

## ACCIDENTS

By Yael Hedaya

Translated by Jessica Cohen

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Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is the story of a father, a daughter, and the new woman who enters their lives. Yonatan is a moderately successful middle-aged author living in a Tel Aviv apartment with his pre-teen daughter Dana. Two years after his wife's sudden death in a car accident, he is trying to get back to writing and Dana is struggling to fit in at school. Through a mutual friend named Roni, the mother of Dana's only friend, Yonatan meets Shira Klein, a bestselling novelist in her mid-thirties whose father is slowly dying of old age. Cheered on by Dana, Yonatan and Shira fall in love and struggle to overcome their fears of intimacy.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yael Hedaya was born in Jerusalem in 1964. She received a BA in philosophy from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and an MA in creative writing and English literature from NYU. Hedaya has worked as a journalist and a columnist for the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, and she currently teaches journalism and creative writing at Tel Aviv University. She is the author of two novels and a book of novellas, including *Accidents*, which was a bestseller in Israel.



### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why is this novel called *Accidents*? What are the major accidents that take place? In what ways do Shira, Yonatan, and Dana form an "accidental family"? Are there any other accidental relationships in this book? How does the accidental become meaningful in this story? Are there any relationships in your own life that you would describe as "accidental" yet meaningful?
2. Do you think Yonatan is a good father? Why or why not? As the novel progresses, does he become better or worse?
3. Consider how the major characters in this novel feel about the relationship between Yonatan and Shira. Is Dana excited or repulsed to think of her father as having a love life? Is Roni happy for her friends or jealous of them? How does Hedaya remain faithful to the true complexity of these relationships?
4. This novel contains many scenes of bad sex and many scenes of failed attempts at writing. Try to recollect as many of these scenes as possible. Do you see any connection between them? How do writing and sex function as metaphors for one another in this novel?
5. Reread the description of Shira's bestselling novel on p. 85. We later learn that this novel, too, was entitled *Accidents*. Why do you think Hedaya chose this particular form of self-reference? To what extent can you justify the claim that Shira and Hedaya have written the same novel, with the exception of a few "accidental" details?
6. Hedaya often refers to the names of streets in Tel Aviv as if they should be familiar to us. Several street names mentioned again and again, until they almost become characters in their own right. Even if you had not heard of these streets beforehand, what do you know about Allenby, where Shira's father's architecture office used to be located? What about Shenkin, where Yonatan and Tamar eat in a café and where Yonatan runs into Shira? How does Hedaya gradually familiarize us with the geography of her setting?
7. Consider the attitude to religion advanced by each of the characters in this novel. Ilana would light candles for Shabbat even though Yonatan would mock her for doing so (p. 22); Tamar describes arguing with her peers about whether God exists (p. 27); Shira does not want to wear a long skirt lest she appear religious (p. 180). Can you think of other instances in which the Jewishness of the characters plays a role in the story? What general conclusions can you draw about their Jewish identities?



8. The characters in this novel come to several realizations about the relationships between parents and children. For instance, Shira suggests that "our parents are more an extension of us than we are of them" (p. 67) and she comments that "the death of one parent would instantly turn her [the daughter] into the parent of the one who remained" (p. 71). Consider these observations and any others you might recall from the novel. Do you agree with them? Based on the way that characters and events unfold in this novel, do you think that Hedaya supports these notions?
9. At one point in the novel, Yonatan remembers his past lover Hagar, a kibbutznik who later "found religion." Read Hedaya's description of Hagar in the paragraph on p. 116-117. In relating Hagar's transformation, is Hedaya describing a uniquely Israeli phenomenon? If so, why? And if not, are there any aspects of this vignette that are unique to Israel?
10. Tamar tells Dana that she wants her mother to adopt a Chinese girl because "there's something screwed up about being an only child...I once read about it in the paper. I read that only children get screwed up" (p. 295). Based on the characters in this novel, do you agree with this diagnosis? Why do you think Hedaya chose to write a novel in which all the main characters are only children? And why are the parents—Roni, Yonatan, Shira's father, Yonatan's mother—all "only parents"? Are there any siblings or spouses at all in this book?
11. Yonatan, who grew up in Jerusalem, is distressed that his hometown has been overtaken by religious people. He complains, for instance, that the restaurants display kashrut certificates instead of menus. How do Yonatan's reactions to the transformation of Jerusalem reflect on the polarity between religious and secular Jews in Israel? What is it like for you to see Jerusalem through Yonatan's eyes? (See especially p. 340-341.)
12. Consider the relationship between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as a metaphor for the relationship between Yonatan and Shira, respectively. In what ways do they each resemble the cities of their childhood? How does the distance between the two cities (traversed several times by car throughout the novel) symbolize the distance between these two characters?



## REVIEW QUOTES:

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

"[A] fine-grained, tragicomic, and always gripping portrait of adult love in the making....Hedaya alternates between viewpoints — male and female, adult and adolescent — with unflinching empathy, never ignoring the poetical sparks of the everyday....This book is, in every sense, the real deal."

—Joseph O'Neill, *The Atlantic Monthly*

"The author's detailed, slowly unfolding story captures the growth of affection and the conflicts inherent in new relationships. By presenting the views of parents, children, friends, neighbors, and former lovers, Hedaya is able to bring an impressive multidimensionality to her characters as they alternately care for a dying father, seek the approval of the cool group, and grapple with differing levels of success in their work."

—Barbara Bibel, *Booklist*

"*Accidents* is about courtship and emerging partnership, the story evoking the uncertainty that people feel upon imagining and then starting a new relationship with someone they feel they could love . . . The strands of Yonatan's, Shira's, and Dana's narratives are skillfully braided together in this lovely novel of beginning love set against everyday life in Israel."

—Carla Cohen, *Politics and Prose* newsletter

"[Hedaya's] love stories . . . are an exploration of the fractured bourgeois dream of domestic bliss."

—Maureen Howard, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*



**OTHER BOOKS BY Yael Hedaya Available in English:**

*Housebroken: Novellas* (Metropolitan Books, 2001)

