

Profile

Amos Oz

Israel's most prolific author, named after Judaism's prophet Amos, insists his fiction is about the human condition—the love, longing and loneliness that plague us all.

By **Rahel Musleah**

When Israeli writer Amos Oz was 8 years old, he and two friends built a rocket in the backyard of his Jerusalem home. Made of “bits of an abandoned refrigerator and the remains of an old bicycle,” it was aimed at Buckingham Palace in an attempt to end the British Mandate in Palestine. 🍁 The rocket never took off, but in the 65 years since then, Oz’s imagination has continued to fire, fueled by invention, remembrance, loss, a compelling love of words and a desire for self- and national healing. This time, the missile-turned-missive has reached its destination: the hearts and minds of readers around the world.

THE AUTHOR OF OVER 30 BOOKS—AMONG them 13 novels and collections of short fiction, numerous works of nonfiction and 3 children’s books—Oz (pronounced ohs) crafts shadowy and wondrous tales as well as provocative political commentary. He has received almost too many awards to enumerate, including the Israel Prize for literature and the Goethe Prize (perhaps second to the Nobel Prize in literary importance); has been mentioned as a top contender for the Nobel and has won prestigious awards in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United States.

A Tale of Love and Darkness, the poignant story of his parents and grandparents, his own childhood and that of the State of Israel, won the Koret and National Jewish Book Awards, among others. His works have been translated into 41 languages, 3 of them into Arabic, and several of his books have been made into films and plays. He holds the S.Y. Agnon Chair in Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Known almost as much for his political outspokenness and controversial activism as for his fiction, Oz is a founding member of the Peace Now movement and has supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1967. “In the English and American traditions writers are regarded as fine and subtle entertainers,” he notes in an interview at the offices of his American hard-



The Wizard Oz *The author says he writes to ‘exorcise evil spirits.’*

cover publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “In the Jewish-Slavic tradition they are often expected to show the way.” In fact, Oz is named not for a family member but for the biblical prophet Amos (meaning “burden-bearer”), whose anarchist tendencies fascinated Oz’s parents.

At 92nd Street Y in New York to promote *Scenes From Village Life* (see review, page 82), his new novel-in-stories, Oz reads aloud in his mesmerizing voice to an enrapt audience, caressing the Hebrew like a violinist drawing his bow over lush notes and apologizing in advance for his rendering of the English translation by Nicholas de Lange.

A shortish man with tousled gray hair and reading glasses, in his younger days Oz resembled an Israeli version of Robert Redford. He still dazzles with his smile as well as with his consummate storytelling.

DAN PORGES

Oz illuminates every quirk and eccentricity of his lonely but interconnected characters—the way their clothes fit (or don't); the way they pronounce (or mispronounce) words and names—and details the dark and uneasy temperament of the invented village of Tel Ilan, a strange and gothic vista filled with “blurred stars” that takes on a desolate life of its own. “I write about unhappy people,” Oz says, in reply to questions following the reading. “If I can describe what I write about in one word, it's families; in two words, it's unhappy families. In happy families, nothing happens.” Readers and critics may look for political allegories, but Oz mildly insists that his fiction is about the human condition, about the love, longing, loneliness, death, desire, dissolution and guilt that plague us all.

OZ KNOWS FIRSTHAND ABOUT UNHAPPY FAMILIES AND deep loss. Born into a family of scholars, storytellers and right-wing revisionist Zionists, he grew up on 18 Amos Street in the Kerem Avraham neighborhood of Jerusalem. His parents, Yehuda Arie and Fania Klausner, emigrated from Russia and Poland in the 1930s to Israel and spoke nearly 20 languages between them.

Yehuda was a librarian in the National Library on Mount Scopus and lavished his etymological passion on his son at every opportunity. Fania was a spellbinding storyteller of tales “veiled in mist” and so “frightening and captivating” that they sometimes sent shivers up the spine, he writes in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. She suffered from depression and committed suicide when Oz was 12.

Oz and his father never talked about his mother's death—never even mentioned her by name again. At the age of 14, Oz rebelled against his father's world and ran away to Kibbutz Hulda in central Israel, “where a new race of rugged pioneers was taking shape,” he says. He changed his last name to Oz, meaning “courage, strength or daring: Everything I needed badly.” Hulda remained his home until 1985, when he moved to the Negev town of Arad for its climate, beneficial to his son's asthma. His father later remarried and moved to London.

Oz could not escape the love of books his parents instilled in him, especially since his childhood teemed with legendary literary figures. The Hebrew poet Zelda Schneersohn was his elementary school teacher; his uncle, Joseph Klausner, a historian, author and professor of Hebrew lit-



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erature at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, invented many modern Hebrew words. Sometimes, Oz dropped in on S.Y. Agnon, who lived on the same street as Klausner, and won the Nobel Prize in 1966. On the kibbutz he continued to devour everything from Chekhov to Hemingway. Yet he despaired that his provincial surroundings could serve as a backdrop for fiction (“Who had ever seen brandy in Hulda?”) until he read Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, which inspired him to write what he knew.

Oz studied philosophy and literature at Hebrew University and received a master’s degree from St. Cross College in Oxford, England. He wrote his first book, *Where the Jackals Howl*—published in 1965—sitting on the toi-

denly they become apparent. Sometimes they became even more painful because he brings them into being by his articulation.” On a personal level, he says, Oz has influenced him to release “the daring to write about the darkest points and not to protect myself while writing.”

Oz’s stories grow organically, almost unbidden, out of his psyche. “I never decide what to write,” he says. “A story comes to me from somewhere, and if it stays with me long enough I write it down to get it out of my system. Writing is a way of exorcising evil spirits.” Often, he “pickpockets” strangers by watching them, listening in to their conversations and making up stories about them.

It took him many years to make peace with his parents.

‘A story comes to me from somewhere, and if it stays with me long enough I write it down to get it out of my system.’

let seat of his small kibbutz house in the dead of night. The kibbutz granted him days for writing, balanced with farming and teaching, increasing the time from one to three days as he became more successful. He learned that he could not compare his productivity—perhaps five sentences a day—with others who milked 500 cows or plowed 100 acres, but taught himself to view his work as a shopkeeper who opens his store every morning, whether or not he has customers. “If I have customers, it’s a good day,” he says. “If I don’t, I’m still doing my job by just sitting there and waiting. This is my working mantra: Sit and wait.”

There is an ethical imperative in writing fiction, Oz feels, which is to imagine the other. He also prescribes that perspective as an antidote to fanaticism. “I believe in curiosity,” he says. “I believe a curious person, a person who imagines the other, is a better person than a person who does not.” His Jewish gene, he says, has planted in him a moral, intellectual and political restlessness. “I don’t humbly comply and obey. I doubt and criticize. Judaism is a civilization of argument, of interpretation, reinterpretations and counterinterpretations.”

IN PERSON, OZ IS A KIND, CHARMING AND GENTLE PRESENCE. Author David Grossman, who has known Oz for 20 years, says Oz is a “condensed person with many layers. He is not a person who takes things easily. Being with him you feel his inner intensity and his inner tension. You feel all the powers that are acting in him.”

Oz’s writing, says Grossman, “are points of reference and identity” for Israelis of three generations. “Sometimes when Amos gives his description or his definition of a situation or of a person, then you understand things that were vague and anguishing because they had no name. Sud-

denly they become apparent. Sometimes they became even more painful because he brings them into being by his articulation.” On a personal level, he says, Oz has influenced him to release “the daring to write about the darkest points and not to protect myself while writing.”

Only then could he write *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, which, he emphasizes, is not a memoir but a story—an ancient literary form that precedes the novel or the autobiography. He squeezes his parents’ legacy into a few pithy, laden words: “My father taught me to look for the truth and my mother taught me to look underneath each truth.” Perhaps, he suggests, his writing is a way of telling the stories his mother left untold.

At home in Arad, Oz works in his “monastic” basement study from which he can look out at the secluded desert garden that he enjoys tending. Aside from the books on every wall, the office is furnished only with a simple desk that he inherited from his father, a sofa and a couple of chairs. “I work like a watchmaker or an old-fashioned silversmith,” he writes, “...with bits of paper in front of me...on which I have written various words, verbs, adjectives, adverbs...bits of dismantled sentences, fragments of expressions and descriptions and all kinds of tentative combinations.”

Every morning around sunrise, Oz goes out to see what’s new in the desert: “A lizard. A cockroach. The smells borne by the wind, which provide a sense of perspective, a sense of proportion. What’s important and lasting, and what is not important. Here today and gone tomorrow.”

A lover of music from Bach to jazz, he works in quiet—except for the voices of his characters. He considers the Hebrew language “the best musical instrument in the world” and “the core of Jewishness,” and writes in long-hand so he can experience the sensual contact between his fingers, the pen (a basic ballpoint) and paper. To separate his fiction from his journalism, he uses two different pens: “When I hear just one voice I write an angry essay. When I hear more than one voice, I write fiction.”

AS A RESERVE SOLDIER IN A TANK UNIT, OZ FOUGHT IN the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars. He calls the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians “a clash between right and right...and often it is a clash between wrong and wrong.” He sees no choice but to accept a “compromise of pain and clenched teeth.” Neither Palestinians nor Israelis are moving. “They cannot become one happy family because they are not one, and because they are not happy, and because they are not even family. They are two unhappy families. They must divide the house into two smaller apartments.” That once-radical political credo is now almost centrist, he writes, since the Israeli public today is “unhappily ready” for a two-state solution.

Oz is especially moved by the courageous actions of the family of George Khoury, a 20-year-old Palestinian Israeli student shot in the head by terrorists who mistook Khoury for a Jew while he was jogging in Jerusalem in 2004. The Khourys funded the Arabic translation of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and found a Lebanese publisher who has distributed it all over the Arab world. Oz sparked a burst of rage in Israel by sending a copy to jailed terrorist Marwan Barghouti (he does not know if Barghouti received it)—but he does not regret it.

His work at the university gives him perspective beyond his writing. “He is not just an author who sits at home and writes books,” says Nily Oz, his wife of 51 years, his first reader, as well as the former chief archivist of the kibbutz movement and now archivist of the town of Arad. “It gives him a good feeling that there is a framework. You belong to this place. You teach there and it is yours.”

“The students are addicted to him. They come to him like junkies come to get their drug,” says Yigal Schwartz, director of the Heksherim Research Institute for Hebrew literature at BGU, which includes Oz’s archives.

Oz does not divulge the details of the new book he is writing: “I’m not inclined to expose my pregnancy to X-rays,” he smiles. “It’s not good for the baby.” Books aside, his other children are Fania Oz-Salzberger, a professor of history at Haifa University; Galia, a writer of children’s books and documentary filmmaker; and Daniel, a poet and musician. He has four grandchildren. He feels he has raised a good family. “I’m a very grateful man,” he says.

Oz will continue to illuminate the darkness for himself as well as for others. As he says in the concluding lines of *Rhyming Love & Death*, “Once in a while it is worth turning on the light to clarify what is going on.” **H**

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