

## THE ONE FACING US

By Ronit Matalon

Translated by Marsha Weinstein

First published in Hebrew by Am Oved, 1995

English translation published by Holt, 1998

Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is the story of a seventeen-year-old Israeli girl named Esther, who is sent to live with her wealthy Uncle Jacques Sicourelle in Central Africa. There, amidst the indolence of postcolonial Africa, where her family is attended to by an impressive array of black servants, Esther resists attempts by her uncle and aunt to marry her off to her divorced cousin Erouan. Instead, Esther prefers to delve into her family's past, with the help of several sepia-toned photographs that are included in the novel. She learns about her pan-Arabist father, Robert, who spends his life dabbling in Israeli leftist politics and exploring central Africa; Jacques' stingy wife Marie-Ange, who is valued most for her French citizenship; Esther's maternal uncle Moise, a Zionist who leaves Egypt in the late 1940s to found a kibbutz in Palestine; his brother Edouard, tyrannical head of Israel's secret service interrogation team in Gaza; and Robert's sister Nadine, a suicidal New York City librarian and Emily Dickinson scholar. The novel yields a rich portrait of Esther's Egyptian-Jewish family, now scattered to the four corners of the earth in the wake of personal tragedy and political upheaval.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ronit Matalon was born in 1959 to Egyptian-Jewish immigrants to Israel. She studied literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University and worked as a journalist for the newspaper *Haaretz*, where she covered Gaza and the West Bank from 1987 to 1993. She currently teaches literature and Haifa University and works as a newspaper columnist and reviewer. She lives in Tel Aviv with her husband and children.



### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. This novel, which is set primarily in Africa and Israel, serves to situate Israel in a particular geographical region. Does you sense a shift in Israel's geographical context shift after reading this book? What aspects of Israeli life and culture are thereby revealed?
2. Which characters in this book spend time in Israel? Compare, for instance, the experiences of Uncle Moise and of Esther's cousin Zuza. How would their senses of Israel differ from one another?
3. How does Esther's mother's family become acquainted with Zionism? Which family member is primarily responsible for bringing Zionism home, and how does he do so?
4. What is Edouard's job in Israel? What do we learn about his personal life?
5. What is Esther's father's reaction to the Six Day War (p. 245)? Why is he so angered by the Israeli media response?
6. Why does Esther's father get so upset when the Manhattan detective Armando assumes that his sister disappeared in the Holocaust (p. 251)? What assumptions and stereotypes does Armando's comment reflect, and how does Esther's family (and this novel) challenge those notions?
7. What role does the Holocaust actually play in this book? Why do you think that Esther dreams of a crematorium (p. 280), and why is Zuza writing a book on Dr. Mengele?
8. What do you think Uncle Sicourelle means when he calls the members of his family "sons of the East" (p. 296)?
9. What does this novel teach you about the experience of Sephardic Jews in Israel? How is the relationship between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews depicted?
10. Have you visited any of the places mentioned in this book -- such as the airport in Douala, or the Hilton in Tel Aviv, or the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City? Do these places seem more or less familiar as they are described by Matalon?
11. How do you explain the title of this novel? To whom does it refer most directly? Might the author also be referring to Esther? Is Esther always "the one facing us," given the way in which this book is narrated? Why do you think Matalon chooses to tell the story in this manner?



## REVIEW QUOTES:

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

"Mr Yehoshua's inventiveness and hallucinatory intensity should be vividly evident. He is a writer who exhibits the rigorous fidelity to his own perceptions that produces real originality."

--Robert Alter, *New York Times*

"We see an Arab and an Israeli locked into a debate of proximity, likeness, mental hatred, that Yehoshua's superb ability to render both presences relieves of all sentimentality. What I value most in *The Lover* is a gift for equidistance – between characters, even between the feelings on both sides."

--Alfred Kazin, *New York Review of Books*

"Yehoshua's psychological novel is complex and fascinating, his voices – distinct and striking – represent more than themselves."

--*Publishers Weekly*

"Delicate shifting tensions between political surface and elemental depths...elusive, haunting."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"One of Israel's world-class writers."

--Saul Bellow

"It is a disturbing, brilliantly assured novel, and almost thirty years after its appearance it retains a startling originality."

--NatashaLehrer, *TLS*

"In place of the unifying and optimistic passions of Zionism, [Yehoshua's] skilful, delicate prose depicts a darker country of insomnia, claustrophobia and disconnectedness, while the clever contrast of perspectives emphasises the vast gulf that can exist between people who supposedly love one another."

--Francesca Segal, *Jewish Chronicle*

"In this profound study of personal and political trauma, Yehoshua... evokes Israel's hallucinatory reality."

--*The Daily Telegraph*



**OTHER BOOK BY HAIM BE'ER AVAILABE IN ENGLISH:**

*Bliss* (Holt, 2003)

