

Yehoshua, Avraham B.

Doreet Hopp

Born: December 09, 1936 in Jerusalem, Israel

Other Names : Yehoshua, Abraham B.; Yehoshua, Avraham B.

Nationality: Israeli

Occupation: Novelist

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## YEHOSHUA, AVRAHAM B.

**YEHOSHUA, AVRAHAM B.** (1936– ), Israeli novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and essayist, considered both nationally and internationally one of the foremost Israeli writers; recipient of all the literary prizes awarded in Israel including the prestigious Israel Prize (1995). He was also awarded many international prizes, such as the National Jewish Book Award in the U.S., the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate prize in the U.K., and the Boccaccio and Lampedusa prizes in Italy. Yehoshua's books have been translated into 26 languages, and many of his stories and novels have been adapted for the theater, cinema, television, and opera.

While Yehoshua's literary works focus on the hidden realms of the individual psyche embedded in its familial, social, and cultural context, his challenging essays address ideological, political, and ethical issues. In these essays Yehoshua questions the very tenets of Israeli society: Judaism, Zionism, religion and nationalism, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and antisemitism.

A.B. Yehoshua was born in Jerusalem, the fifth generation of a Sephardi family on his father's side, and the first generation on his mother's side. His father, Jacob Yehoshua, an Orientalist by training, wrote a number of books recounting the life of the Sephardi community in Jerusalem from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and two books on the Palestinian press of that time. While his father's occupation with the language, history, and culture of the Palestinians probably opened Yehoshua's eyes to their unique plight and thus indirectly influenced his *Weltanschauung* in general, his father's numerous books served him in the writing of his most acclaimed novel, *Mar Mani* (1990; *Mr. Mani*, 1992). The background of his mother – Malka née Rosolio, born to a rich merchant in Morocco – was a source of inspiration for his novel *Massah el Tom ha-Elef* (1997; *Voyage to the End of the Millennium*, 1999). Although Yehoshua's family was observant, his parents, avid Zionists, sent him to a secular school, the Hebrew Gymnasium in Jerusalem. Yehoshua was also active in the scout movement. His early exposure to the moderate Sephardi version of Jewish tradition along with his secular education and Zionist ideology contributed to a lifelong preoccupation with the complex theme of identity which underlies all his writings.

Upon the completion of his military service (1957), Yehoshua began studying Hebrew literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. At that time, he started publishing his first short stories, later collected in his first book *Mot ha-Zaken* (1962). After his graduation, he taught literature in Jerusalem, and then moved to Paris, where he spent the next four years (1963–67). There he served as a school principal and later as the general secretary of the World Union of Jewish Students. During his stay in Paris, he also completed his second book of short stories and novellas, *Mul ha-Ye'arot* (1968; *Three Days and a Child* 1970). In all, Yehoshua published four collections of short stories before he wrote his first novel, a genre to which he has devoted most of his later writings.

Yehoshua's early stories drew immediate attention from literary critics: some were critical of the nightmarish impact of an absurd, alienated reality presented in those stories, others recognized the influence of Agnon and Kafka on his early stories, acknowledged his unique talent, and predicted that he would leave his mark on Israeli literature. Whereas the first volume of stories is surrealistic and grotesque, placed in a no man's land, his later stories, though still grotesque and terrifying, have become more realistic, placed in the familiar settings of Israeli scene. The gripping plots, a hallmark in all of Yehoshua's writing, evolve around single, lonely, and lethargic characters controlled by underlying destructive powers, unconsciously driven to their unavoidable ends.

Returning to Israel shortly after the 1967 war, Yehoshua joined Haifa University as the head of the department for the advancement of immigrant and minority students. Five years later he was appointed professor of comparative and Hebrew literature (1972); a position he held until his retirement in 2002. Following the Six-Day War and its ensuing upheaval, Yehoshua became involved in various left-wing movements and started publishing essays in which he elaborated his ideological and political stance. His active participation coupled with his intellectual and rhetorical skills have made him one of the major spokesmen for the Zionist left wing and the Israeli peace camp, at home and abroad. Many of his thought-provoking and often controversial essays were later published in two volumes: *Bi-Zekhut*

*ha-Normali'ut* (1980; *Between Right and Right* 1981), and *Ha-Kir ve-ha-Har* (1989). Another volume of essays, *Kokha ha-Nora shel Ashmah Ketanah* (1998), focuses on the moral dilemmas underlying all great literary texts.

After the publication of his first novel, *Ha-Me'ahev* (1977; *The Lover*, 1978), Yehoshua wrote eight novels, exploring innovative artistic forms, enlarging the historical scope from which the narrative is told, tackling new terrains, retrieving the writers' lost "authority over sociological, economical, historical, and ideological issues."

In *Ha-Me'ahev* and in *Gerushim Me'uḥarim* (1982: *A Late Divorce*, 1984), his second novel, the plot is retold by different voices and from different points of view, thus reflecting the essence of the polyphonic Israeli society and giving voice to hitherto muted voices within that society, such as that of a slightly deranged expatriate, or an Arab-Israeli youth (*Ha-Me'ahev*). The scene of events in these, and in most of Yehoshua's novels, is the family, where identity is forged and which also serves as a mirror of society. The first novel encounters the chain of events of a family in a state of deterioration following the father's attempt to revive his long-lost libido by introducing two lovers into the household. The second novel expounds the effects of a bitter and fatally late divorce on the three children of the family, leading to the ultimate destruction of the father.

Hailed by readers and critics, *Mar Mani*, Yehoshua's most ambitious novel, is one of the most interpreted novels of modern Hebrew literature. Like its predecessor *Molcho* (1987; *Five Seasons* 1989), its unique perspective is achieved by juxtaposing the Sephardi angle with the Ashkenazi one: whereas in *Molcho* Yehoshua's narrator follows Molcho, a Sephardi Jerusalemite, throughout the first year of mourning following the death of his "yekke" Ashkenazi wife, in *Mar Mani* Yehoshua employs a polyphonic device in a highly artistic and innovative manner, unfolding the story of more than five generations of a Sephardi family, the Manis, through five one-sided dialogues related by "outsiders," mostly Europeans, about their fatal encounter with one or more of the Manis. In particular, the genealogical novel explores the often disastrous effects of the unconscious, personal and collective, on individuals as well as on nations. The novel encompasses close to 200 years, and explores new terrain (such as Poland and Crete), different cultures (such as the Minoan), and diverse languages (such as Yiddish and Ladino), attempting to understand in depth the complex relationship between Judaism and Zionism, Israel and the Diaspora, religion and nationalism, and above all, the human psyche, where the struggle to make sense of it all takes place.

Wanderlust, restlessness, and a drive to uncover unconscious desires and anxieties send many of Yehoshua's characters on eventful journeys to unknown continents where the confrontation with the irrational is inevitable, such as: Benji's passage to and from India in *Ha-Shivah me-Hodu* (1994; *Open Heart* 1995); Ben Attar's marine voyage to Europe at the end of the first millennium in *Masah el Tom ha-Elef*; Professor Rivlin's repeated travels to Jerusalem, the West Bank, and an Arab village in the Galil in *Ha-Kalah ha-Meshaheret* (2002; *The Liberating Bride*, 2004); and the Via Dolorosa journey of the manager of the human resource division to an unnamed northern country in *Sheliḥuto shel ha-Memuneh al Mashabei Enosh* ("The Mission of the Human Resource Man," 2004). Yehoshua's strength in portraying dramatic situations, often by means of fatal albeit healing confrontations, was also expounded in his plays such as *Layla be-Mai* (1969; "A Night in May," 1974), and *Hafazim* (1986; "Possessions," 1993), and many of his stories and novels have been adapted for the theater such as *Mar Mani*; for the cinema: *Ha-Me'ahev*; and in 2005 his own libretto based on *Masah el Tom ha-Elef*, for the opera.

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