

AMOS OZ

Israelis read for rage, not necessarily for enjoyment.
Maybe that's the way literature is supposed to be read:
for provocation.

Amos Oz, *New York Times*, 12/30/93

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In his memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2004), Amos Oz admits that as a child in the 1940s, he hoped to “grow up to be a book.” In hindsight, he interprets this ambition as a response to the Holocaust and precariousness of Israel; history showed that not every child grew up. His home in Jerusalem, filled with books written by dead men, suggested that “a book may survive” (*The New Yorker*, 11/8/04).

Oz survived as well. He became one of Israel's major figures, celebrated for his mastery of modern Hebrew prose and controversial for his liberal political writings. In his widely translated fiction and nonfiction, Oz explores the tensions within modern-day Israel: its turbulent history, diverse inhabitants and religions, and mad political landscape. Drawing on his experience as a kibbutznik, soldier, and teacher, Oz illuminates the contradictions of daily life, Israelis' individual and collective hopes and experiences, and the clash between Zionist idealism and the realities of a pluralistic society. These themes take the form of domestic dramas playing out against Israel's political landscape. In Oz's bestselling *My Michael* (1968), for example, a marriage disintegrates in the face of the 1956 Suez War.

Oz, who teaches modern Hebrew literature at Ben Gu-

rion University of the Negev, lives in the southern Israeli desert town of Arad. The town, which lies between Be'er Sheva and the Dead Sea, harbors a microcosm of Israeli society, including secular and religious inhabitants and recent Ethiopian and Russian immigrants. Oz's son's asthma prompted the family's move here in 1986 from Kibbutz Hulda, Oz's home since age 15. That same year he changed his last name from Klausner to Oz, “strength” in Hebrew. Until then, Oz had never owned any personal property or even a checkbook; he had invested all his novels' royalties back into the kibbutz. This was not unusual. In the period before independence, when kibbutzim—Israeli communal settlements inspired by Zionism, socialism, and economic necessity—took shape within Israel's capitalist society, kibbutz members contributed equally to the welfare of their community. In the 1980s, the kibbutzim, once representa-

tive of Israel's idealistic social image, started to decline. “You will not find someone with a more exotic background this side of North Korea,” Oz told *The New Yorker* (11/8/04).

Oz's heritage helps explain what his literature and politics mean to Israeli society today. Oz was born in 1939 in British-ruled Jerusalem as Amos Klausner. His parents, right-wing Zionists, had emigrated from Eastern Europe

WHERE TO START

MY MICHAEL, Oz's breakthrough novel and still a classic, paints a touching, disturbing portrait of Jerusalem on the eve of the 1956 Suez War.

A PERFECT PEACE, set against the backdrop of the Six Day War, explores what happens when generations clash and idealism meets reality. For nonfiction, start with **IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL**, which records Israel's complex past, present, and future from multiple perspectives.

to Palestine in the early 1930s. They viewed the Labor Zionists with suspicion; his uncle ran unsuccessfully against Chaim Weizmann for the presidency. In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz recounts his childhood—the political talk, his mother's suicide in 1952, his father's intellectual pursuits, his own love of Chekhov and Sherwood Anderson, and the sense of living in a country constantly under threat.

At age 15, Oz left his family's cloistered apartment, joined Kibbutz Hulda (between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), and embraced Labor politics and the socialist practices of the kibbutz. (Today, approximately 2 percent of Israelis live on kibbutzim, though some 270 still exist throughout the nation.) "I wanted to become a simple, dumb tractor driver," he said. "But I began to write secretly. I couldn't resist it" (*New Yorker*, 11/8/04). He published his first short stories in the literary quarterly *Keshet*, then studied philosophy and literature at Hebrew University. Degree in hand, he returned to kibbutz life, where for 25 years he waited tables, farmed, taught at the kibbutz high school, and married and raised three children. He wrote before sunrise; each published novel brought more time off to write. War interrupted his endeavors. As a reserve soldier in a tank unit, Oz fought in two armed conflicts: on the Sinai front during the 1967 Six-Day War, and in the Golan Heights in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. His battlefield experience—the universal Israeli experience—is noticeably absent from his writings. In 1991, he was elected a full member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language; in 1998, the 50th anniversary of Israel's independence, he received his country's most prestigious award: the Israel Prize for Literature.

Literature and Politics

Oz is very much a part of Israel's literary and political fabric. "Each time I agree with myself, I write an essay. When I disagree with myself, I know that I'm pregnant with a short

story or a novel" (*New York Times*, 12/30/93). If in his literature Oz introduces characters with multiple viewpoints, in politics he is more singularly focused.

Since the 1967 war, the dovish Oz has written extensively about the Israeli-Arab conflict, campaigned for compromise between Israel and its neighbors, and advocated a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian clash. As a founder of Peace Now, a grassroots movement formed in 1978 during the Israeli-Egyptian peace talks, Oz was one of the first Israelis to advocate "land for peace." He has praised the Oslo Accords and discussions with the PLO, and he has been criticized for his "apartheid" stance. As he articulates in the collections *In the Land of Israel* (1982), *Israel, Palestine and Peace* (1994), and other nonfiction, Oz understands the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict as war "between two victims," each with equally convincing claims to the land. Not surprisingly, he imagines the conflict's two possible endings in literary terms. A Shakespearean tragedy would produce a "stage hewed with dead bodies [while] justice of sorts prevails"; a Chekhovian finale would leave everyone "disappointed, disillusioned, embittered, heartbroken, but alive." With Peace Now, Oz has worked toward a Chekhovian ending, which he calls "clenched teeth compromise" ("Coping with Conflict," *Online NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer, 1/23/02).

Oz's vocal activism has made him a political celebrity of sorts. In 1993, Israel's then-foreign minister, Shimon Peres, recommended Oz as a possible leader of the Israeli Labor Party. But as Oz said, "If writers moved into politics and politicians into writing, it would be the end of civilization as we know it. Anyway, it's more exciting to write a novel than to run a country" (*New York Times*, 12/30/93). Oz's fiction, exciting in psychological and historical range, extends far beyond his own beliefs to reflect the multiple Jewish viewpoints of Israel's past, present, and future.

OTHER SELECTED WORKS IN TRANSLATION

ELSEWHERE, PERHAPS (1966)

In his fictional recreation of an Israeli frontier kibbutz, Oz depicts kibbutz culture—one born of love, sorrow, and necessity.

UNTO DEATH (1971)

This collection contains two novellas: *Crusade*, about an 11th-century knight in the Holy Land, and *Late Love*, featuring a Russian émigré lecturer in contemporary Israel.

SOUMCHI (1978)

In this children's book, a young boy in modern-day Jerusalem grows up and finds his first love.

FIMA (1991)

In this novel, Efraim (Fima) Nisa, a

brilliant middle-aged poet, falls prey to fantasy and disillusion.

DON'T CALL IT NIGHT (1994)

Oz's 10th novel focuses on two lovers—a civil engineer and a school teacher in charge of a drug rehabilitation clinic—in a quiet desert town in the Negev.

ISRAEL, PALESTINE AND PEACE (1994)

Oz expresses his views on the possibility of achieving peace between Israel and Palestine in these essays and speeches written between 1976 and 1994.

PANTHER IN THE BASEMENT (1995)

In this novel, Oz explores the Jerusalem of his youth—the late days of the British Mandate—from the perspective of a 12-year-old Jewish

boy. Despite fantasies of quashing British rule, he befriends a British soldier.

THE SAME SEA (1999)

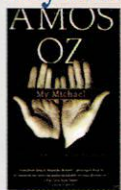
Written in free-form verse, this experimental domestic comedy shows, through the Israeli characters Albert Danon, his dead wife, his itinerant son Rico, and Rico's enticing girlfriend, that all secrets are the same, far removed from religious and racial divisions.

A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS (2002)

In this memoir—a personal history of Zionism—Oz recalls his childhood from British-ruled Jerusalem to his life on a kibbutz, as well as his careers as a novelist and an arbiter of peace. (★★★★ March/April 2005) ■

Major Works

My Michael (1968; trans. 1972)



My Michael, the first of Oz's novels to be translated into English and published in more than 30 languages, established Oz's international reputation. Besides an emotional portrait of a frustrated woman told from her perspective, the novel also sketches Jerusalem's neighborhoods on the eve of the Suez crisis. The book, though a bestseller in Israel, raised controversy for its depiction of Israelis removed from their own history.

THE STORY: In 1950s Israel, against the backdrop of Jerusalem's old city streets, Hannah Gonen marries a stable, unremarkable geologist named Michael. As the two become more distant, Hannah retreats from reality and delves more intensely into her fantasies. She starts to reject the outside world—and her emotionally barren marriage—as both war and mental breakdown become imminent.

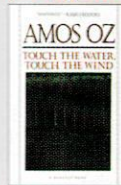
"My Michael is an extremely self-conscious and serious psychological novel, slow, thoughtful, self-assured and highly sophisticated. ... In a way it's a modern Israeli *Madame Bovary*, a finely wrought portrait of a woman that is also a critique of a superficial 'masculine' society." RICHARD LOCKE, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/25/72.

"Although [Hannah's] dreams are tame by the standards of American fiction, and sometimes rather adolescent, her craving for violence, for sexual relations with passionate Arab youths, has evidently scandalized and fascinated Israeli readers." MILTON RUGOFF, SATURDAY REVIEW, 6/24/72.

"It was Amos Oz's good fortune that his breakthrough novel, *My Michael*, was published in 1968, when, in the wake of the Six-Day War, everything associated with plucky little Israel, from Moshe Dayan to Cinderella Rockefeller, was trendy in the West. And he has, with his Peace Now credentials, remained the international literati's darling." DAVID ISAACSON, THE TELEGRAPH, 5/9/04.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Oz's best known novel is a psychological study rich in its depictions of place.

Touch the Water, Touch the Wind (1973; trans. 1975)



In his third novel, Oz experimented with mathematical, musical, mystical, and fantastical themes. It marked a departure from his first novel, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, a portrait of kibbutz society, and the narrower focus of *My Michael*.

THE STORY: In 1939, as the Germans advance into Poland, Elisha Pomeranz, a provincial Jewish mathematician and watchmaker, leaves behind his beautiful wife and flees to the forests via a magical flight. He eventually lands in Israel, where he proves a theorem about infinity while working on a kibbutz. His wife ends up a Commu-

nist in Stalinist Russia. When the two reunite in Israel, they must rebuild their lives—or magically escape—as the eve of the Six-Day War approaches.

"Oz is an immensely clever, subtle, and mischievous writer whose new book is a brilliant scenario of all Jewish experience in our day. ... To the unusually sensitive and humorous mind of Amos Oz, the real theme of Jewish history—especially in Israel—is unreality." ALFRED KAZIN, SATURDAY REVIEW, 11/2/74.

"Conceived in poetic license and dedicated to the proposition that all characters are created equal, *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* lightly touches everything under the sun as it flows and turns from Poland to Israel, from Heidegger to Stalin, from mathematics to gossip, from espionage to metaphysics, from infernal Nazism to international Communism to eternal love. ... [But] flying and diabolism remain poetic fancies rather than compelling fantasies." ALAN FRIEDMAN, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/24/74.

"When Pomeranz is captured by the Germans, he escapes by levitation, like somebody in a Chagall painting. ... Many of these bits of fantasy, or 'symbolism' if you will, are unbelievably tasteless ... also the attempts at humor." JOHN THOMPSON, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 1/23/75.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Oz's novel is a fantastical portrayal of the war and the postwar experience in Europe and Israel.

Under This Blazing Light (1979; trans. 1995)



Written between 1962 and 1979, these rigorous, heartfelt, and open-minded essays focus on Oz's central concerns: the revival of Hebrew literature and the challenge of achieving peace between Israel and Arab nations—what he calls the conflict of "right" versus "right."

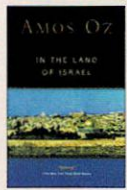
THE COLLECTION: In "The Meaning of Homeland," which appeared after the 1967 war, Oz examines his identity as a Jew and Zionist. In other essays, he supports a gradual, two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; explores the extended family created by kibbutz life ("It is the least bad place I have ever seen. And the most daring effort."); muses on the great themes of Israeli literature (suffering, protest); discusses the concept of "homeland" and socialism in the Israeli context; and provides insight into his own heritage and personal development.

"In Israel, of course, the political and literary are hopelessly entangled with the personal. This is something that Mr. Oz recognizes in his bones." TOVA REICH, NEW YORK TIMES, 6/25/95.

"Under this Blazing Light should be high up on any recommended reading list." JOHN HUCKANS, BOOK SOURCE MAGAZINE, 5/02.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Oz's collection explores the theme of renewal and makes relevant commentary on Israel's cultural, political, and philosophical issues.

In the Land of Israel (1982; trans. 1983)



In the 1980s, during Israel's war with Lebanon, Oz traveled through the West Bank and his own troubled land. Originally appearing in the Israeli newspaper *Davar*, these articles engendered heated controversy and acclaim. Since then, the volume has appeared in more than 10 countries.

THE COLLECTION: Ranging from documentary interviews and factual reporting to personal essays, these articles chart Oz's observations about Israel's deep-seated political and ideological differences and evaluates the question, "Should Israel give up land for peace?" Through interviews with an orthodox rabbi, Palestinian journalists, West Bank settlers, North African Jewish immigrants, a Jewish farmer, and an Israeli Arab, among others, Oz argues for "spiritual pluralism" as he acknowledges his country's profound contradictions and his belief in Israel's people.

"Here, unadorned and brutal, are the voices of messianic nationalists; here, rough but vivid, are the voices of the Oriental Jews. ... [This] is a vivid, tense, somewhat garish social portrait." IRVING HOWE, ATLANTIC, 12/83.

"When the artist triumphs, and the situations or characters are allowed to speak for themselves, Oz produces some of his most robust prose to date; whenever the ideologue intrudes, in the name of the 'pluralistic' spirit, Oz reveals more than he

intends about his own role in fomenting the current tensions in the land of Israel." RUTH R. WISSE, COMMENTARY, 4/84.

"His final plea in this book is for patience, because in spite of everything, including their words which fly up against his, Mr. Oz believes in people. How else could he have written so stunning a book?" ROGER ROSENBLATT, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/6/83.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *In the Land of Israel* is a timeless work about a divided homeland, no less important today than 20 years ago.

Black Box (1987; trans. 1988)

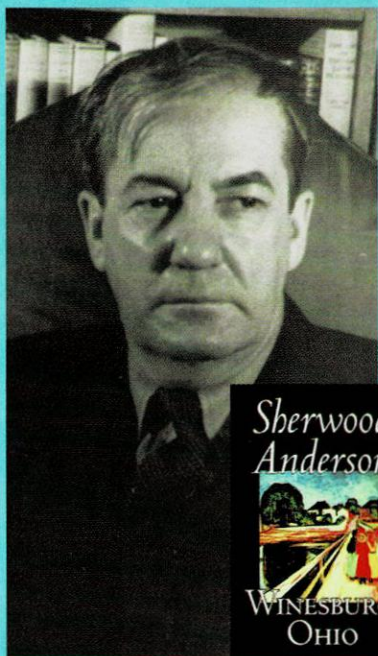


Black Box remained on Israel's best-seller lists longer than any previous book and has been translated into more than 30 languages. With its vituperative epistolary love story, it marked Oz's most experimental work to date. Oz described *Black Box*, about marriage and the decline of the Jewish Eastern European experience, as "an observation on the human condition formulated on the Israeli scene."

THE STORY: In contemporary Israel, the manipulative Ilana contacts her abusive, war-hero ex-husband, now living in the United States, to seek financial and psychological help for their rebellious teenage son, Boaz. Meanwhile, Ilana's right-wing, Moroccan-born second husband resorts to blackmail to support Zionist causes as concerned lawyers and relatives jump in.

"Mr. Oz is concerned not only with the private lives of these people, but with the life of Israel, and the characters, in

Amos Oz on His American Compatriots



As a child, Oz hoped to grow up into a book (since books don't die). He did not, but he counts American authors among his great literary influences. Ernest Hemingway in particular inspired him, but there was a catch: "I couldn't possibly hope, being the humble kibbutznik that I was," Oz said, "to get to Madrid or New York or Rome or Paris before I wrote the Great Israeli Novel. But then how could I write any great novel before I've traveled to all those places like Hemingway?" Fortunately Oz discovered Sherwood Anderson. His depiction of daily life in a small Midwestern town in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) convinced Oz that the best material came from what writers knew best—in Oz's case, his family, Eastern European immigrants, kibbutznik revolutionaries, and

Jerusalem neighborhoods (Commonwealth Club transcript, in 12/7/04).

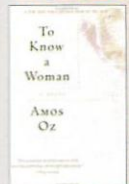
Although Oz has read his generation's Jewish-American novelists—Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth—he sees them as belonging to a different literary tradition, one more comical and intellectual, perhaps, but less daring. If he were American, Oz admitted that he might also write about Jewish immigrants' neuroses. But then, he said, "I wouldn't be writing about the desert or the starry nights of the country. ... So much of what I have to tell has to do with the open, the desert, the field, a kind of arid mountains around Jerusalem, the neighborhoods, the street, the garden, the kibbutz. I would feel claustrophobic" (*New Yorker*, 11/8/04). ■

revealing their inner lives, reveal, as well, the condition of the state. ... The paradox, or perhaps the mystery of *Black Box*, is that it is only by pushing their natural extremism to its limits that the characters are able to come together in peace." MARY

GORDON, NEW YORK TIMES, 4/24/88.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Oz's award-winning novel is a powerful fusion of personal and political destinies that illuminates modern Israeli society.

To Know a Woman (1989; trans. 1991)



In another psychological novel, Oz examines a modern Israel family's interpersonal dynamics.

THE STORY: A retired Mossad (Israeli secret service) agent, middle-aged widower Yoel Ravid, ever distrustful, searches for "signs of life" and an objective view of reality. Living

with his mother, mother-in-law, and teenage daughter in a Tel Aviv suburb, he is "a free man in almost every sense of the word"—except for the haunting memories of his dead wife.

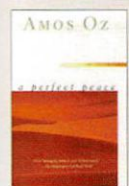
"In the hands of a lesser writer, the tedium of Yoel's grieving introspection might have seriously undermined the novel's more ambitious symbolic subtext. But Oz is an old hand at using mundane material to evoke the dark recesses of Israel's collective unconscious." BRYAN CHEYETTE, NEW STATESMAN, 2/15/91.

"If *To Know a Woman* impresses, finally, as a lucid and indeed honest book about lying, this honesty derives less from plot than from its consistent respect for words as the basic unit of both political and literary language." JONATHAN COE, LONDON REVIEW OF

BOOKS, 4/4/91.

A Perfect Peace (1982, trans. 1985)

♦ HAROLD BLOOM'S THE WESTERN CANON



With a backdrop ranging from Syrian tensions to the Six-Day War, Oz's novel again explores family dynamics—this time, the clash of immigrants with their native-born children. "The crux of the novel," said Oz, "is the marvelous dream of the idealistic pioneers, those old tyrants who wanted to revolutionize the human psyche and the nature of love. Somehow, their dream still hovers in the air" (*New York Times*, 7/6/85).

THE STORY: In 1965, the restless 26-year-old Yonatan Lifshitz struggles whether or not to leave the Israeli kibbutz where he was raised and has, in turn, started his own family. Can he leave the experimental, idealistic society his father helped create and start a new life? Either way, he must confront the realities of a changed land, search within his soul, and come to terms with his father's legacy. The arrival of a stranger at the kibbutz challenges his plight.

"In its perfectly-controlled blend of lyricism, passion and stoicism, *A Perfect Peace* transcends place and nationality.

Amos Oz is a novelist of stature and—even rarer in the scheme of things—wisdom." SHEILA MACLEOD, NEW STATESMAN, 7/12/85.

"*A Perfect Peace* is not the Chekhovian masterpiece that some have called it. It is however, a thoroughly decent narrative; ... in its fair-minded balance and mutual placing of voices and opinions; and in its expression of human sympathies." S. S.

PRAWER, TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, 8/9/85.

"[It is] on a level other than the documentary that this novel succeeds so well. It is concerned with inner wholeness, and with a more profound peace than respect between generations and among countries." GRACE SCHULMAN, NEW YORK TIMES

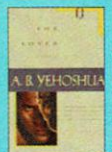
BOOK REVIEW, 6/2/85.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *A Perfect Peace* tells the universal tale of how people transcend cultural, religious, and generational divisions. ■

Who's Who in Modern Israeli Literature



S. Y. AGNON (1888-1970): The first Hebrew writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1966), Agnon is best known for his surreal, religious storytelling and his depiction of the conflict between traditional Jewish custom and the modern Hebrew language. Try *Only Yesterday*, set during the second wave of Jewish emigration to Palestine in the 1910s and featuring a hopeful pioneer and wandering dog. *Twenty-One Stories* introduces Agnon's magical storytelling.



A. B. YEHOSHUA (1936-): Yehoshua, described as an "Israeli Faulkner," focuses on contemporary Israel and stresses deep connections to the North African and Jews from Arab lands (Sephardim). Start with *The Lover*, about a husband and adulterous wife during the Yom Kippur War, or *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, about a North African Jewish merchant in the year 999.



AHARON APPELFELD (1932-): A poet and novelist, Appelfeld escaped a concentration camp during the Holocaust and immigrated to Palestine in 1946. He recalls the Holocaust and European anti-Semitism in such novels as *Badenheim 1939* and *The Immortal Bartfuss* and in his memoir, *The Story of a Life*.



DAVID GROSSMAN (1954-): A structurally complex prose stylist, Grossman casts a sharp eye on Israel's psychological and socioeconomic injustices and a more empathetic one on the Palestinians. *The Yellow Wind* captures his reportage on the West Bank imbroglio; *The Smile of the Lamb* is a fictional account of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. ■