

Letters From a Smoldering Land

BLACK BOX

By Amos Oz; translated by Nicholas De Lange

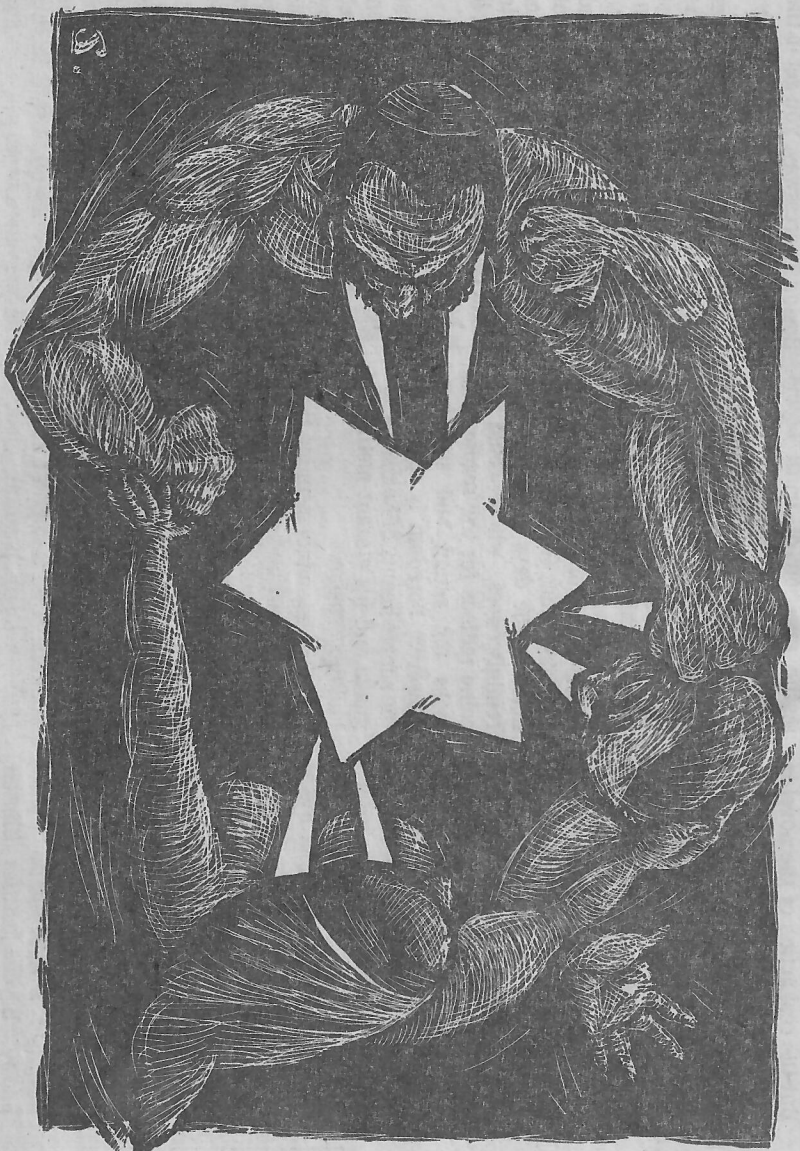
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/A Helen and Kurt Wolf Book; 243 pages; \$19.95

REVIEWED BY RON H. FEIDMAN

Amos Oz's reputation is already firmly entrenched as one of Israel's leading authors. A versatile writer, at home in many forms, Oz is probably best known in America for such novels as "A Perfect Peace" and "Elsewhere, Perhaps" and the collection of essays "In the Land of Israel," written after the 1982 Lebanon war. In his own country he is equally well known as a left-wing political figure whose political tracts and commentary are among the best in Israel's highly politicized culture.

Oz's forte is a devastating exploration of the individual and collective Israeli psyche, and this skill is readily apparent in his latest novel, "Black Box." The year is 1976; the lives of the novel's characters have figuratively crashed and burned; and they are trying to sort out what happened. The flight data recorder — or black box — is in this case the chain of correspondence between the characters who make up the novel.

As in a number of Oz's novels, the plot involves a love triangle with a woman at the center. Ilana is an attractive woman of Polish extraction now married to Michel, an Algerian Jew who arrived in Israel via France, and by whom she has a 3-year-old daughter. Her first born, Boaz, is a handsome and strong youth of 16 who lives at a boarding school and is on the edge of becoming a juvenile delinquent.



This epistolary novel begins with Ilana breaking a silence of seven years and writing Alex, her ex-husband and Boaz's father, to plead for money and help for Boaz. Alex and Ilana met while in the army, where he was a dashing tank corps officer and war hero. He divorced her after discovering that she had slept with "three div'sions" of men. Today, a famous professor of political science in Chicago, he has inherited a fortune from his father, an immigrant from Russia who made his money from real estate and business during the British Mandate.

Oz is a master at integrating the bubbling politics, culture and history of Israel into the lives of his

characters, and this same interplay is at work here. We learn that a few years ago, Alex won out in the generational conflict by successfully institutionalizing his mad father in a sanatorium. To him, this represents a kind of victory for the native-born Sabras against their European-born parents who created the state of Israel. But now Alex is lonely and ill; his emotional and physical strength, which Oz indicates is symbolic of his generation, is waning.

Alex directs his lawyer in Jerusalem to pay Ilana and Michel a small amount; a subsequent request from Ilana for a substantially larger amount is also given. This is surprising to the lawyer (and the

reader) as much for political as for personal reasons, since Alex — an academic expert on political fanaticism, which he detests — is on the political left. Michel, in contrast, is one of those fanatics who has God on his side, a religious-political right-winger advocating the expulsion of Arabs from the occupied territories.

Alex's money liberates Michel from his teacher's job to become a full-time politico and real estate developer in the "liberated" areas of the promised land. Michel — embodying both the religious-political right wing and the Oriental Jews who immigrated from Arab countries — represents the next generation of power.

respondence is under way, Michel attempts to take Boaz under his wing, hoping to set him on the path of righteousness. He uses his family connections to keep Boaz out of police custody, first getting him a job with a greengrocer, then placing him in a yeshiva in Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement next to the West Bank city of Hebron. Rebellious, unruly and unschooled, Boaz becomes something of a nature-man, a "Tarzan" who only wants to be left alone and wants everyone to leave everyone else alone to live in peace, whether family or enemy, Jew or Arab. His is the voice of the "simple people," in whose mouth Oz puts level-headed common sense:

"Don't be angry Michel you no your a lovely good person the only trouble is you've got this obsession that everyone's got to be exactly the same as you and anyone who isn't like you you think their not really a human being ... All the favors you've done to Ilana and me and the country Michel they arent good enough unless you let everyone live there own life. Take Kiryat Arba were you sent me its a very nice place with a view and everything the only trouble is its just not the rite place for someone like me thats not religious and dont believe that what the starve needs is to keep conking the arabs and take their places away from them. In my opinion we should leave them alone and they should leave us alone."

It is through Boaz that a new future is possible. As he begins to renovate the family estate, he attracts a small following to his commune along the coast near Zikhron Yaakov, one of the oldest towns established by the Zionists. It is no accident that Oz plays off this commune — an echo of the

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Ilana soon discovers that Alex's money has changed her life for the worse. No longer does she have a loving, diminutive husband with whom she builds an intimate home despite their penury. As Michel becomes full of new-found self-importance, Ilana becomes marginal, and politics supplants family. Like many people, Ilana is fundamentally apolitical; she is concerned with the fullness of life.

Ilana and Alex become involved in an increasingly passionate correspondence consisting of equal parts vitriol and desire as they attempt to excavate the ruins of their lives, trying to salvage what happiness there might yet be. While Alex, like many of his generation, has lost his way and lost his hope, Ilana writes, "There is happiness in the world, Alex, and suffering is not the opposite of it, it is the thorny path along which we have to creep on our bellies to that forest clearing, bathed in a fine lunar silver, which is calling to us and waiting."

Ron H. Feldman edited "The Jew as Pariah," a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt on Jewish history, politics and identity.

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they will kill anyone who is not pluralistic enough." In his book-lined study, a special shelf is reserved for Oz's own work translated from Hebrew into 19 languages, including Japanese. For the last two years, the 50-year-old novelist and his family have lived in this small new city in the Yehuda Desert, overlooking the Judean hills.

During our interview, Oz didn't want to waste time discussing the way the American or Western media deal with Israel. "There's obviously a standing expectation that Israel be the most Christian nation, if not the only Christian nation on earth," he said with just a hint of irony in his lightly accented English. "It's probably a tough realization for some American Jews, this expectation that Israel be the most Christian nation on earth." See Page 4

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An Israeli Dove Speaks Out

BY JUDY STONE

Arad, Israel

One of Israel's finest novelists and a prominent "dove," Amos Oz in person seemed more concerned at the moment we met in February with speaking out to the Israelis than in the forthcoming American publication of his fifth novel, "The Black Box." His epistolary narrative traces the wreckage of an Israeli marriage and attempts to study fanaticism in unexpected places.

"I wanted to decipher the emotional, psychological — and should I say psychotic mechanisms of fanaticism, discovering that fanaticism does not lie where most people expect it. It can be everywhere. I've seen left-wingers, pacifists, liberals — people who waved



Amos Oz: 'It's time for us to stop acting stupid'

tolerance and patience — catch fanaticism and they will shoot anyone who is not open-minded, and

Months Within and Without

