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BOOK REVIEW

A. B. Yehoshua: By the Book

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The novelist, playwright and author, most recently, of "The Extra," avoids suspense and sci-fi: "Very possibly I am missing out on important genres. But it's too late to change my conservatism."

What books are currently on your night stand?

It may come as a surprise, but what's now at my bedside is "The Rainbow," by D. H. Lawrence, and not any of the dozens of new Hebrew books that land in my mailbox almost daily. A few weeks back, my bedtime reading was Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain," and before that, Gogol's "Dead Souls." A few months ago, I revisited Proust's "In Search of Lost Time," and for a month last year I was engrossed in "Anna Karenina." Despite my advanced age, I still write, and still feel a need to be nourished and revitalized by the classics. Reading Lawrence, I am amazed and edified by the raw emotional intensity of his characters. I'm looking for ways to internalize this rich, untamed emotion and try to impart something of it to the characters who come to life in my keyboard.

Who are your favorite underappreciated or overlooked authors? Are there Israeli writers who aren't as widely translated as they should be whom you'd recommend in particular?

Israeli literature is well known today in many places in the world. For a small Hebrew-speaking country it's quite an accomplishment that our novels and short story collections are published in translation in many languages and Israeli authors win literary prizes abroad. The saga of modern Jewish history, the Holocaust and the

establishment of Israel, the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, draw many foreign readers, Jews and non-Jews alike, to stories about Israeli life. But let's not forget that Israeli literature is only one part of Hebrew literature. Most Israeli literature in translation was written in the last 40 or 50 years, whereas Hebrew books that preceded the founding of Israel in 1948, from the 19th century onward, are unknown to readers abroad. It's like reading translations of contemporary English literature without having an inkling of Dickens, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf.

I would recommend three canonical Hebrew authors: Y. H. Brenner; S. Yizhar; and S. Y. Agnon, who shared the Nobel Prize in 1966. Much but not all of their work has appeared in translation, but these writers remain widely underappreciated. Foreign publishers of Israeli literature ought to encourage new translations, and keep older ones in print. We Israeli authors regard them as a source of inspiration, so our international readers ought to know them too.

What genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

I am a serious reader, and I read slowly. I deeply respect literature and expect to gain insight from a book and to identify emotionally with its characters. I therefore avoid reading suspense novels or science fiction. Family life and society are so rich and filled with surprises that I have no need of murders solved by clever detectives to better understand the dramas of life all around me. The literary trappings and moralizing of science fiction I find insufficiently compelling. Very possibly I am missing out on important genres. But it's too late to change my conservatism.

Tell us about your favorite short story.

I only published my first novel at the age of 40. Till then I wrote short stories. I have great admiration for the short story, and my advice to young writers is not to rush to write novels until they have honed their prose in short stories. Two of my favorites are very different in style, but each of them ends with a powerful twist. James Joyce's "The Dead," the longest story in his marvelous "Dubliners," brings tears to one's eyes precisely because the revelation at the end is unexpected yet very believable: Gretta's secret memory of a boy she loved who died at 17 of tuberculosis. "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner, is a classic, a staple of anthologies.

Although I've taught it dozens of times as a university professor, I still marvel at its genius for compression. Faulkner manages to pack 40 years of a town's history into a short story, gradually unveiling the strange Miss Emily: her personal, neurotic core; the interpersonal milieu of family and society; and the terrible trauma of the Civil War. All these elements lead inexorably to the shock at the end: the decomposed corpse of the poisoned Yankee lover, at whose side she has lain for many years.

And about your favorite poem.

My very favorite comes from the wonderful Hebrew poetry of the golden age of Spanish Jewry, a period that inspired me to write "A Journey to the End of the Millennium," a novel set in the Middle Ages. The poet is Shmuel HaNagid, who lived in Granada under Muslim rule. I chose the opening line of this poem as the last line of that novel: Hayam beini uveinekha. . . . "Is there a sea between us, that I should not turn aside to visit thee?"

And your favorite play.

From my limited experience as a playwright I've learned that writing a good play is much harder than writing a novel. You can easily name 30 outstanding novelists of the 20th century, but it's hard to find 30 modern playwrights of equivalent quality. The greatest of them all was Chekhov, whose plays are still featured in the repertoire of theater companies around the world. Of his four wonderful plays I'll choose as my favorite "Uncle Vanya," which I've seen performed in many productions, and each time I am in awe of Chekhov's ability to create a raging drama within an elegant, intimate family setting.

What moves you most in a work of literature?

What moves me in literature is the interconnection of themes and events. Our lives are a flow of events, and it's difficult to organize them into a narrative of beginning, middle and end, with a satisfying resolution of all the conflicts in the story. Good literature overcomes the randomness of life by imposing a form that creates meaning from the rushing stream of chaos, making symbolic connections among the various events. For example, when Tolstoy's Anna Karenina throws herself on the railroad tracks, we recall that her first encounter with Vronsky took

place in a train station, when he came to welcome his mother. His relationship with his mother, which aroused Vronsky's love for her traveling companion, Anna — a married woman and mother — is what in the end destroys that love, culminating with the suicide. The ability of literature to weave long, symbolic threads through a story enables us to see the flow of our lives from a more meaningful perspective.

Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine? Your favorite antihero or villain?

I'm fascinated by Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment." The student who gives himself permission to murder an old woman moneylender because he believes he is a superior person who can do what is forbidden to others. In the course of Dostoyevsky's magnificent novel he undergoes a deep moral and ideological change, which leads him in the end to confess to the crime of his own free will. The novel has aspects of detective fiction but is ultimately a work of profound morality.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

When I see how much time my grandchildren spend in front of the television I'm glad I grew up in a period when electronic media were minimal. I read books, visualized the characters, laughed and cried with them. I particularly remember my excitement with two very different books that I read as a child in Hebrew translation. Each in its way shaped my literary world and instilled the urge to do my own writing: "Cuore" ("Heart"), by the Italian author Edmondo De Amicis, a book filled with feeling and moral values; and "The Willoughby Captains," by Talbot Baines Reed, an amusing account of boarding-school life that taught me the importance of wit and humor in literature.

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

"Sefer HaMa'asim" ("The Book of Deeds"), by the Hebrew author S. Y. Agnon. He died in 1970, but his influence on Israeli literature continues to grow. This book is a collection of short stories with a surrealistic, grotesque flavor reminiscent of Kafka, even though Agnon claimed he never actually read Kafka but only heard

about him from his wife, who was a big fan of the Czech-Jewish writer who died so young.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be? The Israeli prime minister?

David Ben-Gurion, the founding prime minister of the state of Israel, was a great lover of books, but preferred reading philosophy and history rather than fiction. His disciple Shimon Peres is a lover of literature and is very friendly with authors and poets. Israel's current president, Reuven Rivlin, whom I've known since our days together in a youth movement, is also a big reader who responds to books with warmth and intelligence. I know nothing about the reading habits of Benjamin Netanyahu. No interesting references from his reading appear in his speeches. But if I were to recommend that the prime minister read one book, it would be "A Savage War of Peace," by Alistair Horne, about the French colonial war in Algeria, a terrible war with aspects that parallel the conflict he persists in continuing with the Palestinians.

What author living or dead would you most like to meet, and what would you like to know?

I read somewhere that Faulkner's literary breakthrough in "The Sound and the Fury" was analogous to the breakthrough of Beethoven's "Eroica" in the world of symphonic music. If I were to meet Faulkner in the world to come I would ask him if he didn't fear losing his readers by beginning his novel with a jumbled stream-of-consciousness monologue by Benjy, a man of 33 with the mentality of a child, telling us the story of his family. This remarkable literary feat trusts the reader to use his imagination to fill the gaps presented by the author.

Of the books you've written, which is your favorite or the most personally meaningful?

I still stand behind all my books, but it's natural that there are some I'm especially proud of. The foremost of these for me is my novel "Mr. Mani," which I published in 1990, when I was 54. I am proud of it because of its unique structure, consisting of five conversations, arranged in reverse chronological order from 1982

to 1848. Each conversation is between two people, with only one voice speaking and the other to be inferred by the reader. Although several friends predicted this book would be a failure, I believed that readers would be willing to make the effort to construct the full dialogue in their imagination. And “Mr. Mani” turned out to be my most significant novel.

What do you plan to read next?

I just met with a young literary critic who enthusiastically recommended “A Death in the Family,” by the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard. Because I have faith in this critic’s taste, this will be my next purchase in the bookstore.

Responses translated from Hebrew by Stuart Schoffman.

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