

Cultural Daily

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Land of Strife and Honey: An Interview with A.B. Yehoshua

Richard Klin · Wednesday, January 19th, 2022

Many years ago, after a stint at Tel Aviv University, I returned stateside, animated by a conception of Israel that had, all in all, made the most enduring impression on me: a teeming, polyglot entity of beaches, cafés, and maniacal drivers. This was not to elide those very real, vital political issues. But it was the swirling Israeli quotidian—sometimes taking on the qualities of a Fellini film—which I found hugely fascinating.

A short while later, I stumbled across [A.B. Yehoshua's novel *The Lover*](#), arbitrarily coming across a passage where the teenage girl Dafi idly flips through the radio dial, alighting upon a random station and speculating if it's Greek, Turkish, or Yugoslav. It felt as if my ruminations on Israel as a teeming, polyglot entity had somehow been detected and were now appearing in the very pages of this novel. This was surely the strangest five seconds of my reading life.

A.B. Yehoshua has been a force in the world of Israeli letters since the 1960s. He is one of the seminal figures in Israeli literature, with a substantial literary reach that extends far beyond the country's borders. He has also, in his writings and public pronouncements, addressed the myriad of issues attached to the State of Israel, including a decidedly unfavorable assessment of the Jewish diaspora. Not surprisingly, his views have generated ample controversy. Some of his strongly held positions are—also not surprisingly—reflected in this interview.

Yehoshua is also expressly indebted to William Faulkner. There is a notable portion of his work (*The Lover*, *A Late Divorce*, *Five Seasons*) where he has ingeniously rejiggered Faulkner, transposing Yoknapatawpha County into the Israeli locus: two radically disparate societies haunted by the commonalities of war, memory, and one people's subjugation of another.

His stylistic innovations continued with the acclaimed *Mr. Mani* (1992), a novel constructed as a series of monologues reaching backward into the Israeli and Jewish past.

It has been an unceasing output that continues today (his latest novel is *The Tunnel*): a distinctive, profound oeuvre.

A.B. Yehoshua is eighty-five. He is the focus of a new Israeli documentary, Yair Qedar's somberly titled *The Last Chapter of A.B. Yehoshua* (unavailable, as of this writing, in the United States), in which the writer is described as suffering from a serious illness and grappling with the death of his wife. Yehoshua's longtime confidant, Amos Oz—the other colossus of Israeli literature—has also recently passed.

Yehoshua's health, quite obviously, is not robust. Nevertheless, he graciously allotted time and effort to speak with me via Zoom.



Cultural Daily: In a previous interview with Joseph Cohen, you stated that “*Mediterranean* is a key word in understanding and talking about Israel...[Israel] is Greece and Italy and Egypt and Malta and Turkey... the colors you see in the southern part of Italy... a special *mélange*, a special mixture.” Those factors—that specific Israeli quotidian—are very apparent in your writing.

Yehoshua: For me Israel was so natural in the sense in that I'm fifth- or sixth-generation on my father's side and my [maternal] grandfather came from Morocco in 1932—an old man, leaving all his family and coming to Israel; it was a sign of honor.

I am sixth generation in Israel. We are not [recent]immigrants... we came here and this is our homeland. Without the problems of politics, of saying, “This belongs to me. Or doesn't belong to me.” We are attached to the land. For me, this is the great sin of Moses. Moses detached us from the land. The [Jewish] people were born *outside* the land. This is very unique: People that were born outside the land. The Torah was given in the desert, not in the land. The land was always secondary to the identity. God wanted to get his domination, his priority, on the people—so land was secondary.

I try to extract from Israel the normal situation.... But this is home. And at home there are problems like this, problems like that. I try to find a common language with [peoples'] different conceptions, political camps. And to write a simple story.

Cultural Daily: A simple story that often is anything *but* simple.

Yehoshua: Israel was an attempt to try to normalize something that was abnormal [the condition of the Jews in the diaspora]. The word *normalize*—that we are normal; like other people, that you

have to be normal—this was by itself a kind of accusation. Jews don't like the word *normal*, because we have been, from the beginning, different from all other people. Not different in the relative way, but in the absolute way.

I can say we paid the most terrible price a people have paid. Not only speaking about the fact that we are a people of over 3000 years and now number only 13 million, but of course the Holocaust. For me, the Holocaust is a *defeat*, not a holocaust. The word *holocaust* means something that's coming, like a tsunami, an earthquake.

We *knew* [historically] that there could be a disaster. And in five years, we lost a third of our people—for nothing. Not for an ideology, not for religion, not for money, not for territory. We had been killed like microbes. This for me is a very profound defeat and a very profound problem, because it wasn't something that was coming *suddenly*. All the red warning lights were glittering all over history. People were saying it [the Jewish diaspora] was dangerous—since the expulsion from Spain. All the time we have been warned. It is *dangerous*.

I'm now angry with the Jewish people. And I try to hide my anger and propose something else. And I propose something that is very annoying to many people: To do one state with the Palestinians in the West Bank... to give them slowly a kind of residents'hip and then citizenship. People are angry when I say this, but this should be the direction.

I'm angry with the Jews of the United States.

Cultural Daily: I know your feelings about the diaspora.

Yehoshua: They're [American Jews] not coming [to Israel]; they're coming and then they are leaving... and they're attracting so many people from us. In Los Angeles, in New York, in other places, there are so many Israelis. Hannah Arendt once said, "Everywhere and nowhere." This was a very sharp definition of the Jew. Everywhere and nowhere.

Cultural Daily: I had read William Faulkner, but it was not until I read *your* work extensively that I then immersed myself in Faulkner. Your writing led me to Faulkner. He has, of course, been a fount of inspiration for you. I wonder if you'd speak to this.

Yehoshua: Faulkner gave to me a lot of basis. I always say, as a writer: You are not alone, you did not come alone—you have literature behind you. I'm always aware of the writers who have influenced me—why I have chosen this writer, what was the quality of that writer. You have to speak of them, to emphasize. Who are the writers who have influenced me?

In a certain way I was influenced by Faulkner because of his characters' monologues. *The Sound and the Fury*, for example—people have said this was like Beethoven's *Third Symphony*—[this was] a breakthrough in the form of literature; also seeing it with Joyce, with Virginia Woolf. And the way in which he treated the black characters and understood their problems.

Nevertheless, I don't want to enter in *your* [America's] problems. And I don't know where you are, the Jews of America, where you will be—with Trump, without Trump.

Cultural Daily: It's all just awful. Even *I* don't want to enter in our problems!

Kedmi, the loutish, obstreperous lawyer who figures prominently in *A Late Divorce*, seems very

reminiscent of Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Yehoshua: Jason for me was the key to writing *A Late Divorce*. You hate Kedmi and yet...

Cultural Daily: He's awful—and he's also very funny.

Yehoshua: It was the monologues, especially in *As I Lay Dying* and of course *The Sound and the Fury*. This gave me a kind of a freedom to speak with the voice of someone...and to get out from the Agnon style of *telling a story*. This by itself was very important. [S.Y. Agnon, who died in 1970—Israel's only Nobel laureate—is considered the father of modern Hebrew literature. Yehoshua and his generational cohorts moved away from Agnon's European-flavored, allusive style.]

Secondly, the way in which he was digging in the generations: *Light in August*, for example.

This came about in *Mr. Mani*, which was for me the most important work that I have done: Going through generations and through the unconscious of generations—which is still working on the coming generations. I started from the present and went into the past and tried to demonstrate that some things that have happened four or five generations before are still working on you.

My late wife was a psychoanalyst and, of course, working on the past is very important, and she would say that the patients are speaking more about their parents than about their children.

Perhaps they speak about their grandfather... but to go to the *great-great-grandfather*: that totally disappears in the darkness. So I try—with my literature—to take this from the darkness and show what previous generations have done is *still* working on you and me in the present.

Cultural Daily: The aforementioned Kedmi (*A Late Divorce*) says that nothing keeps him from his naps—to the point of dozing off under enemy fire. In *The Lover*, Dafi is gripped with insomnia. All of the characters in *The Lover* express themselves via internal monologues; the monologues of Dafi's mother, Asya, are transmitted solely through her dreams.

Molkho, the protagonist of *Five Seasons*, travels to a remote Israeli village in an official capacity. Succumbing to sudden fatigue, he (quite unprofessionally) avails himself of an impromptu nap in one of the resident's houses. Later in the book, he helpfully—but disastrously—urges sleeping meds on another character, which has the unintended effect of plunging her into hours and hours of unwanted slumber.

All of us sleep, of course. But this rarely makes it into literature. Your writing, though, abounds with sleep. This is really uncommon.

Yehoshua: Sleep is very important and not only sleep, but to sleep in foreign beds. In order to understand someone, you have to sleep in his bed!

Sleep is very important and I know from where it came in my writing. I went with my father to Tel Aviv, where we were living in Jerusalem. I was with him for two days and there was an apartment of his sister—she had gone somewhere else—and for two days he was sleeping in the apartment bed... going away from my mother, who was arguing with him all the time. He had relief! He slept for two days!

Cultural Daily: What are you working on now?

Yehoshua: I'm now returning to short stories, novellas. I've completed a novella called *The Only Daughter*, about a young girl who's twelve years old, the daughter of a mixed marriage in Italy—it's already been translated into Italian to great success.

There was an Italian woman writing a doctorate about my work, about its connection to Italy. She tried to examine why my books are so popular in Italy. She told me a story: When she was twelve years old, before her bat mitzvah, she was chosen to play the Madonna in school. Her father forbid her to play the Madonna. Her father was Jewish, her mother was a convert. The father wasn't religious, but he was so annoyed she was chosen to play the Madonna! And from this small story, I wrote a novella.

I was digging into the question of mixed marriages, because it exists in the Jewish world today, many mixed marriages. I don't know how much this is occupying the Jews of America, the question of mixed marriages.

Cultural Daily: A lot—intermarriage has been viewed as a huge issue.

Yehoshua: It's been translated into English by my translator, Stuart Schoffman, who just died very suddenly around a month ago. I liked him so much! The book will be published in English around March 2022.

Cultural Daily: Are there any particular strictures you face as an Israeli writer?

Yehoshua: We are the only country in the world that is reckoned to be destroyed. To be totally destroyed. This is something unique.

I think that in a hundred years the uniqueness of Jews—of connecting a special religion to a special people since Mt. Sinai—this will be broken.

There will be Israelis—totally Israelis and part of the Jewish people—who include Muslims and Christians. They will be part of Israel. This is something that will change... but not for many years. And the change will be very slow. And the Palestinians themselves will not want it [integration into Israel], but little by little... I see it now with the Israeli Palestinians [Arabs in Israel proper, who have a different legal and political status than the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza]—they are judges, doctors... all the hospitals are full of [Arab]nurses and doctors. They speak Hebrew fluently. And they are a part of us. They don't want to separate.... They don't want a Palestinian state. They speak about a Palestinian state. But they don't make any real effort to do it.

Yet the Israeli-Palestinian problem was totally omitted in this previous year's Hebrew literature. I wrote *The Tunnel*, which speaks about the question of the Palestinians.

Cultural Daily: What have you been reading lately?

Yehoshua: I just read the new book of Pynchon's. I was fond of [Jonathan Franzen's] *The Corrections* and then I was disappointed with the other two books [*Freedom* and *Purity*], but now people are saying that the new book [*Crossroads*] is good; I will try to find it.

But the literature I really like to read is in Hebrew. For me, it a pleasure; the language is important.

Cultural Daily: Any concluding thoughts?

Yehoshua: I don't know... I don't know. I'm tired. What can I do?

I don't know what's going to happen with my malady; this will be decided if I'm going to stay in this world.

What can we do?

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