A Tale of Love and Darkness by Amos Oz

11 March 2009, 12:00 am

A Tale of Love and Darkness

Amos Oz

ISBN:9780156032520

About the book:

Tragic, comic, and utterly honest, this bestselling and critically acclaimed new work by "one of Israel’s most gifted and prolific authors" (Helen Epstein, The Forward) is at once a family saga and a magical self-portrait of a writer who witnessed the birth of a nation and lived through its turbulent history.

It is the story of a boy growing up in the war-torn Jerusalem of the forties and fifties, in a small apartment crowded with books in twelve languages and relatives speaking nearly as many. The story of an adolescent whose life has been changed forever by his mother’s suicide when he was twelve years old. The story of a man who leaves the constraints of his family and its community of dreamers, scholars, and failed businessmen to join a kibbutz, change his name, marry, have children. The story of a writer who becomes an active participant in the political life of his nation.

About the author:
Amos Oz is the author of numerous works of fiction and collections of essays. He has received the Prix Femina, the Israel Prize, and the Frankfurt Peace Prize. His books have been translated into more than thirty languages. Amos Oz lives in Israel.

Discussion Questions:
1. The memoir begins with precise descriptions of tangible objects, such as the
cumbersome sofa bed where Amos Oz’s parents slept; the pickle jars and the lone lightbulb. What impressions do these initial images convey? What did Oz make of his surroundings when he was a child? What does he see in them now?

2. What do the author’s maternal and paternal ancestries share? What are the greatest sources of contention between the in-laws? How was Oz affected by the stories of his mother’s upbringing among faltering Polish aristocracy (especially those in chapter 25), and his father’s legacies of renowned scholarship in Russia (chapter 15)?

3. The Russian Revolution reverberated in Oz’s childhood, including his parents’ quandary over schooling as they had to choose between “the darkness of the Middle Ages and the Stalinist trap” (page 284). How do Oz’s parents perceive the role of religion and class (especially intelligentsia versus proletariat) in society? Was Judaism integral to all aspects of their identity?

4. Discuss the uneasy relationship with Europe embodied in the refugees Oz describes. How was his father able to reject British occupation yet admire the words of Churchill? To what extent is Oz a product of European culture, though he was not born there?

5. How would you characterize Oz’s childhood personality—a combination of creativity and industriousness, grandiose imaginary war games and a sensitive desire to please perfectly? How would you characterize his parents’ style of child-rearing? Are there recurring themes in his childhood narratives, ranging from being mesmerized by Teacher Zelda (chapter 37) to injured emotionally and physically in the incident at the Silwani family’s house (chapter 41)? What might his childhood have seemed to predict about his future?

6. Chapter 44 includes Oz’s memory of the pivotal United Nations vote that created modern Israel. How did Oz’s memories of this process enhance your understanding of it? As his father emotionally explains what that day means to him, what is being conveyed about nationalism? Is his longing universal, or unique to Israelis?

7. Numerous tragic deaths mark the reality of anti-Semitism in A Tale of Love and Darkness, from Oz’s cousin Daniel Klausner, who was murdered with his parents in Vilna when he was three, to the death of Greta Gat, who was shot by an Arab League sniper in the siege of Jewish Jerusalem in 1948. How does Oz use his role of survivor? How did he and his family cope with the knowledge of such danger, when armed resistance was not part of their nature (Oz’s father was not even able to load the gun issued to him)? What enables the author to see multiple facets of these situations?

8. Literature itself forms a backdrop for A Tale of Love and Darkness, with beautiful images of the Klausners reading passionately, and Fania telling evocative stories.
that needed no denouement. Oz pays homage to a pantheon of authors, from Tolstoy and Tchernikhowsky to Walt Whitman and Sherwood Anderson. In such a multilingual family, what role did language play in shaping identity? What is the significance of the varieties of Hebrew mentioned by Oz? Which authors recur in your own family’s literary legacy?

9. What literary techniques, such as the way time unfolds and the use of a refrain in the form of a bird singing notes from Beethoven’s Für Elise, enhanced the crafting of this memoir? What might Oz’s parents have thought of it?

10. Discuss Oz’s many vivid descriptions of food. From the perspective of an adult, what does he now understand about his parents’ cuisine—the carp in honor of Sabbaths and festivals, the failed vegetable garden? Was Fania able to nourish her family as she wanted to?

11. Chapter 46 features the appearance of Finnish missionary women. What do they indicate about the West’s varied attitudes toward Israel? Do the missionaries seem realistic? Did Oz receive a realistic account of Jesus from Joseph Klausner?

12. Oz compares the exuberance of Tel Aviv to the gravity of Jerusalem as he travels from his home to visit relatives. How does each locale shape the outcome of his life?

13. On page 215, Oz writes that his mother “might have been able to grit her teeth and endure hardship and loss, poverty, or the cruelty of married life. But what she couldn’t stand, it seems to me, was the tawdriness.” In what way is this the dilemma of many immigrant experiences? Is it possible to find a true “homeland” where one’s complete identity can be fulfilled? By what means have your ancestors weighed the costs of migration and survival?

14. The death of Oz’s mother occurs at a time of life that would traditionally have marked his transition from boyhood to manhood. How does he subsequently describe his approach to relationships with women (and to the experience of love and darkness)? Did his father appear to possess the same quantity of humility in love?

15. What do you believe motivated Oz’s move to the kibbutz? What was he able to determine about his true nature there? How did you react to his meeting with David Ben-Gurion in chapter 52? Did he feel equal or less affinity with his father when he came to visit, bringing an inscribed copy of The Novella in Hebrew Literature no less?

16. To what extent did Oz’s young life reflect that of the young nation of Israel in which he was raised?
17. Oz’s memoir mentions the fictional characters and conflicts that arose from some of the events in his life. What parallels do you see between *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and Oz’s previous work? How did the skills honed in his other books, fiction and nonfiction, manifest themselves in such a personal work as this?

Tagged adult, biography/memoir, Jewish interest, literature in translation, Nonfiction

| Permalink