

A WOMAN IN JERUSALEM

By A.B. Yehoshua

Translated by Hillel Halkin

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Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

ABOUT THE BOOK:

In this novel's opening pages, the corpse of a woman who was the victim of a terrorist bombing in the Jerusalem market lies unidentified in the morgue. The local newspaper points a finger at the large Jerusalem bakery where the woman worked as a cleaning lady, holding the management responsible for "gross negligence and inhumanity towards an employee." The bakery owner, overcome by guilt and fear for the company's reputation, entrusts the mission of identifying the woman's body to his human resources manager, the divorced, middle-aged man who is this novel's hero. The human resources manager discovers that the woman was a former engineer from the former Soviet Union who had come to Israel on a religious pilgrimage. His mission takes him back to the woman's native land for her burial, a journey that turns into an opportunity for his moral redemption.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

A.B. Yehoshua was born in Jerusalem in 1936, the fifth generation of a Sephardi Jerusalemite family. After studying Hebrew literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he started a teaching career. From 1963 to 1967, he lived and taught in Paris; he is now Professor of Literature at Haifa University. Yehoshua has published numerous novels, short stories, plays and essays and is one of the best internationally known Israeli authors. He has received several literary prizes both in Israel and abroad: the Brenner Prize, the Bialik Prize (1989), the Alterman Prize, England's "Best Novel of the Year" for *Mr Mani* (1992), the Koret Jewish Book Award, the National Jewish Book Award, the Israel Prize for Literature (1995), the Giovanni Boccaccio Prize (Italy, 2005) and the Viareggio Prize for Lifetime Achievement (Italy, 2005). His work has been published in 28 languages.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. The beginning section of this novel offers a sense of the way the personal and professional interact in the Israeli workplace. Give some examples of how these spheres overlap with one another. Is this different from what you are familiar with in your own professional experience? How?
2. Yehoshua talks of Israel being a country where “nothing ever gets forgotten” (p. 33). How do you think this squares with the fact that Yehoshua is the only character in this book who is referred to by her proper name?
3. Yulia is not the only outsider in Jerusalem depicted in this novel; consider, for instance, the young Arab dishwasher in the bakery who “preferred to get a good night's sleep there without having to worry about the three humiliating checkpoints he had to pass through on the way back from his village every day” (p. 56). How does this matter-of-fact reporting of an Arab’s humiliation make you feel? Does it add to the novel, or distract you? Why?
4. This novel depicts many of the ways in which terror changes people's lives. For instance, the bakery owner says, “I never thought I'd be as wealthy as I've become, especially since the start of all this terror, which makes the whole world want bread and cake” (p. 122). What are some of the other unexpected consequences and repercussions of living in a time of terror?
5. The six religious girls who lived next door to Yulia have a unique perspective on her. Describe how they view her. How is this perspective informed by their sheltered religious upbringing? How do you think these girls might describe you?
6. The resource manager believes that for the owner, who is determined to make up for the way he treated Yulia, “atonement was turning into lunacy” (p. 135). Where can you see this in the book? Have you ever come across this kind of response in people you know?
7. The Talmud relates that ten measures of beauty were given to the world, and nine of them went to Jerusalem. Thus in the rabbinic imagination, Jerusalem is famous for its beauty. Given this, what is the significance of Yulia's beauty? What is the impact of her beauty on those who see her? Perhaps Yehoshua is drawing a connection between this woman and the city in which she chose to make her home. Where else do you see this parallel at work in the novel?



8. How has the human resources manager been shaped by his army experience? (Consider, for instance, that his wife was one of his soldiers.) What qualities does he attribute to his years as a troop commander? Would you say that any of these qualities are often typical of Israelis in general? And by the same token, would you say these qualities are lacking in non-Israeli Jews you know?
9. The human resources manager, while sitting beside Yulia's coffin, directs several questions at her, including "What did you hope to find in the hard, sad city that killed you?" (p. 144) In what ways does the book present Jerusalem as Jerusalem a hard and sad city? Why did Yulia come there nonetheless? Why do you think so many people continue to be drawn to this place?
10. When he is far from home, in Yulia's native country, the human resource manager refers to the "entire false promise of Jerusalem" (p. 193). What is he referring to? Do you relate to this way of thinking about Jerusalem?



REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes one by one. What does each add to your understanding of Yehoshua and his work? Do you agree with them?

"This mysterious, quiet meditation on Jerusalem is, I think, about something much greater [than Israel's "problems and identity."] The manager . . . trying to make some meaning of . . . pointless, violent death, as all the structures of his own life fall apart around him, is a figure much bigger and much sadder than even the horrific reality of Israel can suggest."

--Neil Gordon, *Bookforum*

"A moving, unsentimental reckoning with death and renewal."

--*Kirkus Reviews*

"[A] smart, suspenseful seriocomic tale of guilt, penance, and public relations....Tautly composed in a manner akin to Kafka and Babel, Yehoshua's brilliant under-your-skin satire subtly evokes thoughts of war and terrorism, vulnerability and fate, the sacred and the profane."

--Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

"What engages Mr. Yehoshua most here is the question of humanity...Yet his evocation of what it means to be human is drawn in the subtlest strokes...A sad, warm, funny book about Israel and being Jewish, and one that has deep lessons to impart--for other people as well as his own."

--*The Economist*

"A WOMAN IN JERUSALEM is a book about a mission and a memorial...But while the novel is always aware of the sorrows of modern Israel, it soars on wry, wise wings far above the battered landscape...a small masterpiece, a compact, strange work of Chekhovian grace, grief, wit and compassion."

--Warren Bass, *Washington Post Book World* :

"An elegantly structured, thoroughly accessible story, albeit one with rich philosophical layers...A WOMAN moves us with deep insights into the meaning of home, belonging and the fate of the stranger."

--*Miami Herald*

"The author beautifully renders a humanity that transcends culture and ritual, the distinctly personal engagement of a lonely man and the woman in his care, no obstacle too great in a quest for the fulfillment of a promise."

--*Curled Up With A Good Book.com*

"Yehoshua is examining a deeper question: what does it mean to be human--humane--especially during troubled times? "When Jerusalem is burning, does any of this matter?" The answer for both the author and his main character seems to be: "more than ever.""

--*Christian Science Monitor*



OTHER BOOKS BY A.B. YEHOSHUA AVAILABE IN ENGLISH:

(The Liberated Bride (Harcourt, 2004
(A Journey to the End of the Millenium (Harcourt, 2000
(Open Heart (Doubleday, 1997
(A Late Divorce (Dutton, 1993
(Mr. Mani (Harcourt, 1992
(The Continuing Silence of a Poet (Peter Halban, 1991
(The Lover (Harcourt, 1985
(Early in the Summer of 1970 (Doubleday, 1977
(Three Days and a Child (Doubleday, 1970

