

BLISS

By Ronit Matalon

Translated by Jessica Cohen

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Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel, set in Tel Aviv and Paris, is the story of Ofra, a Ph.D. student in art in Tel Aviv, and her best friend Sarah, a photographer and political activist. In the novel's opening pages, Sarah accompanies Ofra to Ben Gurion airport, where Ofra is departing to Paris for the funeral of her beloved cousin Michel. The story unfolds in time both forwards—to Ofra's experience preparing for the funeral with her extended family—and backwards—to Ofra and Sarah's early years of friendship in grade school, and then to Sarah's marriage to Udi and the birth of their son Mims. From France, Ofra learns about the disintegration of Sarah's marriage after Sarah becomes involved with a Palestinian named Marwan. Exploring the tensions between the political and the personal, *Bliss* is a testament to the endurance and necessity of friendship amidst all of life's vicissitudes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ronit Matalon was born in 1959 into a family of Egyptian-Jewish descent. She studied literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University, and has worked as a journalist for Israel TV, and for the daily Ha`aretz. More recently, she has been a critic and book reviewer and has taught at the Camera Obscura Academy for the Arts in Tel Aviv. Matalon is a member of the Arts and Culture Council of the Ministry of Education, and the Forum for Mediterranean Culture at the Van Leer Institute. She has published two novels, one book of short stories, a collection of essays and a book for children.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Ronit Matalon worked as a journalist for the left-wing Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*, covering Gaza and the West Bank during the first Intifada. Where do you see the impact of her experience in this book? Do you think Matalon wishes the reader to sympathize with Sarah's mission? Why or why not?
2. Ofra comes from a Sephardi background, whereas Sarah is Ashkenazi. Where do you see evidence of their different heritages? Do you think this accounts for any of the differences between the two women? Consider, for instance, Sarah's reaction to Ofra's cooking (p. 50) and Ines' comment about Ashkenazi superstitions (p. 116).
3. In describing the situation in Gaza, Sarah says of the Palestinians, "If you only knew, Ofri, the things going on there...The Israelis are just beating the crap out of them, and they're trying to construct a national myth" (p. 67). What is this national myth? Would you say that a national myth is being maintained in your country? How would you describe it?
4. Ofra tells Udi, "This country drives everyone a little crazy, what can you do" (p. 74). Do you think that any of the slightly "crazy" behaviors in this book can be attributed to the political backdrop? Why is Udi so resistant to Ofra's comment? With whom do you tend to agree?
5. Do you recognize any of the places where this story takes place: the Cameri Theater, Nahalat Binyamin, Neve Tzedek. What, if anything, do you know about these places?
6. What is Shelly's background? How and why did she get to Israel? How is she different from Ofra and Sarah?
7. Sarah says to Ofra, "When there is love, power stops to be relevant" (p. 171). Do you agree? Is this something you have experienced in your life?
8. How is Michel's funeral different from other Jewish funerals you have attended? How would you describe the rabbi? Are any of the mourning practices familiar to you? Does anything surprise you? (See p. 173-179.)
9. When Ofra tells Sarah that Marwan has great Hebrew, Sarah accuses her of racism (p. 188). Why does Sarah respond in this way? What is Ofra's retort? Can you imagine a similar kind of conversation about ethnic minorities in your locale?
10. How do the characters in this book celebrate Chanukah (p. 208)? How does the observance of Chanukah differ in Israel and in America?
11. What is Ines' response to the Russian aliyah (p. 243)? Is she being racist, in your opinion? Do you know of similar responses to immigration in your community?
12. When exactly does this book take place? How and when do you figure this out? What details would have to change if this book were set ten years later?



REVIEW QUOTES:

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

“Matalon creates a shifting, dreamlike mosaic in which each scene is vividly conveyed yet persistently enigmatic . . . there's no escaping the traumas of this tragic land.”

--Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

“Matalon’s story draws you in like a child’s fairy tale turned on its head... it is soaked through, too, with the particular bewilderment of those who have been sideswiped by history.”

--Susie Linfield, *Los Angeles Times*

“Matalon makes a strong case for the necessity of unearthing the past, even if it is in fragments – a case for the language of memory.”

--*The New York Times Book Review*

“Matalon's finely calibrated prose, cosmopolitan outlook and nuanced perspective on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict give the novel a sophisticated grace.”

--*Publisher’s Weekly*

OTHER BOOKS BY RONIT MATALON AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH:

The One Facing Us (Metropolitan Books, 1998)

