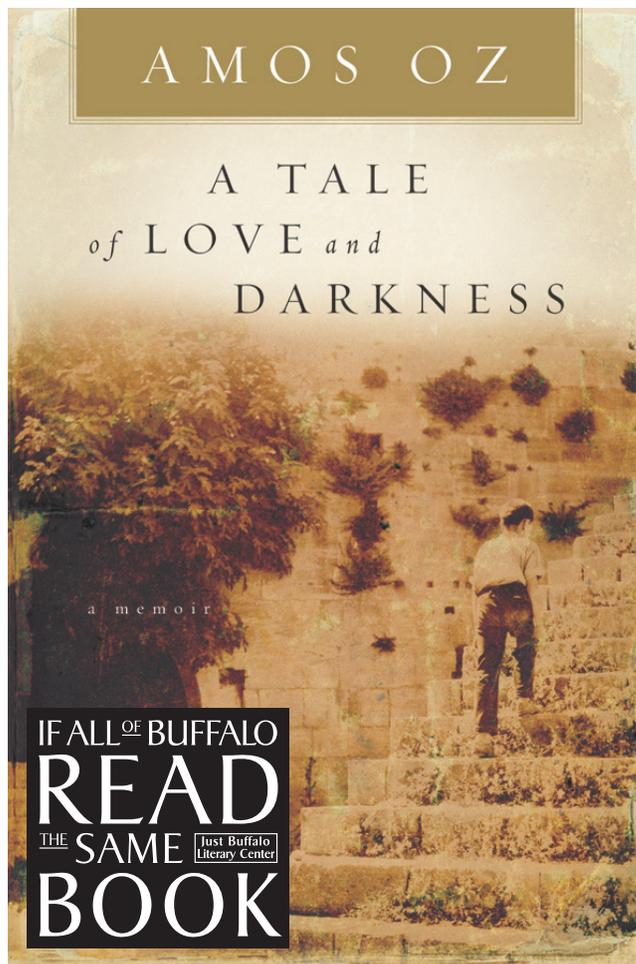
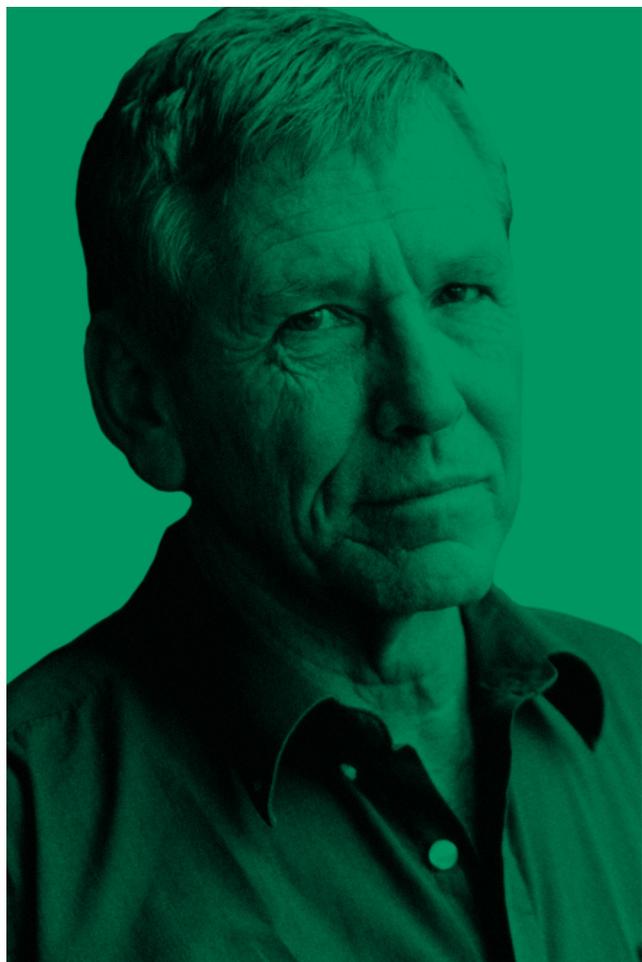


# AMOS OZ

READERS  
GUIDE



# Amos Oz



Amos Oz is one of Israel's most acclaimed and widely translated intellectuals and authors. His prolific literary career spans decades and includes political essays, a personal memoir, and highly acclaimed fiction and nonfiction for both children and adults. Oz writes to unearth tensions and truths—the connections people make with the places and predicaments in which they find themselves, and the loss they experience when those connections fail them.

In 2007, his memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (*Sipour Al Ahava Vehosbekh*, 2003), was nominated one of the ten most important books since the creation of the State of Israel. (In 2009 he was short listed for the Nobel Prize in Literature.) The autobiography recounts his coming of age shortly after World War II, from about 1947 to the early 1950s. Most of his razor-sharp recollections of his past come in non-linear flashbacks years later as he writes about the birth of Israel and the 1948 siege of Jerusalem during the Arab-Israeli War from his present-day home in the desert town of Arad.

*A Tale of Love and Darkness* is primarily set in Jerusalem, the claustrophobic, multi-ethnic melting pot where Amos Klausner—later Amos Oz—was born in 1939

and lived for his first 15 years. Before war tore them apart, immigrant Jews lived shoulder-to-shoulder with Arabs, separated only by neighborhood boundaries and overshadowed by the barracks of British soldiers instructed to keep the “peace.” Oz was raised in a tight-knit neighborhood called Kerem Avraham by a family of scholars and teachers. The memoir rarely strays from this enclave, describing it as a Chekovian place reminiscent of the Yiddish-speaking *shtetls*, or provincial 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish villages, of a Europe that didn't want its Jews.

No one, it seemed, wanted them. In the early days when the Land of Israel was rapidly becoming more than just a theological ideal, Oz's extended family fled their native Ukraine and Lithuania for Palestine, barely escaping a mass extermination that claimed nearly every Jew who stayed behind in Eastern Europe and Russia, including Oz's Uncle David. Oz writes that his father once saw German, Russian and Ukrainian graffiti back home saying “Jews Go Home to Palestine.” Fifty years later, on a trip back to Europe, he saw the slogan “Jews Get Out of Palestine.”

Young Oz, however, grew up on wartime rations and a rich diet of political debate, familial legacy and patriotic

fervor that his parents—especially his voluble father—shared with their opinionated and passionate neighbors. In Oz's world, only military triumph over "the Arabs" could compete with academic learning as the true path to enlightenment.

His destiny as a writer seemed to have been born along with him, inseparable from the deferred hopes and dreams of his parents which haunted him throughout his career. Yehuda Arie Klausner and his wife, Fania Mussman, were nationalists—right-wing Zionists who fervently believed that the destiny of the Jewish people was to establish their own homeland on ancestral land in the Middle East. Only then could Jews begin to reverse the cultural, political and economic damage done by the Diaspora—the two-millennia-long segregation, discrimination and dispersal of their people throughout the civilized world. In Palestine's sun-parched landscape and in their talented, precocious son, Oz's parents saw a chance, finally, to dissolve the nightmare experienced by countless generations of families who fled Europe's pogroms and the fresh horrors of Hitler's genocide. They also sought, in vain, to fix an irreparable rift in their own marriage.

Arie Klausner, a librarian and scholar who spoke 11 languages, struggled to understand those closest to him. He worked in relative obscurity for decades, studying comparative literatures and world languages by a dim single light bulb in his family's basement apartment, filling the silences with awkward jokes and pedantic definitions of meaning.

Oz's mother, Fania, on the other hand, believed in the emotional power of fairy tales, and myth. This Gothic sadness grew into a deep depression peppered with severe migraines, and she increasingly spent her nights awake, ironing clothes or reading Brecht and Maupassant and longing for the green forests and genteel values of her childhood in Rovno, a prominent city in Western Ukraine. She relived those memories and hinted at her fears through fantastic stories she concocted with her son while his father was out of earshot. Also multilingual and well-educated, Fania was raised by a decidedly more bourgeois family than Arie's working-class Lithuanian ancestors. Both spoke Russian and Polish to each other, but Oz grew up learning Hebrew, an ancient Jewish language once banned and forgotten, resurrected in Israel by such prominent

scholars as Oz's Uncle Joseph to give the fledgling nation a voice.

With the help of his relatives, teachers, classmates and neighbors, Oz defined himself by words, repressed fear and a stubborn sense of survival. "Because it was slowly dawning on those whose families had not arrived in Israel that the Germans had killed them all," he wrote in *A Tale*. "There was fear in Jerusalem, but people tried as hard as they could to bury it deep inside their chests." His mother's stories and father's monologues fueled his imagination and anxiety. As a young boy playing war games and reading *Robinson Crusoe*, he saw reading as more than just an escape from sadness and terror; he fantasized about one day becoming not a writer, but a book. If abandoned, he reasoned, books, perhaps more than small boys, could hide in dark corners and survive.

Oz later described his literary career in two words: "unhappy families." In *The Silence of Heaven*, he writes: "Every true writer becomes a writer because of a profound trauma experienced in youth or childhood." For Oz, that trauma was his mother's suicide in 1952 at the age of 38. He ironically recalls her words to him shortly before she died: "to forsake is to betray." "Among the immediate reasons for my mother's decline was the weight of history, the personal insult, the traumas, and the fears for the future," Oz has written. Upon arriving in Israel with its promise of freedom from persecution, she found an alien climate and a city full of violence, gossip and "tawdriness." The fear that young Oz had felt growing inside him, in part, was the fear that he was losing her for good.

When Oz was around 15 years old, he left the despair and poverty of Jerusalem to live on the edge of civilization at Kibbutz Hulda, one of Israel's experimental socialist communes. There he learned to drive a tractor, pick apples and carry a gun, and unraveled the mysteries of sex and literature only a few miles from the Jordan border. In an ultimate act of rebellion against his father, he changed his name from Klausner to Oz, (meaning "strength and courage" in Hebrew). "This is what I needed most at the age of 14," he has said. To leave the shadows of Jerusalem and join the suntanned pioneers, the strong, silent laborers and "poet-worker-revolutionaries" of Tel Aviv who were building Israel's future, not lamenting its people's past.

Oz was a self-proclaimed failure as a kibbutzer. Instead, he hid in the men's toilet to write poetry and pamphlet articles. Throughout the book, he equates this literary impulse with "sinful" teenage desires. A voracious reader of Western literature, he found the courage to accept his calling after reading American writer Sherwood Anderson's short story collection, *Winesburg, Ohio*. Its simple depictions of everyday life motivated him to "write about what was around me." During this time, Oz would leave the kibbutz only to study philosophy, history and literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Life on the kibbutz, where Oz resided until 1986, taught him other important lessons: about leftist politics, the differences between love and lust, and how one transforms from a boy into a man. More subtly, the kibbutz's Communist brand of rugged individualism provided him with a wholly different kind of validation from what he sought as a spoiled Jerusalem prodigy. Also, it was where he met and married his wife of 51 years, Nily Zuckerman. The couple has a son and two daughters—one of whom became a historian like her father—and several grandchildren.

Among his other well-known works are his first short-story collection, *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965); *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966), a novel about kibbutz life; and, *A Perfect Peace* (1982). Oz has been a visiting fellow and author-in-residence at many institutions, including Oxford University and Colorado College, and currently

teaches literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Among his many accolades are the French National Order of the Legion of Honor, the Israel Prize for Literature—the State's highest honor—as well as Spain's Prince of Asturias Letters Award and the Frankfurt Peace Prize.

After serving in the Israeli military, Oz grew more critical of Zionist politics and became a prominent advocate for peace through a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His debut as a major Israeli intellectual came shortly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, or Six Day War, when he was 28. He submitted an article in the Labor newspaper, *Davar*, calling for political negotiations with the Arabs to split ownership of the West Bank and Gaza—two areas of ancient Palestine still very much in contention today.

In his acceptance speech for the 2004 Prix France Culture award, Oz said *A Tale of Love and Darkness* was about "the inner side of one small family. It puts forward an ancient riddle: how could two good persons bring about a terrible disaster? It is also the tragicomedy of all immigrants everywhere." Like the ancient riddle that foreshadowed his parents' marriage, Oz defines the seemingly endless Israeli-Palestinian conflict over land as a tension between "two rights." Both are flawed, yet legitimate perspectives on a reality he seeks in his writing. It is, Anderson would agree, the reality all around us.



Cotton fields of a kibbutz, ca. 1958

# Israel's Secrets and Separations

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When the English translation of his memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, was published in 2004, Israeli writer Amos Oz said in a *New Yorker* interview, “I was, if you wish, the Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn of history. To me it was like sailing alone on a raft on the Mississippi River, except it was a river made of books and words and stories and historical tales and secrets and separations.”

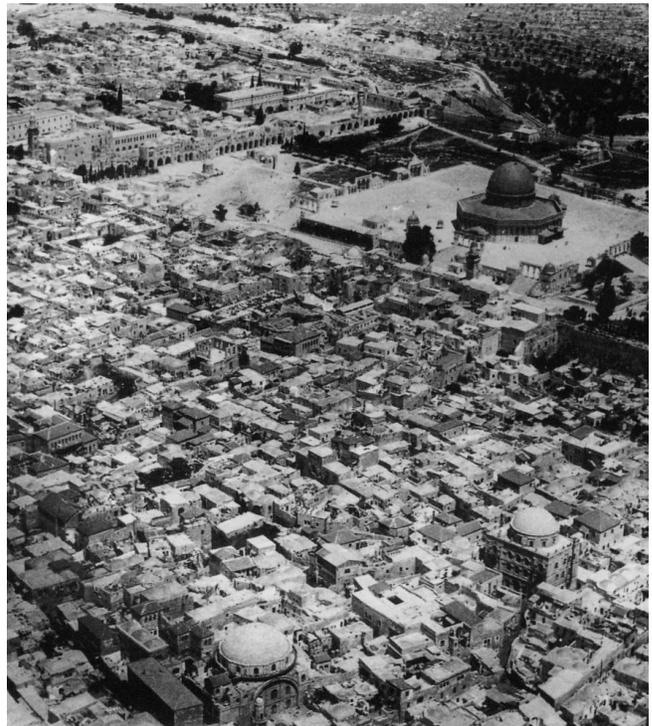
“Secrets and separations” is an apt description of Israel’s complex history. In 1948, it became a brand-new nation built on land that shares 2,000 years of Jewish and Arab heritage, religion, persecution, war and pockets of tentative peace. Oz recently said that being an Israeli at 70 is like being “an American who is 250 years old”; he grew up along with his young country, observing his people’s struggle to set up a new government and protect their culture and borders from post-World War II Europe and the Middle East. His memoir recounts his personal involvement with three major aspects of early statehood: its people’s mass immigration to and subsequent struggles to adapt in Israel’s future capital, Jerusalem; the declaration of the new State of Israel and the subsequent retaliation by neighboring Arab nations in the Arab-Israeli War (what Jews refer to as the War of Independence, and the Arabs as the “Catastrophe”); and the kibbutz culture that would help define Israel’s experiments in egalitarian society.

## The shtetls of Jerusalem

Following their ejection (commonly called the Diaspora) from the Land of Israel during Biblical times, Jews immigrated to other countries, mainly in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Over the centuries, they established large and often prosperous communities all over Europe and the Middle East, where they experienced widespread anti-Semitism in the forms of economic and cultural discrimination (like the banning of Hebrew), violent pogroms (mob attacks), and eventual expulsion. According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, “each wave of persecution and violence strengthened their belief in the concept of the ‘ingathering of the exiles’ and inspired individuals and groups to return to their ancestral homeland.”

The Zionist movement, founded toward the end of the 19th century, was born out of this belief, and through a few passionate activists like Theodor Herzl and writer, journalist and soldier Ze’ev Jabotinsky, became not just an idea but a way of life. Although it took many ideological forms, Zionism’s shared goal was to reinstate the Land of Israel, or *Eretz Yisrael*, unequivocally, by compelling the world to recognize the legal right of all Jews to settle in Palestine.

To do this, Jabotinsky’s right-wing brand of Zionism stressed military power, mass immigration to Palestine and resurrecting the Hebrew language as central tenets of the revisionist ideology adopted by Oz’s father and Uncle Joseph. These and other similar beliefs circulated widely through Oz’s Jerusalem neighborhood as a way to challenge British policy with a more unified and self-determined Jewish citizenry. “The renaissance of Hebrew is the most unqualified success of cultural Zionism,” Oz has written, adding that just 10,000 people spoke the language at the turn of the century, compared to seven or eight million today. “So this is the big story of my life, more even than creating a state or drying the swamps or winning some victories on the battlefield.”



Early 20th Century view of the city of Jerusalem

However, buried within this nationalistic fervor, Oz observed, was the old fear of annihilation and the existential threat that had re-surfaced during World War II. Added to this was a suppressed longing, like Fania's, of an idealized life many remembered before the pogroms (although they were grimly aware of the similarities between Jerusalem's dingy suburbs and Russia's provincial Jewish villages, or *shtetls*). Many chapters of Oz's memoir deal with Europe's hold on the Klausners and Mussmans, through stories of their former lives in Vilna, Lithuania and the Polish-Russian towns of Rovno and Odessa. His ancestors were among hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who were driven out of their homelands around the turn of the century during the second and third *aliyahs*, or immigration waves ("*aliyah*" means "ascension" in Hebrew). Some made it to Palestine to join the existing Jewish population, or *yishuv*, while others were rounded up in Greek refugee camps or were captured and killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Their stories converged in Jerusalem, where the young Oz represented a fragile hope in the new generation: "To me, Jerusalem was the only real city in the world. Europe was a myth." By the time Arieh and Fania Klausner escaped the slaughter and settled there in the 1930s, work already was underway to establish a permanent Jewish settlement within the British-held territory of Palestine. But enlightenment philosophies lingering from 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe influenced liberal Jewish thinkers like Oz's parents who scorned the British colonialists while secretly yearning for the sophistication of Paris and London. Jerusalem, they found, was an alien place of dust and sun and unfinished roads, the call of the muzzein and the howling of jackals.

From 1945 to 1948, around 80,000 illegal immigrants were smuggled into Palestine by the *yishuv* and underground activists like Jabotinsky. By the time Israel reached statehood, the *yishuv's* population had grown to 650,000. Cities like Jerusalem struggled to provide food, shelter and jobs for the newcomers, cramming multiple families into tiny apartments. With humor and a child's innocence, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* deftly portrays this tangle of disenchanting Europhiles, Muslim Arabs, Sephardic (Spanish) and Ashkenazi (Germanic) Jews, and Scandinavian missionaries. Clashes between secular Jews and Jerusalem's observant minority still exist today, with stark contrasts between each group's beliefs about Israel's connection to the coming of the Messiah.

## A state of war

"It is not easy to write novels and stories in the heart of a political drama," Oz has said, but with his memoir he has succeeded in chronicling Israeli's struggle for independence. After World War I, Britain committed itself to the idea of establishing a Jewish state and, with urging from the United Nations, set up the "British Mandate" to ensure its progress. During the Mandate years (1917-1948), England reclaimed some of the land originally promised to the Jews, calling it Transjordan; British troops remained on the ground to keep the peace, which was tentative at best. But Palestine's *yishuv* continued to establish its elected bodies, the Assembly and National Council. Jewish culture, its Hebrew education and trades economy thrived in cities like Jerusalem, and industrial and agricultural centers (*kibbutzim*) expanded further out in the desert. New roads, and communities like Tel Aviv—the first modern Jewish city—were built. Military systems were also formed such as the Haganah, one of several underground Jewish defense organizations which eventually became the Israel Defense Forces after statehood.

Israel's first political and military leaders were the charismatic David Ben-Gurion—whom Oz describes meeting in his memoir and who became Israel's first prime minister—and Chaim Weizmann, who was elected as the first president of Israel's parliament, the Knesset. Oz also mentions another boyhood military idol, Menachim Begin, whose fiery speeches sat on the fringe of Israeli politics for years opposite Ben-Gurion's Labor Party. Begin, who went on to serve as prime minister from 1977 to 1983, called for expanding Israel's stake in the Middle East by any means necessary.

In July 1937, after tightening Jewish immigration to Palestine, the British ended their mandate to protect the Zionists from what most of the world recognized as growing Arab aggression, proposing to partition the region into Arab and Jewish states. The Jews, who claimed a third of the population, would receive more than half of the entire territory, though much of it was arid land.

Jews all over the world rejoiced on November 29, 1947 when the UN General Assembly voted to adopt the partition resolution, but the Arab League refused



Haganah soldier. June 1948. photo: Frank Scherschel

to recognize the plan. On May 15, 1948, the State of Israel was officially recognized, and less than 24 hours later, Arab armies invaded Israel and began more than a year of murders, reprisal attacks, and counter-reprisals, with thousands of casualties on both sides. The resulting war put Jerusalem under siege for months with little food, water or electricity.

It was an exhilarating and terrifying time. Oz remembers watching the British leave the Schneller Barracks in Jerusalem and the Haganah “rushing to take over. Then, on Friday afternoon, we were told that Israel is a nation now, it has a government, but one minute after midnight we were told that Israel is being invaded by five regular Arab armies, and that there was shelling and bombardment by artillery batteries. There was nowhere to send the kids, nowhere to go.” So he and his parents and many of their neighbors holed up in Jerusalem, in the dark.

Led by Ben-Gurion, Israeli forces fought back, ultimately winning enough ground to end the war in 1949. The armistice lines divided Jerusalem between Jordan and Israel. Oz later became a soldier in the Six Day War with Jordan in 1967, and served in the Yom Kippur War in 1973. By that time he had left his home on Amos Street in Jerusalem far behind to make new start at Kibbutz Hulda, near the Jordanian border.

Partly to escape his father’s oppressive hopes and his mother’s suicide, Oz joined the communal, agricultural lifestyle on the kibbutz also as an attempt to become the heroic revolutionary he read about in books. The kibbutz movement was created by young, socialist immigrants who had fled Russia’s anti-Semitism during the Second Aliyah. Kibbutzim helped pre-state Israel with its settlement, military and economic efforts; although in decline today, their ethos still remains part of Israeli society. Oz once wrote, “If you see the directness of Israelis, the almost latent anarchism, the skepticism, the lack of an in-built class hierarchy between the taxi-driver and the passenger—all of those are very much the kibbutz legacy, and it’s a good legacy. So, in a strange way, the kibbutz, like some bygone stars, still provides us with light long after it’s been extinguished.”

As a young kibbutzer and soldier, Oz formed radically unpopular opinions about Israel’s solution to the “Jewish problem” and its claims over formerly Palestinian soil. Following the Six Day War, he was one of the first Israelis to advocate a two-state solution, and for Israel to return its conquered land to the 700,000 Arabs it displaced. “Even unavoidable occupation is a corrupting occupation,” he has written. Yet he also remains sympathetic to the Zionist cause, stating, “The Jews had nowhere to go, and this is difficult to convey today. People now ask, Was it a mistake? Was Zionism a reasonable project? There was no place else.”

Decades later, Oz continues to speak out about his country’s ongoing conflicts with Palestinians, acknowledging that both Jews and Arabs were oppressed by Europe—one through the Holocaust, the other through colonialism. “The two children of the same oppressive parent can often be the worst of enemies,” he once said, adding optimistically, “I will risk a prophecy: It will not take the Middle East as long to make peace as it did Europe. And we’ll shed less blood.”

# Readers Questions

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1. To what extent did Amos Oz's childhood reflect that of the birth of the Israeli state?
2. "I don't like to be described as an author of fiction," Oz has said. "Fiction is a lie." In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, he often takes fictional liberties in his recollections, taken from memory, his reading or conversations with relatives, to fill in for fact. Where in the book does he do this? Is it distracting, or does it add to the power of the novel?
3. From the beginning, the book describes Oz's memories of specific objects and places: the sofa bed, pickle jars on the windowsill, the smell of books in his uncle's library, the pomegranate bush in the courtyard, Teacher Zelda's spare apartment. Name some other examples. When Oz returns to Jerusalem decades later, how have his memories changed?
4. In Chapter 28, Oz receives a letter from his mother's friend, Lilka, which reads, "Your mother came from an unhappy family, and she damaged your family. But she is not to blame..." What did she mean? What seemed to be missing for Fania that drove her to eventually take her own life?
5. In this same passage "Aunt Lilia" is also referred to as Lilenka and Lea Bar-Sankha. Many characters close to Oz, especially his immediate family, are called by alternate names and nicknames. Why? Why might this be an important part of Jewish culture?
6. How are Oz's maternal and paternal grandparents—and their extended family histories—different from one another? How are they similar? Give some examples of how Oz was affected by the legacies of his ancestors.
7. How would you characterize Oz's personality as an only child among adults? Are there recurring themes in his childhood narratives, ranging from being mesmerized by Teacher Zelda to being traumatized psychologically and physically in the incident at the Silwani family's house?
8. Chapter 44 includes Oz's vivid description of the United Nations vote in 1947 that created modern Israel. How is nationalism conveyed by his father and their neighbors? Are their feelings unique to Israelis, or universal?
9. Death and the fear of anti-Semitism are a reality in Jewish life in Europe and, in a different way, in the new State of Israel. How do Oz's family and friends cope with the knowledge of such fears in their past lives and especially during the siege of Jerusalem during the War of Independence?
10. Literature—from Chekov and the Brothers Grimm and Tchernikhowsky, to Shakespeare, Walt Whitman and Sherwood Anderson—is woven throughout *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. What role does storytelling play in Oz's upbringing? How do Arieh's and Fania's vastly different styles of communicating emotions and ideas affect their son?
11. In Oz's linguistically talented family, what was the significance of etymology and the multiple meanings of Hebrew words—many of which were invented by his Uncle Joseph—to Oz and his father? How did his family's scholarly accomplishments (like Joseph Klausner inventing Hebrew words) impact Oz as a young boy and later as an established author?
12. What literary techniques, such as non-linear flashback and the bird singing the first notes from Beethoven's "Für Elise," does Oz use in this memoir? How does it enhance the storytelling?
13. How do Israel's landscapes and locales affect Oz's childhood memories? What are some of the differences he describes between Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and, later on, Arad?
14. In Chapter 50, Oz says he began his life as a writer over corn on the cob and ice cream, concocting romantic tales about people he spied in cafés. Why did he always stop himself when he reached the physical consummation of his fantasies? Later, as

an established author, how does he connect writing with love and voyeurism?

15. His mother's death comes at a critical time in Oz's life as a pre-adolescent just entering puberty. How does he subsequently describe his approach to relationships with women? How are women generally portrayed in the book, and where there are differences, which characters are interacting with them?
16. Why is Oz so angry with Fania while she was sick and even more so after she died? Why does he then turn that anger on himself?
17. After Oz moves to the kibbutz, Oz's father eventually drifts away, remarries and leaves Israel for London. After Fania's death, neither he nor Oz mention "her" name again, not even with each other. What significance does this silence—and other silences among people and in the physical environment—play in the story?
18. What various meanings and importance does Oz give the words "love" and "darkness," and also "light?"
19. What motivates Oz to move to change his name and move to the kibbutz? Did he succeed in finding himself—why or why not?
20. Why do you think Oz includes his searing description of David Ben-Gurion in chapter 52? What effect does their meeting have on the young soldier?
21. Oz writes: "I think fatigue is the best solution for a crisis, not only between nations and communities, but inside families." What do you think he means by this? How does this apply to Oz's depiction of Israel's War of Independence and his own family in this memoir?
22. Oz wrote of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, "It can also be read as the portrait of an artist as a young man, and a portrait of Israel as a young society. Indeed a very old young society, because the story is set in the years when Israel was one great refugee camp, full of runaways." In what ways does this memoir reflect the struggles of all immigrants who search for their cultural identity? Is there such a thing as a true "homeland"?



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