

THE BLUE MOUNTAIN

By Meir Shalev

Translated by Hillel Halkin

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English translation published by Harper Collins, 1991

Study guide by Ilana Kurshan with Adi Inbar

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This lush and compelling novel is set in a small cooperative village in the Valley of Jezreel prior to the founding of Israel. The earliest inhabitants of the village are Eastern European immigrants who arrived in the early 1900s in what has become known as the Second Aliyah. Their story is narrated by Baruch, the grandson of one of the village founders, who becomes the owner of a cemetery that serves as a resting place for many members of this pioneering generation. Baruch recalls his grandfather Mirkin and his two friends Mandolin Tsirkin and Eliezer Liberson, who, inspired by the beautiful Feyge Levin, formed the Feyge Levin Workingman's Circle, which soon became a village legend. The village is peopled by colorful characters such as Ya'akov Pinnes, a gifted teacher who takes his students out into the fields to infuse them with his love for nature; Uncle Efrayim, who disappears carrying his beloved pet bull named Jean Valjean on his shoulders; and Hayyim Margulis, the beekeeper who allows himself to be seduced by the watchman's wife. Baruch comes to know their stories through conversations with his grandfather and with his teacher Pinnes, and through his own childhood recollections, which are woven together to create a rich and vivid historical tapestry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Meir Shalev was born in Israel in 1948, the same year as the founding of the State. He was born and raised in Nahalal, an agricultural cooperative. Shalev then moved to Jerusalem, where he studied psychology at the Hebrew University and where he lives today. He produced and hosted several radio and television programs, and he works as a regular columnist for the Israeli press. *The Blue Mountain* was Shalev's first novel. Since then, he has written a book of essays, six additional novels, and several children's books. His most recent novel, *Yonah v'Naar*, was published in Israel in March 2006.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. This novel is infused with strains of magical realism, in which fantastical elements are woven into the narrative without being questioned or explained – such as, for instance, the donkey that serves as postman, and the way in which Feyge became pregnant with Avraham. Can you give some examples of magical realism in this novel? How does this literary technique reflect the characters' own sense of the mythic nature of their story?
2. Who are the "founding fathers"? How are they accorded special status? How do they differ in social position from the American "founding fathers" – Jefferson, Washington, Madison, etc.? What does this say about the values of the society that Shalev is depicting?
3. As a character, Levin functions as an outsider who offers a unique perspective on the pioneer generation. Consider several of his comments:
 - a. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he remarks, "This city, with its stones and poverty, will be the ruin of me. All one sees is vanished glory and dead ashes. The stones alone are at home here. This is no place for living men" (p. 44-5). What is Levin reacting to? Do you feel that any aspects of his description of Jerusalem are applicable to the city today? How do you relate to his criticisms of the place?
 - b. When Levin arrives in Israel, he says "You can't throw a stone in this country without hitting some holy place or madman" (p. 47) Do you agree with Levin's assessment today? Is he expressing a timeless truth about life in Israel? What is it like to live in this sort of reality?
 - c. Levin criticizes the attitude of the pioneers: "You people never had any appreciation of plain ordinary work. You were too busy acting in your great Theater of Redemption and Rebirth. Every plowing was a return to the earth, every chicken laid the first Jewish egg after two thousand years of exile. Ordinary potatoes, the same *kartoffelakh* you ate in Russia, became *tapuchei adamah*, 'earth apples,' to show how you were one with Nature" (p. 94). Why is Levin so critical and resentful? Do you think the pioneers have a right to mythologize their lives? What are the benefits and dangers inherent in doing so?
4. What is the metaphorical significance of Mirkin's habit of drinking tea with an olive between his teeth? No one in Russia drinks tea this way, nor do any young and modern Israelis. Why is this habit particular to his generation?
5. Pinnes teaches Baruch to divide all of nature into "Our Friends" and "Our Enemies." He instructs him, "Whenever you see an insect, bird,



- mammal, or reptile, ask if it is friend or foe" (p. 211). How does nature become politicized in this novel? How is nature a tool for nation-building? Is this type of binary thinking necessary when living in the Middle East?
6. What is the purpose of Pinnes' field trips, beyond teaching an appreciation for nature? How does he use the land to teach text? Have you ever studied in this way?
 7. Consider the list of books on Grandfather Mirkin's shelf (see p. 55-56). What does his library reveal about him? Do your bookshelves reflect who you are?
 8. Describe Baruch's physical appearance and his personality characteristics. Why do you think Shalev choose him as the narrator for this novel? What is the symbolic significance of Baruch's profession? How is he uniquely situated to narrate this story?
 9. When Avraham is born, he is accorded special status as the first child born in the settlement (see p. 54-6). How is he treated? In what way is he considered a child of the whole village? How does Shalev use his character to discuss the general village attitude towards outsiders?
 10. In commenting on Baruch's uncle Efrayim, Pinnes writes that "Every man has a bull that he must lift. We are all flesh, seed, and a great bellow in the heart that will not rest until it is let out" (p. 154). What is Pinnes saying? Who besides Efrayim has to carry around a bull in this story? What is the bull that we each must lift?
 11. Why does Grandfather Mirkin insist on being buried in his orchard?
 12. What are the parallels that Baruch's lawyer draws between farming and running a cemetery (p. TK)? Why are the villagers so angered by his defense?
 13. What does Pinnes mean when he says, "The earth cheated on us. She wasn't the virgin we thought she was" (p. 275). How did the earth cheat on the settlers? In what way was the land not a virgin? Do you agree with this statement?
 14. Towards the end of the novel, Baruch says, "Grandfather died when he had no more dreams. Doesn't everyone?" Do you agree with this statement? Which characters in this book die when they have no more dreams? Are there any collective dreams that all the characters share?



15. How does your understanding of Pinnes' attempted suicide change over the course of the novel? What new light is shed on the scene, and how does this affect your understanding of what happened?
16. Why is Meshulam so angered by the history journal he finds with its article on "The Swamps in the Valley of Jezreel: Myth and Reality"? What is his opinion on Zionist propaganda? Why is the reality of the swamps so important to him and to the founding fathers? What are the myths we tell ourselves as Americans, and how have we been forced to confront them head-on?
17. Why do you think this book was a bestseller in Israel? Can you think of a book that performs a similar role in American culture?



REVIEW QUOTES:

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

"Passionate, ribald and tender, bursting with dozens of interwoven tales, this lushly nostalgic novel (a bestseller in Israel) records the loves, hates, infidelities, feuds and enterprises that fuel one community over three decades. It also gently laments the eclipse of the pioneer spirit in modern Israel . . . An indelible portrait of the birth of a nation."

--*Publishers Weekly*

"Shalev's novel is complex and densely structured, moving back and forth in time, hinting at slowly revealed secrets. His characters are stubborn, argumentative, full of quirks and crotchets, irritating but believable individuals. History here has not been prettied up; the novel at times is as awkward and uncompromising as its main characters. Overall, a demanding but often gripping look at what it costs to make dreams a reality."

--Beth Ann Mills, *Library Journal*

"The untamed land these settlers inhabit before and after World War I stands in marked contrast to the developed country encountered by the recent arrivals from the Soviet Union. The stubborn characters in Mr. Shalev's novel may well remind readers of some of the tough-minded old-timers with similar backgrounds in modern Israel."

--Herbert Mitgang, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Reminiscent of a painting by Chagall . . . Evocative, even lyrical, with the underlying magic realism adding to the mythic stature of the villagers and their accomplishments."

--*Kirkus Reviews*

"Shalev's bonds to the Jewish state stretch back almost a century and have heavily influenced his work. Though not autobiographical, his books . . . draw on a proud family story starting in 1905. That's the year his young grandparents abandoned a life imperiled by poverty and pogroms in Ukraine to become pioneers and farmers in pre-state Israel."

--Abby Cohen, *San Francisco Jewish Chronicle*



"*The Blue Mountain* is a lyrical and wise portrait of a community struggling with its surroundings and with itself. It makes good use of folk history, humour and a dash of magical realism. Perhaps its political edge is less sharp than it could be, but its humanistic message that ordinary people, in all their glory and confusions, are worthy of respect and dignity, is one that we should surely heed."

--Peter Whittaker, *New Internationalist*

"A giddy mixture of zany comedy, folktale, and heroic fantasy . . . glitters with unexpected juxtapositions and wild shifts from the practical to the impractical."

--*Atlantic Monthly*

OTHER BOOKS BY MEIR SHALEV IN ENGLISH:

Esau (Harper Collins, 1993)
The Loves of Judith (Ecco, 1999)
Four Meals (Canongate, 2002)

