

REVIEW


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In the Land of Milk, Honey and Much Conflict

A PERFECT PEACE

By Amos Oz, Translated by Hillel Halkin
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REVIEWED BY RON H. FELDMAN

 ver the past 20 years, Amos Oz has gained a reputation both at home and abroad as one of Israel's best writers. Two years ago "In the Land of Israel," a series of essays about his travels through Israel in the wake of the Lebanon war, was published. Previous to this Oz was known best to American audiences through his novels and short stories, such as the recently reissued "Elsewhere, Perhaps."

No matter what form this versatile writer has explored — short story, novel, reportage or the political tracts that have remained untranslated — his forte is a withering exploration of the individual and collective Israeli psyche. A kibbutz member and left-wing political activist, Oz is a passionate man whose energy infuses all of his writing.

Oz's passion is especially apparent in his most powerful novel to date, "A Perfect Peace." Just published in an excellent translation, it received much critical acclaim upon its appearance in Israel in 1982. A key to the novel's success is Oz's ability to keep strictly political issues boiling under the surface as they do in the lives of all Israelis. Set on a kibbutz prior to the 1967 Six Day War, the novel shows how the country's continual unease, due to the interminable border skirmishes, is mirrored in the quarrels between the Lifshitz family members, as they yearn for peace of mind in the pressure cooker of Israeli life.

A generational conflict between father and son is central. Yolek Lifshitz is a Utopian dreamer who struggled to create the kibbutz and an independent Jewish state. Yolek was always in the thick of ideological battles and political

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intrigue as a former government minister, member of Parliament and the outgoing kibbutz secretary. Entering the sunset of his life, he lives with the curse of seeing his dream realized.

Reality, of course, is no match for Utopia and he feels bitter and betrayed. "In vain, my friend, was all our devotion, in vain all our dreams, in vain all the years we plotted with subtle cunning to save the Jewish people." The new generation to whom the fate of the nation is entrusted are but "wild-eyed kulaks plucked by Ben-Gurion from behind the plow, Jewish Neanderthals, Cro-Magnon heroes, moronic rednecks, circumcised Cossacks, biblical Bedouins, Tatars of the Hebrew faith."

At age 26, Yonatan "Yoni" Lifshitz is a "typical" son of the kibbutz. A no-nonsense and non-political person, he is a man of few words who is also a military hero. Beneath his cool exterior rages a troubled soul searching for love, purpose and self. He is fed up with living for causes — his country, his kibbutz, his parents, his slightly demented wife — tired of being hemmed in by others' eyes and expectations, of being told there is "no choice." Searching for an

escape, yearning to be alone, he flees into the desert on a cathartic journey to the ruins of Petra, "A rose-red city, half as old as time," across the Jordanian border.

Yonatan's silent disappearance creates a crisis for his parents and the kibbutz. Even Prime Minister Eshkol, Yolek's erstwhile political comrade and nemesis, pays a visit to the bereaving family, promising all possible help. Yoni's absence provides an opportunity for his friend Azaria, a new arrival on the kibbutz full of idealism and half-baked philosophical ideas about justice and fate.

After Azaria moves in with Yonatan and his wife — to the delighted dismay of the scandalized kibbutz gossips — Yonatan is only too happy to leave his wife's lifeless, porcelain beauty to Azaria, who is only too pleased to receive it. Yolek finds in Azaria a misguided but kindred soul, and is filled with joy to hear him harangue the prime minister with prophetic zeal:

"No one loves anyone, sir, not even on a kibbutz, any more. It's no wonder Yoni cleared out . . . If we Jews hate each other so much, why be surprised that the Gentiles hate us? Or the Arabs? Srulik is dying to be Yolek. Yolek would do anything to be Eshkol. Eshkol would give his right arm to be Ben-Gurion. Hava would gladly murder you all if only she could get up the courage to poison your tea. And then there's Udi and Etan and your son Amos, who do nothing all day but talk about killing the Arabs. This is a snake pit, not a country. A jungle, not a commune. Death, not Zionism."

Whether it be Petra and the murderous bedouin tribe that surrounds it, the ruins of the Arab village next to the kibbutz, the incessant border clashes, or the Six Day War, the conflict with the Arabs is enmeshed in the lives and psyche of all the characters. Yolek knows there was a moral price paid for independence, and Yonatan knows that the sons will pay for the sins of the fathers. Rather than finding his "perfect peace" through death in the desert, "alone in the wilderness on enemy soil, face down on the dark sand," ultimately Yoni must choose his own way.

Oz's Israel is a land of prophets and dreamers, rain-drenched valleys and bone-dry deserts, conflicts and contradictions, realized dreams and continuing nightmares, home to "the highest percentage of nuts of any country on earth." Perched on the edge of the abyss, on an endless search for peace of mind, they live by accepting their place in the unending chain of being. As a master at portraying the torment of the individual soul, Oz reveals, through the interplay of his characters, the struggle of the Lifshitz family, the Israeli people and all humanity, for inner meaning and tranquility at center stage in front of the political backdrop.

Ben Lomond writer Ron H. Feldman edited and introduced "The Jews as Pariah," a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt.