

Yehoshua, A. B.

Born: December 09, 1936 in Jerusalem, Israel

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

Nationality: Israeli

Occupation: Novelist

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A. B. Yehoshua

BORN: 1936, *Jerusalem, Palestine (now Israel)*

NATIONALITY: *Israeli*

GENRE: *Fiction, nonfiction, drama*

MAJOR WORKS:

Over against the Woods (1968)

Three Days and a Child (1970)

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Between Right and Right (1981)

A Late Divorce (1983)

Five Seasons (1989)

Overview

A. B. Yehoshua is one of Israel's foremost contemporary fiction writers. He is a member of "the generation of the state," the first generation to come of age after Israel was proclaimed an independent state in 1948. One of Israel's most important social critics, his political and social commentaries appear both in his fiction and as essays in Israeli newspapers and magazines. Yehoshua's works have been translated into numerous languages and eight of his works have been adapted for film and television.

Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Childhood in the New Jewish State Abraham B. Yehoshua was born on December 9, 1936, in Jerusalem, Palestine, to Yakov and Malka Rosilio Yehoshua; he was a member of the fifth generation of a Sephardic Jerusalemite family. A child during World War II (1939–1945) and the Nazi-directed Holocaust of six million Jews throughout Europe, he was eleven years old when the nation of Israel was formed from a portion of what had



A. B. Yehoshua Yehoshua, A.B., photograph. AP Images.

once been Palestine, an event that both fulfilled Jewish dreams of a permanent homeland and brought resistance from Arab Muslims. The largely Muslim Palestinians had fought for independence of these same lands from Turkish rulers three decades before. This led to decades of conflict between Israelis and their Arab neighbors, conflict that remains far from resolved; it is this tension more than any other that has shaped the work of Yehoshua and other Israeli writers of his generation.

A Background in Hebrew Literature and Philosophy After serving in the Israeli Army as a paratrooper in the Nachal unit from 1954 to 1957—during the Suez Crisis of 1956, in which Britain, France, and Israel fought to eject Egyptian forces from the Suez Canal region, which Egypt had decided to nationalize—Yehoshua attended the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There he studied Hebrew literature and philosophy. He graduated in 1961, a year after marrying Rivka Kirsnski, a psychoanalyst, on June 14, 1960. They had three children: Sivan, Gideon, and Naum. Yehoshua then began a high school and university teaching career, starting in Paris, where he lived and worked from 1963 to 1967. In 1972 Yehoshua took a position with the University of Haifa in Israel, where he is currently a professor of literature.

A “New Wave” Writer Yehoshua began publishing fiction after his military service. He gained his first critical attention with short-story collections such as *The Death of an Old Man* (1962) and *Over against the Woods* (1968) and an early novella, *Early in the Summer of 1970* (1972). By the early 1970s he had become a notable figure in the “new wave” generation of Israeli writers and had collected several awards to testify to this—including the 1961 Akum Prize, second prize in the 1964 Kol-Yisrael Competition for his radio script *The Professor's Secret*, the 1968 Municipality of Ramat-Gan Prize for his short-story collection *Over against the Woods*, and the 1972 Prime Minister Prize. Yehoshua also earned a University of Iowa fellowship in the international literature program, which he took in 1969. Throughout this period, Israel was periodically at war with its neighbors—Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, especially—and much of Yehoshua's fiction includes responses to this state of near-perpetual war, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

Multiple and Prestigious Literary Awards Yehoshua's first novel, *The Lover* (1977), was controversial in Israel because of its criticisms of Israeli society, but this was not representative of the author's reception at home. Yehoshua's second novel, *A Late Divorce* (1982), was praised for its critical depiction of a Jew who leaves Israel to start a new life in America. That same year Yehoshua was awarded the Brenner Prize by the Hebrew Writers Association. A year later, Yehoshua was awarded the Alterman Prize (1986), and a year before he was to receive the Bialik Prize (1988), he published his third novel, *Five Seasons* (1987; published in the U.S.A. in 1989). The work was Page 1727 | Top of Articleequally well received, while his next novel, *Mr Mani* (1990), earned the author one of England's highest accolades as it was named Best Novel of the Year.

The 1990s continued to prove successful for Yehoshua: As he garnered ever more accolades for his writing in both reviews and honorifics, he moved away from political and social morality issues and looked to history in *A Journey to the End of the Millennium* (1997), a historical novel set in the year 999. With *A Late Divorce* Yehoshua told the *New York Times Book*

Review's Laurel Graeber that he had "wanted to understand the present by digging through the layers of the past." With *A Journey to the End of the Millennium* he uses an intricate tale of a medieval merchant's travels and marriages to illuminate a rich moment in Jewish history.

A Controversial Success Yehoshua has continued to publish novels and short-story collections in the 2000s. His 2006 novel *A Woman in Jerusalem* won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize of the same year, but has also attracted much criticism for its controversial message that the only authentic Jewish identity to be found today must be found in Israel and in Zionism, in the promise and practice of a Jewish state. He also continues to teach and to write from his home in Haifa—to the pleasure of readers, critics, and scholars alike. According to the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, his 1989 novel *Five Seasons* is one of the ten most important books since the creation of the State of Israel.

Works in Literary Context

Influences According to David Wiley at the *Minnesota Daily*, Yehoshua names Shmuel Yosef Agnon, William Faulkner, and Franz Kafka as his influences. It therefore makes sense that he is described by the *New York Times* as "a kind of Israeli Faulkner," and that critics have compared him with Franz Kafka—because of the abstract nature of his stories.

Abstract Fables? Many of Yehoshua's stories—such as *The Death of an Old Man* (1962) and *Over against the Woods* (1968)—are modern fables that are not necessarily set in any particular time or place; instead Yehoshua uses allegory to comment on contemporary Israel and humanity in general.

For example, *A Late Divorce* (1983) concerns an Israeli who has immigrated to the United States and later returns home to obtain a divorce. The man finds his family in a state of decay, which some critics considered a symbol for the decline of Israel. Yehoshua explained, "I don't claim the family is a symbol of Israel, but there is a layer of allegory—the imbalance between the father and mother, which does not create proper relations for the health of the family. Like the father, who gives up his responsibilities and goes to America, Jews who leave Israel for America are escaping their responsibility."

Jewish and Generational Themes Yehoshua's fiction treats concerns that have arisen in his generation: such political problems as the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict; such moral dilemmas as the danger of clinging to the Zionist dream without facing the reality of Palestinian demands; and such social issues as the emigration from Israel of the younger generation and its loss of faith in the Zionist ideology that created Israel. For instance, for the story "Facing the Forests," which appeared in *Three Days and a Child* (1970), scholars and critics have offered a variety of interpretations. A frustrated and disaffected Israeli graduate student takes a job as a forest ranger. He ultimately acts as a silent accomplice when an Arab burns down the forest that had displaced his village. In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the story has been seen as an illustration of the younger generation's ambivalence and lack of faith in Israel. On a more universal level, the story has been interpreted as a commentary on humanity's tendency toward unmotivated evil and isolation.

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Yehoshua's famous contemporaries include:

Shirley Bassey (1937–): A Welsh singer best known for her performances of James Bond movie theme songs.

Warren Beatty (1937–): An American actor and director famous for his portrayals of characters as diverse as Clyde Barrow and Dick Tracy.

Václav Havel (1936–): The Czech writer and dramatist who was the ninth and final president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic.

Barbara Jordan (1936–): An African American congresswoman who has served in the U.S. House of Representatives, has been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the United States Military Academy's Sylvanus Thayer Award, and has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

John Updike (1932–): An award-winning U.S. novelist, essayist, and literary critic who is often recognized for his in-depth chronicling of American psychological, social, and political cultures.

Works in Critical Context

Critics of Yehoshua's early story collections such as *The Death of an Old Man* (1962) and *Three Days and a Child* (1968) compared him with Franz Kafka because of the abstract or surrealistic nature of his stories. And such novels as *A Late Divorce* (1983)—a family saga that employs a series of different narrators to explore psychological and moral questions—they compare to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). And though Page 1728 | Top of Article the extensive use of symbolism in Yehoshua's works is a characteristic some critics have found overwhelming, critical reaction as a whole has often focused more on the ideas Yehoshua presents than on his literary style.

Between Right and Right While being commended for his storytelling abilities, the psychological depth of his characters, his precise and evocative use of language, and for his structural innovations, Yehoshua is also acknowledged as one of Israel's most important social critics. Eminent literary critic and scholar Harold Bloom, describing *Between Right and Right* (1981) as "a polemic against the Diaspora," asserts that the essays within are important "efforts to reformulate the terms of identity, Jew, Zionist, Israeli." As the Jewish Virtual Library recounts the comments of *The Village Voice*, "Yehoshua's stories find their way right into the unconscious. Nobel prizes have been given for less."

Responses to Literature

1. In several of his stories Yehoshua positions one generation against another; for example, in "The Lengthening Silence of a Poet," from his *Three Days and a Child* (1970), he portrays the impotence of the older generation and the lack of inner resources of the younger one. Consider one or more works by Yehoshua that reveal a commentary on the generations as contrasting groups. To what extent is each to blame for the problems faced by both?
2. Of Yehoshua's works critic Jerome Greenfield writes, "In the existential despair, the pessimism, the sense of dislocation and alienation that pervade his work, Yehoshua establishes a bridge between modern Israeli writing and a dominant stream of some of the best Western literature of our age ... without abandoning ... the everyday reality of Israeli life." Search the Internet for examples of everyday Israeli life—considering the culture, religion, government and politics, science, medicine, education, or other components. Then, find evidence of this "everyday reality" in one or more of the author's works. Does Greenfield's depiction ring true, based on your research?
3. In an effort to gain understanding of one of Israel's greatest political problems—the Arab-Israeli conflict—create a time line of events in Israeli history. Pick three of these events and discuss Yehoshua's response to these in two or more of his works, supporting your arguments with detailed analysis of passages from his writings.
4. Yehoshua's early short-story collections, such as *The Death of an Old Man* (1962) and *Three Days and a Child* (1968), have been labeled "modern fables." What does it mean for a fable to be "modern," and is this an appropriate description of Yehoshua's work?

COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Although much of Yehoshua's work is centered on Israeli concerns, certain characteristics give his fiction universal significance: his underlying theme of the alienation and isolation of humankind and the careful development of the psychological state of his characters, for example. Here are a few works by writers who have also concerned themselves with the psychology of the alienated or isolated human:

Man's Search for Meaning (1946), a nonfiction work by Viktor Frankl. In this powerful work, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist retells his experiences as a Holocaust survivor, putting forth a philosophy of alienation and suggesting a therapy of existential healing.

"The Metamorphosis" (1915), a short story by Franz Kafka. Kafka's classic investigation of man as an alienated being is conducted through the person/bug of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who wakes one morning to find he cannot move because he has turned into a giant cockroach in the night and is stuck on his back in bed.

"A Rose for Emily" (1930), a short story by William Faulkner. In this story, Emily Grierson is alienated from her immediate society and is isolated in her aging, eccentric, and "spinster" years.

The Stranger (1942), a novel by Albert Camus. In this existentialist novel, the protagonist, Meursault, is less than sympathetic from the start as an alienated, damaged soul.

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