

A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS

By Amos Oz

Translated by Nicholas DeLange

First published in Hebrew by Keter, 2003

English translation published by Harcourt, 2004

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This memoir is a journey through Amos Oz' childhood and adolescence, from Jerusalem of the 1930s and 1940s to the kibbutz where the author moved after his mother committed suicide when he was twelve. Oz also takes us back in time to experience 120 years of his family's history, starting from his grandparents' lives in Odessa and Rovno, where they felt the first stirrings of Zionism amidst pogroms and persecutions. Oz' personal history is set against the backdrop of the British mandate, the UN vote to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state, the subsequent War of Independence, and Israel's ongoing struggles with its Arab neighbors. The rich cast of characters in this novel includes the author's father, a scholar who failed to attain academic distinction in spite of his lifelong devotion to books and language; his mother, a passionate reader with a deeply melancholy soul; his uncle, the noted historian Joseph Klausner; his beloved schoolteacher, who later became the famous poet Zelda; his literary mentor Shai Agnon, and many other familiar names from Israeli literary and political history. At the heart of this book is the darkness of his mother's suicide, the tragedy to which Oz continually returns as he cycles forwards and back in time to uncover the story of who he is as a writer and as a human being.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem in 1939. At the age of 15, he went to live at Kibbutz Hulda, where he worked in agriculture. Oz studied philosophy and literature and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For 25 years, he divided his time between writing and teaching in the kibbutz high school. In 1986, he left the kibbutz. He now lives in the desert town of Arad and teaches literature at Ben Gurion University. Oz has published eleven novels, three books of short stories, seven books of essays, a children's book, and numerous articles about the Israeli-Arab conflict. He is the recipient of many prizes and honors, including the Bialik Prize, the French Prix Femina Etranger, the Israel Prize for Literature, and the Goethe Prize for Literature. His books have been translated into over thirty languages around the world.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

These questions unfold in roughly the same order as the book, though feel free to answer in any order you wish.

1. In what ways was Jerusalem of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s a "fascinatingly cultured city" (p. 3)? What was the culture of the time? Would you describe this as a Jewish culture? Why or why not?
2. How does the young Amos perceive Tel Aviv (p. 6-8)? Are there any aspects of his description of the contrast between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that are still relevant today?
3. Discuss the composition of Jerusalem in terms of social class when Oz was a child. Why did Oz' parents and their friends venerate the pioneers? How were these individuals perceived by their more intellectual and scholarly counterparts?
4. Why did buying cheese pose a particular dilemma when Oz was growing up? What were the problems with buying Jewish cheese, and what were the problems with buying Arab cheese? Do you think that contemporary Israelis experience similar dilemmas? Why or why not?
5. How does Oz describe Shai Agnon, the Nobel Prize-winning Israeli writer? Why was there such a rivalry between Agnon and Joseph Klausner? Had you heard of Agnon before reading this book, and if so, how has this book informed your perspective?
6. What are the various languages spoken in this book, and what does this say about the hybrid nature of Israeli identity? How many languages do each of Oz' parents speak? What are the differences among these languages in terms of who speaks them and in what contexts they are spoken? Consider, for instance, Aunt Sonia's description of the relationship between Russian and Yiddish in her family (p. 171-2).
7. Consider the following excerpt from "Pine," by Israeli poet Lea Goldberg. How does it speak to the experiences of Oz' family members:

Perhaps only migrating birds know -
suspended between earth and sky -
the heartache of two homelands.

With you I was transplanted twice,
with you, pine trees, I grew -
roots in two disparate landscapes.



8. Aunt Sonia tells Amos about the history of Zionism in Poland of the 1920s (see p. 191). Who supported Zionism, and who opposed it? What were the perceptions of the land of Israel? What sort of images were presented to the students at the Tarbut school in Rovno? What does Aunt Sonia mean when she says, "I came to the Land long before I actually arrived there?" Did you ever feel like you came to a place before you actually arrived? How so?
9. Aunt Sonia tells Amos that she has not left Israel since 1938 because "all journeys are ridiculous: the only journey from which you don't always come back empty-handed is the journey inside yourself." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? How does it relate to this book as a whole? With what does Oz return, beyond his own story?
10. What happened on the night of November 29, 1947? Is anything surprising to you about the description of events as seen through the eyes of Oz as a child?
11. What was the only time that Amos Oz saw his father cry (p. 359)? Why was his father crying?
12. How did Jerusalem look different after the 1948 war? What changed in terms of the geography and the infrastructure of the city? What is the "morning after" that Oz describes (p. 387)?
13. Consider Amos Oz' conversation with Ephraim Avneri during their night watch duty on Kibbutz Hulda (p. 434-6). Do you find yourself agreeing more with Amos or with Ephraim? Which perspective do you think is more widely accepted today?
14. How does Oz characterize Menachem Begin? What did you learn about him that you had not known before? What about David Ben-Gurion?
15. This book often deals with the subjects of reading and writing. Several of these sections pose particular difficulties for the translator. Can you identify any passages that seem to have been particularly difficult to translate? Were there any moments when you were reminded that you were reading a book in translation?
16. Oz' oldest child, Fania, once told *New Yorker* reporter David Remnick that this memoir should be read as an argument about the history of Zionism: "The book, she said, portrays Zionism and the creation of Israel as a historical necessity for a people faced with the threat of extinction. It acknowledges the original sin of Israel—the displacement and the suffering of the Palestinians—but, at the same time, defends Zionism against some on the European left and among the Israeli New Historians who challenge the state's claim to legitimacy even now." Do you agree or disagree with Oz' daughter? What do you think is Oz' attitude towards the history of Zionism, as expressed in this book?

