bitan, 2005
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Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This war novel tells the story of the handful of Israeli soldiers occupying the crusader fortress of Beaufort in the year leading up to Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Southern Lebanon. The story is narrated by 21-year-old Lieutenant Liraz Liberti, known as Erez, who is in charge of thirteen soldiers ("kids," as he refers to them) whose lives are in constant danger from sudden enemy attack. In the long periods of waiting and keeping watch, the soldiers pass the time by cracking jokes, boasting about their sexual exploits, remembering their dead comrades, and doing everything they can to ward off fear. Leshem's novel demonstrates these soldiers' tremendous dedication to their mission and to one another, in spite of their often confused and ambivalent feelings about the choices made by their army and government.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ron Leshem, born in 1976, is an Israeli writer and media professional who has worked for the Israeli newspapers Maariv and Yediot Acharonot. He currently serves as deputy director in charge of programming for Channel Two, Israel's main commercial television network. *Beaufort* won the Sapir Prize, Israel's top literary award, in 2006. The film version, which Leshem co-authored with Joseph Cedar, won the Berlin International Film Festival's Silver Bear for Best Director and was nominated for an Academy Award. Leshem lives in Tel Aviv and is at work on his second novel.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. The soldiers in this novel recite several prayers, including the "Thanksgiving blessing" (*Birkat HaGomel*, p. 145) and the "Wayfarer's Prayer" (*Tefilat HaDerech*, p. 335). What role does prayer play in this novel? Do these soldiers pray more or less than you would expect? Is it only the religious soldiers who pray? Does the idea of soldiers praying challenge your associations with Jewish prayer?
2. What is the soldiers' attitude towards fear? What slang terms do they use to refer to someone who is afraid? Are they compassionate towards such individuals? Consider, for instance, Erez' comment to River that "It's the privilege of people who aren't here to be afraid...To be afraid you have to think too much" (p. 146).
3. While Emilio is filming him, Zitlawi says, "Believe me, Ma, it's like summer camp here" (p. 133). Why does he make this comment? What do the soldiers want their parents to think about their military experience? Can you imagine their parents believing their sons? In what ways does Beaufort indeed resemble a summer camp?
4. Erez finds a shirt from Ziv that says "OUT OF LEBANON IN PEACE," which he identifies as the motto of the Four Mothers movement, a grassroots organization founded in 1997 to campaign for Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon (see p. 121). What is Erez' reaction when he sees this shirt? How does he feel about the Four Mothers? Do you know anything about this organization and the response they received in Israel?
5. Why does River decide to join a combat unit instead of becoming a "pencil pusher" or drinking milk shakes in the cafes of Tel Aviv? Do you believe him when he suggests that "I had a lot more fun going on deadly missions than drinking mango shakes" (p. 199)? What "fun" do the soldiers have in Beaufort? Can you imagine yourself ever making such a choice?
6. How do the soldiers feel about their mission? Do they believe in what they are doing? What is their reaction when they listen to the news on the radio? Consider, for instance, River's comment that guarding Beaufort "has nothing to do with the northern border. We're just looking out for our own asses" (p. 148). Do his comrades agree with him? How does the book affect your thoughts about Israeli military campaigns that you have heard about?
7. When Erez carries the stretcher with Ziv's dead body, he uncovers his face and muses, "Who says death has no face?" (p. 144). How does this book give a face to death? How does it make you feel to read about the deaths of Ziv, Zitlawi, and Spitzer? How do their deaths (like their lives) differ from one another?



8. Although all the soldiers are almost indistinguishable in uniform, they are well aware of the differences between them. One such distinction is between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, which comes up at several points in the novel. For instance, Erez comments that Ziv is his first Ashkenazi friend (p. 128). Does this book teach you anything new about the relationship between these two groups in Israel?
9. The soldiers play several games with each other, including listing things their dead comrades can't do anymore (p. 1) and listing things they themselves have never done before (p. 180). What do their answers reveal about their values and aspirations? Do any responses surprise you?
10. At the end of the book, when the soldiers prepare to evacuate Beaufort, everyone wants to stay until the bitter end. One soldier even starts crying as he pleads with Erez not to send him out with the first convoy. Why is it so important to the soldiers to witness the full evacuation of Beaufort, even though many don't agree that such a decision is strategically advisable? Do you agree with Bayliss' comment that "The whole time you serve here, your survival instinct gets more and more messed up, dulled" (p. 322)? What other incidents in this book supports Bayliss' claim?

REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of this book? Do you agree with the claims they make?

"Evocative, heartbreaking and haunting ... [Israel's] "*Red Badge of Courage*." Because Leshem, like Stephen Crane, never saw combat, this is not a work of autobiography or observations but one of empathy and reconstruction—and all the stronger for that because the author has deployed both qualities without judgment. *Beaufort* is that rare thing, a novel of deep moral concern in which sympathetically drawn and beautifully realized characters are allowed to speak for themselves."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Thirteen young soldiers spring to life with voices at once self-critical and brash, tender and darkly flippant.... Though firsthand accounts and combat memoirs line the shelves of bookstores, Leshem's fiction rivals them in the completeness of his cosmos of war."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Ron Leshem has succeeded in creating an entire world, simply through language."



—David Grossman, author of *The Yellow Wind*

“A gripping, viscerally powerful tale.... An alternately grim and blackly comic war/coming-of-age novel.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“An important novel.... This is a picture of war from a soldier's point of view. Its language is crude, the body count rises, and yet the tenderness of the bonds among the men is extraordinary.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

"Rather than dwell on the politics behind Israel's conflict with Hezbollah, Leshem focuses on the soldiers' slang-heavy language (those who are scared are "strawberry pissers"; a dumb soldier is a "hummus") and the thickening camaraderie to give readers remarkably visceral access to the isolated outpost. The anxiety and fear are palpable throughout Leshem's vivid novel -- you can practically feel the shells explode."

—*Publishers Weekly*

