

AMOS OZ—Biographical Paper

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Novel Club

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This is a rather fortuitous time to be reading and thinking about Amos Oz. He died just over two years ago, in December 2018 and his loss is still being felt. He was a popular and highly regarded public intellectual in Israel who was also a long-term supporter of a two-state peace solution with the Palestinians. He saw a need for such a scheme over 50 years ago after the 1967 “Six Day” war.

Oz was born as Amos Klausner on 4 May 1939 in Jerusalem, then in British Mandatory Palestine. At that time, Jerusalem had until recently been a small, rather neglected backwater of the Ottoman Empire. It was restricted entirely to the Old city until the second half of the nineteenth century when early Jewish migrants built the first new neighborhoods outside the walls. The population of the Old City, that is, not counting these new neighborhoods, was a by-and-large intensely poor population of mostly Muslims, Eastern Orthodox Christians and traditionalist Jews, with a few hundred Turkish troops and some European missionaries mixed in. The creation of the Zionist movement in the late 1890’s led to an influx of Jews from central Europe along with considerable investment and building. By the time the British Mandate was inaugurated in 1922, the population of greater Jerusalem was just over 50,000. Growth accelerated due to World War I and the rise of Nazism, and the British Mandatory government invested vast sums in building infrastructure. The result was a considerable expansion in both western (Jewish) and eastern (Arab) suburbs.

By the time that the Klausner family gave birth to their only child, Amos, the city's population had reached maybe 100,000. The Klausners lived in the very cramped early neighborhood of Kerem Avraham, founded in 1855. Although both parents were multi-lingual, his father claimed 17 languages, they spoke only Polish or Russian at home and tried to raise young Amos speaking only Hebrew, no small task at the time. This is less surprising when one considers that his family were quite the secular right-wing nationalists. An uncle, Joseph Klausner, for example, was a founder of the Herut party, a revisionist Zionist group that included Menahem Begin and which is one of the parties that merged and morphed into what is now the Likud party of Benjamin Netanyahu.

At age 12, Oz mother, Fania, committed suicide after having struggled with depression for some time. Two years later, at age 14, Amos announced he was becoming a left-wing labor Zionist and marched out of Kerem Avraham to join the socialist community of Kibbutz Hulda, roughly half way between Jerusalem and the coast. The kibbutz became as it were his new family, and in recognition of his new status he changed his name from Klausner to Oz (meaning strength or courage). When later asked why he did not go to the modern and culturally sophisticated city of Tel Aviv, he remarked that it was not radical enough. Maybe I should note at this point that one of Hulda's sister kibbutzim was En Harod, known for its staunch support of Stalin. As The Guardian put it, "He reinvented himself, discarding the stereotype of the ghetto Jew as a pale, urban weakling. Klausner became Oz, the rugged, outdoor, tough guy."

Although a kibbutznik/farmer, Amos managed to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and then at Oxford University in England. He was drafted into Israel Defense Force and served from 1957-60, and was called up again for the 1967 "Six Day" War and again in 1973. These experiences turned him into what we would call a peace-nik.

Despite his advanced degree, Amos was allowed only one day a week for writing, the Kibbutz, after all being a collective farm which needed all hands in the field. As his national and international fame grew, however, the Kibbutz allowed him three days a week, and then, when his fame grew internationally, four. In return he spent Saturdays as a waiter in the dining hall. He eventually left the kibbutz in 1986 when he became professor of Hebrew Literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

Oz saw as early as 1967 that some sort of solution was needed with the Palestinians, and he became an outspoken proponent of a “Two State” solution. “It will come, everyone knows it will come,” he said in 2004. “The question is when.” Always recognizing Palestinian desire for sovereignty, he asked: “Why can’t we just divorce like the Czechs and the Slovaks. Without blood?” In 2004 he published his essay [Help Us to Divorce](#).

This outspoken view was deemed quite radical in 2004 in the wake of the very violent and bloody Second Intifadeh. Yet it is perfectly in line with Oz’s liberal views. As a writer he explored in a variety of ways, in prose and in poetry the fissures he saw developing in Israeli society: the faith of the founders *versus* the skepticism of the first Israeli generation, the divide between religious and secular, the rural socialist way of life and the rise of urban consumerism, the splits within Israeli Socialism, Jewish ethnic nationalism *vs* the Arab population, both within Israel and in the Palestinian diaspora. Amos was clearly committed to the Zionist idea, or to the Zionist idea as he saw it, but was distant enough to see its cracks and flaws and internal tensions. He in many ways lamented the fading away of Jewish Enlightenment optimism as it gave way to a kind of harsh Jewish Israeli nationalism. Maybe for that reason many of his writings revolve around the ironies of maturing Israeli nationhood.

The rest of his life can be quickly told. He married Nilly Zuckerman in 1960 and eventually had three children. Their son Daniel had asthma and so the family moved into the Northern Negev townlet of Arad. Amos Oz was by then something of a literary celebrity and was teaching Hebrew literature as a full professor at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva. He travelled abroad a good deal in his later years as visiting professor here or as writer-in-residence there. His oldest daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger carries on one of his legacies as a professor of history at the University of Haifa. Amos died of cancer at the end of December, 2018.

He is certainly remembered as one of Israel's most respected writers and public intellectuals. His works explore the frailties and disappointments that are part of human life. Among his best known works are My Michael about a failing marriage (1968), The Hill of Evil Counsel about Jerusalem in the twilight of the British Mandate (1976), A Perfect Peace about a kibbutznik who loses faith in his kibbutz and his family (1982), To Know a Woman about a widower's struggles in life (1989), Don't Call It Night an elegy on the idealism of Zionism (1995), Black Box about the effects later on of childhood trauma (1988) and The Same Sea a complex of family relationships in which the characters themselves protest about their portrayal (1999). With his more than a dozen novels and numerous sort stories, he is one of the more prolific writer of modern Hebrew prose. His work has been translated into some three dozen languages. His memoir, *A Tale of Love and Distress* was made into a movie in 2015 directed by, and starring, Natalie Portman. Now He truly achieved fame.

