

A Nation's Dreams Wilt On the Edge of the Desert

Amos Oz explores psychological landscapes in novel of Israeli couple

DON'T CALL IT NIGHT

By Amos Oz, translated by Nicholas de Lange
Harcourt Brace; 199 pages; \$22

REVIEWED BY RON H. FELDMAN

Amos Oz, probably Israel's foremost living writer, is a man of letters in the European tradition, excelling at both fiction and nonfiction. While his reputation rests mainly on such novels as "My Michael," "Elsewhere, Perhaps" and "The Hill of Evil Counsel," he has also become known over the past decade or so for his dovish political views, expressed in essays collected in "Israel, Palestine and Peace" (1995) and "In the Land of Israel" (1983).

"Don't Call It Night," Oz's 11th novel to appear in English, is set during the summer of 1969 in the fictional desert town of Tel Kedar. The author has experience in this territory, having lived for the past few years in the Negev Desert of southern Israel.

The mood suggested by the town's name — literally, "gloomy hill," though left untranslated in the English version — is manifest throughout the novel, whose arid external landscape, a windblown town on the edge of the desert, is mirrored in the interior landscape of its two main characters: Theo, a 60-year-old civil engineer, and

Noa, a schoolteacher 15 years his junior. Lovers for eight years, they moved seven years earlier to Tel Kedar, "a completely new town, with no biblical or Arab past."

The plot revolves around the death of one of Noa's high school students from an accidental drug overdose. The student's father wants to establish a drug rehabilitation facility as a living memorial. Noa and Theo are brought into the project as its organizers and advocates.

But the plot is merely a device to explore the interior psychological landscapes of the two lovers. The striking stream-of-consciousness narrative, broken only occasionally by the third-person voice of the author, alternates between Noa and Theo's experiences, thoughts, feelings and memories.

Often an incident is related by both characters, with different experiences and perspectives; their personal histories and the development of the plot are presented in this nonlinear fashion rather than by the clear chronological voice of the author.

Noa's thoughts are expressed in long, languid sentences, often running to paragraphs longer than a page. Theo's thoughts are brief and angular, voiced in short, clear sentences.

Noa is insecure but full of life. Theo, a military hero from the 1948 war of inde-



Oz writes from experience: He lives in the Negev Desert of southern Israel

pendence, is past his prime and has lost his purpose: "Most people are always busy with arrangements, preparations, leisure activities. I am happy with my home and the desert. Even my work is gradually becoming superfluous. . . . What will I do all day? I'll examine the desert, for example, on long walks at dawn before everything starts to blaze."

When the author's voice does intrude, it is to paint the setting vividly, as in the funeral of an old man: "Now the gravediggers tip the canvas, a task requiring of an cooperative precision and dexterity of an operating theatre, and the sparsely bearded religious youth clasps the dead man's feet lightly and like a skilful midwife lets the wrapped body slide smoothly from the stretcher into the grave. They quickly

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draw away the tallit [prayer-shawl], like cutting an umbilical cord."

More than a forgettable desert town, Tel Kedar represents the state of Israel and Western civilization. Like the drug rehab center, the nation was begun with great dreams and intentions, but the reality has fallen short. After Theo purchases a building that needs substantial renovation, even though plans and permits were not yet in place, the project falters. "What is its purpose?" Theo muses. "I don't have a clear idea any more . . . the idea is becoming vague, as though the meaning has faded."

Oz seems to be saying: We Israelis tried — we didn't live up to our dreams, but we are living a normal life, like normal people, with high ideals, memories of great achievements and a desire to merely be in the present, living life day to day.

Yet, as one character tells Theo: "Our real tragedy is that we're not truly desperate to do anything. That's the real disaster. When you're not burning to do anything anymore, you cool down and start dying. . . . We've got to start wanting things. To hold on with both hands so life won't run away, if you get my meaning. Otherwise it's all over."

This struggle — holding on to dreams and purpose vs. living a "normal" everyday existence — is the struggle Oz presents to us. It is his struggle, it is the struggle of Israel and it is the struggle of every human being who seeks meaning in life. ■

Ron H. Feldman edited 'The Jew as Parish.'