

The Origins of an Israeli Dove

UNDER THIS BLAZING LIGHT

By Amos Oz, translated by Nicholas de Lange
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REVIEWED BY RON H. FELDMAN

Amos Oz is probably Israel's most famous living writer.

While his reputation rests mainly on such novels as "My Michael," "Elsewhere, Perhaps" and "To Know a Woman," he has also become known for his dovish political views through essays collected in "The Slopes of Lebanon" and "In the Land of Israel." "Under This Blazing Light" is a newly translated collection of essays touching mainly on Israeli politics and literature.

It should have been translated many years ago. Originally published in Israel in 1978, the essays

date from the 1960s and '70s; only the introduction addresses the "post-handshake" politics of the Middle East. It is far less polished and coherent than the other two collections, combining lengthy articles with lectures and transcripts from radio interviews. Nevertheless, this book not only makes available important new pieces of Oz's work but contains some real gems.

Here, for the first time, are a few autobiographical pieces that reveal Oz's family origins, his boyhood in Jerusalem and his return to the "old city" of Jerusalem after the Six Day War in 1967. He tells of his paternal grandfather who, having immigrated to Jerusalem from Russia, "went on writing poems in Russian about the beauty of the Hebrew language and the splendour of Jerusalem, not this wretched, dusty Jerusalem, but the other one, the



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real one."

Oz remembers his uncle, who taught European literature at Vilna University until the Nazis murdered him, and reveals that his mother "took her own life in

1952, out of disappointment or nostalgia," when he was 12 years old. "The Jerusalem of my childhood was a lunatic town," writes Oz, which "made me an expert in comparative fanaticism." This, coupled with his experience as a soldier in the wars of 1967 and 1973, is the source of Oz's political views and his need to write: "I write so as not to despair nor to yield to the temptation to return hatred for hatred. . . . I have called for a compromise, grounded neither in principles nor even perhaps in justice between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, because I have seen that whoever seeks absolute and total justice is seeking death."

The jewel of this collection is Oz's first major political essay, "The Meaning of Homeland." Reading this more than 25 years after its original publication reveals it as a classic whose discus-

sions of Judaism, Zionism and the Arab-Israeli conflict maintain their power and relevance despite the passage of time.

Oz takes a simple, clear and nontheological approach to the question of "Who is a Jew?" "A Jew, in my vocabulary," he asserts, "is someone who regards himself as a Jew, or someone who is forced to be a Jew." For Oz, to be a Jew is to "relate mentally to the Jewish past . . . relate to the Jewish present . . . and finally: to be a Jew means to feel that whenever a Jew is persecuted for being a Jew — that means you."

Oz is a Zionist not because he believes in the fulfillment of God's promise of the re-creation of the ancient Israelite kingdoms ("The word 'liberation' applies to people, not to dust and stone," he writes) but because he does "not" — See Page 10

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want to exist as a fragment of a symbol in the consciousness of others," which is how he views the history of the Jews in the diaspora.

Out of his focus on people, rather than homeland, flows Oz's view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a "clash between right and right," a tragedy for which "there is no hope of a happy reconciliation based on a clever magical formula. The choice is between a bloodbath and a disappointing compromise, more like enforced acceptance than a sudden break-through of mutual understanding." It is this type of

thinking that brought Rabin and Arafat together and provides a ray of hope for the future.

There are also personal vignettes and interesting essays on literary theory, Hebrew literary figures and the nature of socialism and the kibbutz, where Oz lived for many years. Still, there is no overall theme tying the essays together, unless it is the intellectual, emotional and political evolution of Oz himself. Amid the cacophony of extremism, not only in the Middle East but in the world as a whole, Oz's passionate moderation is a rarity — and perhaps this is theme enough. ■

Soquel writer Ron H. Feldman edited "The Jew as Pariah," a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt.