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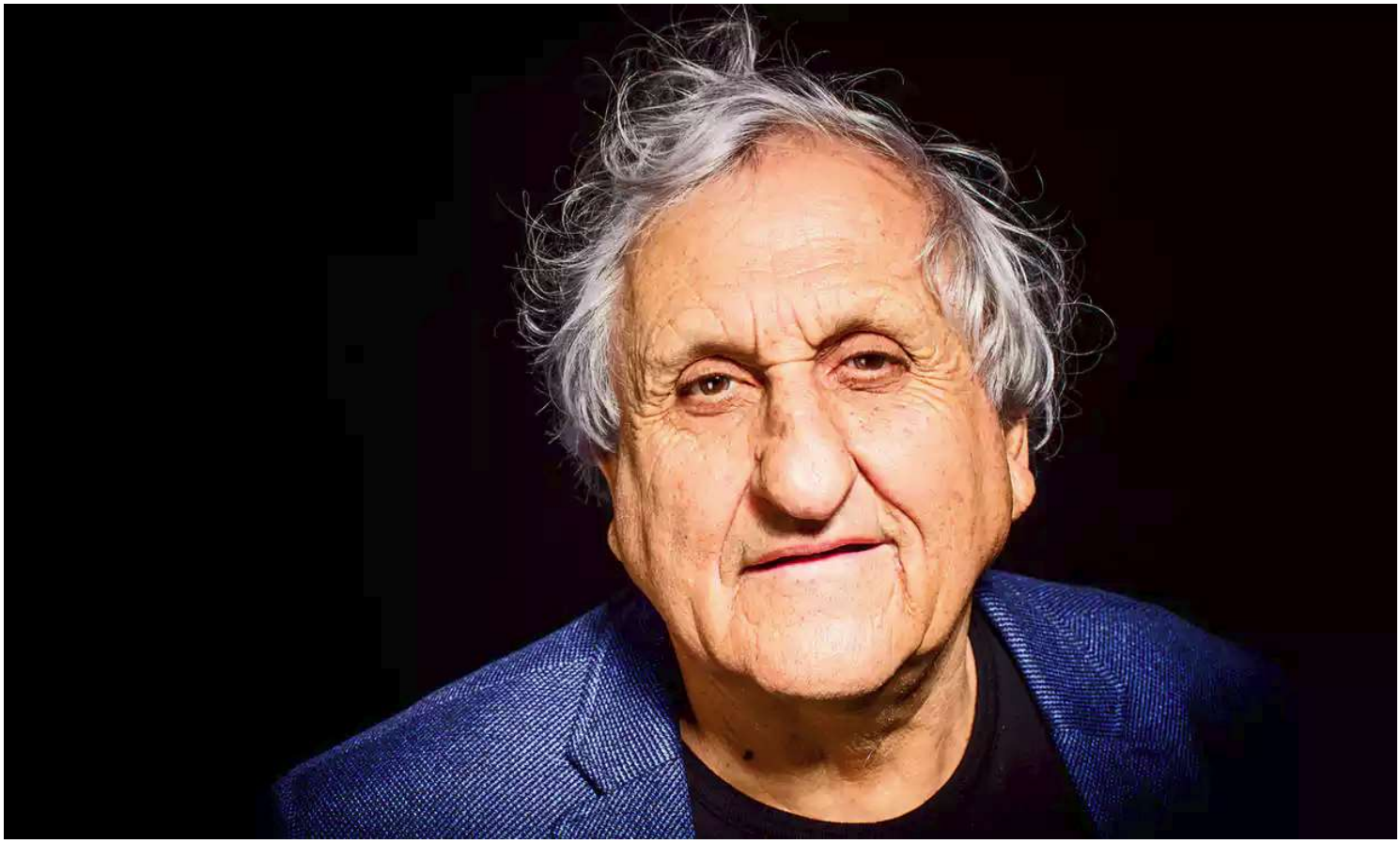
AB Yehoshua: 'Instead of dealing with Palestine, the new generation do a play or write a story'

The acclaimed Israeli novelist on the political role of the writer and why it is time to rethink the two-state solution



Lifelong peacenik ... AB Yehoshua. Photograph: Felix Clay for the Guardian

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They are, if not the holy trinity, then at least the hallowed trio. Amos Oz, David Grossman and AB Yehoshua - once hailed as "the three tenors" of Israeli literature, who have for decades served an exalted double role. Inside the country, they are the unofficial liberal conscience of the nation: delivering rousing speeches at demonstrations or firing off newspaper polemics that burn with righteous indignation, whether lamenting Israel's march rightward, denouncing its presence in the territories occupied since 1967 or making the deeply unfashionable case for peace with the Palestinians. Outside Israel, where literary prizes are heaped on them with unflagging regularity, they offer those same red-hot criticisms - but at the same time, and with no contradiction, also mount a defence of Israel itself: not its governments, but its right to be there and what they see as its enduring necessity.

Of the three, Yehoshua might be the least well known beyond Israel. Perhaps that's because he does not have Oz or Grossman's unnerving ability to deploy the English language with a precision and eloquence few native speakers can muster. Yet Yehoshua, who in his 80th year is the oldest of the trio, is at least as celebrated. In 2005, he was the sole Israeli on the shortlist for the first International Man Booker prize.

And yet recent times have not been good for the version of their country the trio have come to embody. Liberal, outward-looking Israel has been under sustained assault, taking its most overt form this year with a publicity campaign mounted by a rightwing activist group, Im Tirtzu, which named and shamed artists it branded "moles in culture", slamming them for supporting leftwing organisations partially funded by foreign governments. On the hitlist were a variety of Israeli performers and singers, but pride of place went, naturally, to Oz, Grossman and Yehoshua.

The Likud politician, Benny Begin – son of former prime minister Menachem Begin – condemned the campaign as "fascist", while others warned that branding dissenting artists as, in effect, traitors was a tactic bound to end in violence against those targeted. When Im Tirtzu's leader was accused of McCarthyism, his response was to defend Joe McCarthy.

But it goes broader than that. Yehoshua and his comrades have been on the losing side of Israel's internal argument for more than 20 years. The "peace camp", as it was always quaintly styled, has never recovered from the assassination in 1995 of Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister who appeared to be on the brink of doing the peace deal they had all been advocating for decades. Since then, the "two-state solution" – which Oz and Yehoshua began to sketch out almost as soon as the 1967 war was over, and which imagines a secure Israel alongside an independent state of Palestine – has come to seem a fantasy, and a dead one at that. The cause of death, the Israeli peace camp would say, has been the intransigence of both the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships and Israel's ever-expanding settlements on the West Bank. And as that two-state vision has withered, so has the movement – or the Israeli tribe – that once nurtured it. Where once the likes of Yehoshua could claim to speak for at least half of Israeli society, these days he seems to speak for an Israel – secular, enlightened, humane – that is shrinking, banished ever further to the margins.

Amos Oz, once hailed, along with Jehoshua and Grossman, as one of the 'three tenors' of Israeli literature. Photograph: isifa/Getty Images

In person, Avraham Yehoshua – the B is for Bulli, a nickname given to him by two girls at junior school that has stuck for life – conveys none of this. In London to promote his new novel, *The Extra*, he bubbles with vitality, laughing easily, smiling readily, rushing to embrace Rivka – he

calls her Ika – his psychoanalyst wife who accompanies him everywhere: "More than 50 years of being analysed!" Some of his literary colleagues can cut a sober, even severe figure, but Yehoshua is garrulous and effervescent. If the New York Times once called him "the Israeli Faulkner", you wouldn't hesitate to cast him as the Israeli Falstaff.

Yet none of that *joie de vivre* detracts from the seriousness of what he has to say. "The occupation is poisoning us," he tells me. "Poisoning us! The problem is not only for the Palestinians. It's poisoning Israel, poisoning the DNA of the Israeli people. The two systems of law [in the West Bank], of judges, this is penetrating Israel. It's corrupting Israel."

He cites as an example the growing intrusion of racism and casual bigotry into the country's discourse. "I remember the [1948] war of independence. We were a small community, attacked by seven Arab states. And really they wanted to wipe us from Earth. But I never heard people speaking about the Arabs in a racist way. Even though justice was on our side. Now the Arabs are very – very – weak, so you can permit yourself to speak like this about the Arabs. Then there was respect. You spoke about peace because you were afraid. Now," – and he begins to channel the voice of the Israeli everyman – "'I don't need peace, what do I need peace for? Because of Syria, which is totally in chaos? And Iraq, which is in ruins? And all the Arabs are killing each other! What do I need peace for?'" And so "the racist and nationalist" discourse rises, a reaction to the weakness of the Arab nations that have arrived, says the writer, at "one of the terrible moments in their history".

This is something of a theme for Yehoshua, present in several of his novels (though it does not loom large in the latest one): the question of Israeli respect, or even simple recognition, of the Palestinians who live among and alongside them. In the 1962 story that made Yehoshua's name, "Facing the Forests", a young army reservist is on guard duty, watching over a wood planted in the new state of Israel. Sharing his duties is an older and mute Palestinian Arab, whose tongue was cut out in the 1948 war. The climax of the story comes when the latter sets the forest alight, burning it down until the ruin of his own, ancient village emerges from the ashes. Read from today's vantage point, the symbolism may seem too direct, if not obvious, but in its time the story was a radical, provocative statement – recognising that the new Israel had been built, in part, on the ruins of another society, displaced and dispossessed.

AB Yehoshua in 2002. Photograph: FLASH 90/EPA

Perhaps Yehoshua saw what others had not seen because his background was different from theirs. Unlike Oz, Grossman and the rest of Israel's literary aristocracy, whose roots are Ashkenazi or European, Yehoshua's are Sephardi or Mizrachi, sunk deep in the Mediterranean and North

Africa. He is a fifth-generation Jerusalemite, his father's family originally from Salonica, his mother from Morocco. He once said that he sees the Arabs "not as enemies but as cousins". No matter how fierce the conflict, "they are more of a kind of family, with all the problems of family. We have to live with them."

And so, that early story apart, the Palestinian characters in Yehoshua's works are far from silent. *The Lover* features a 14-year-old Arab boy, fluent in the Hebrew poems of Bialik. In *The Liberated Bride*, perhaps the most driven character is an ambitious young Palestinian woman, studying for a master's degree. Yehoshua has said that he sees it as part of his duty to "make the Arabs flesh and blood, to make them real".

No doubt that remark, like those fictional creations, would enrage your average lecturer in postcolonial studies, eager to denounce Yehoshua for his privileged condescension. But Yehoshua is self-aware on that score too. The cast of *The Liberated Bride* consists of a cluster of Orientalist academics, at the centre of which is a Yehoshua-like scholar at Haifa University – where the novelist taught for much of his career – engaged in a quest to "understand the Arab mind". In which mission he, of course, fails. (Yehoshua's father was himself an Orientalist scholar.)

Like most of Israel's writers, Yehoshua is used to his work facing this kind of political scrutiny, each novel read as if it were a manifesto. While a British or American novelist may be regularly asked what aspects are autobiographical, the Israeli writer is constantly called on to defend the views of his characters, either explicit or implied. Oz has always attributed this habit to the "Judeo-Slavonic tradition" of seeing the writer as a prophet, guiding his wayward people out of the wilderness. But Yehoshua traces a more specific, and recent, lineage.

He notes that the founding fathers of 19th- and 20th-century political Zionism – he namechecks Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau and Vladimir Jabotinsky, the latter revered as the spiritual father of the Likud right – were all writers. "Jabotinsky was a writer, translator and a poet. He wanted all the time to return to his desk." He didn't want to be running a political party, meeting world leaders. He wanted to write plays and tell stories. But the call of national duty was too great.

Yehoshua sees himself, along with Oz and Grossman, as staying true to that tradition. When the moment demands it, they put down the novel and take up the megaphone. Which is why you can bet that at any rally of the Israeli peace movement over the last three or more decades, one of those three will have been on the platform.

But what is striking is that the three tenors have not had any real competition for the role of literary-cum-political seers since the 1980s. Why hasn't a new generation of novelist-activists emerged to take their place? Could it be that Yehoshua is part of a dying breed?

"I blame our camp [the peace camp], for abandoning ideology," he says. While the national-religious forces, those who back the settlement project and favour territorial maximalism, have been busy – organising seminars, even arranging weekend talks for young soldiers doing their compulsory military service – "we are doing culture instead of politics. After 1967, I did [constant] talks and articles. The new generation, instead of dealing with the Palestinian issue, they do a play or write a story. All the energy is going into the culture." He worries about this decline in activism and advocacy, of the kind to which he, Oz and Grossman have given so much of their working lives. "They are not well prepared to do battle with the ideology that is coming from the other camp."

What's more, the new generation rarely engage in the careful balancing act that has long characterised the famous trio: always defending the idea of Israel, its right to survive and thrive, even when lambasting successive governments. And, no less important, being sensitive to those neuralgic areas which, if mishandled, are likely to alienate mainstream Jewish or Israeli opinion that might otherwise be open to persuasion.

In an appearance at Jewish Book Week in London earlier this year, Yehoshua gave a masterclass in the art, speaking candidly of Israel's flaws – referring to Israel's West Bank settlements as "colonies" – without losing the sympathy of a largely Jewish audience. He faults younger Israeli writers for not only staying out of the national debate but also, when they do wade in, getting it wrong by throwing around loose analogies with Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa, language that closes the ears of those who might have been ready to listen.

In that same spirit, Yehoshua is at pains to show he understands why his camp lost an Israeli electorate that was once ready to elect dove-ish prime ministers. The key turning point was the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. The way Israelis saw it, the country dismantled its settlements and pulled out its soldiers – only to be rewarded with Hamas rockets landing on towns and villages in southern Israel. "After what happened in Gaza, people are despair[ing]," he says. The novelist channels the everyman's voice again. "'What, we gave Gaza to the Hamas, all the settlements evacuated, and they are throwing missiles: so [if we withdraw from the West Bank] they will be throwing missiles on the airport from Ramallah. Is that you want?'"

It's strange, this pressure on a man who, almost anywhere else, would surely be allowed just to be a writer and university professor, producing short stories and plays; his novels adapted for TV, film and even opera. Instead, he is obliged to navigate around his society's sore spots with as much dextrous empathy as any politician or diplomat.

And yet, you can see how it happens. To be sure, Yehoshua's novels are not frontal accounts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, they are often gently paced, meandering tales of quotidian Israeli life, in no hurry to yield their secrets. They dwell on families, especially marriage. Their characters regularly include people returning home, keen to excavate or interrogate the past, hoping it might provide a guide to the perplexing present and future. Sometimes these stories can turn dark, pivoting on incest or suicide. Still, for all their focus on the private and intimate, a public, political reading is all but irresistible.

Take the latest book, *The Extra*. It tells the story of Noga, a harpist who had moved to the Netherlands but is back in Jerusalem for a few months. To bring in some money she takes on work as a film extra. Earlier, her marriage broke up, in part because of her unwillingness to have children – a decision deemed all but criminal in an Israeli society that venerates child-raising and that can regard any woman who has had fewer than three children as ducking her national duty. What's more, Noga has returned to a Jerusalem neighbourhood that was once a diverse mixture of religious and secular Jews but that is now almost completely "black" – here used to refer to the black-suited, black-hatted men of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy.

David Grossman in 2011. Photograph: Martin Bureau/AFP/Getty Images

Before you know it, what should be a human, personal story can be read as journalistic, sociological observation. What does Yehoshua make of this Israeli demand for fecundity (driven, in part, by a post-Holocaust urge to create Jewish life)? "I have three children and seven grandchildren: I have done my duty!" And of the increasing religiosity of Jerusalem's Jews? He does not lament it much, because the ultra-orthodox Jews are not his "adversary". That label is reserved for the dogmatic ideologues of the national-religious and the settler movements.

More subtle is the fact of Noga's move away from Israel. She is one of many Yehoshua characters to have left the country, only to come back. Usually, these people – *yordim* in Hebrew, literally "those who have descended" – are portrayed in a dim light, evidence of what one critic accurately described as "Yehoshua's contempt for the diaspora".

That contempt is rooted in a worldview best characterised as classical Zionism. The Z-word is now so widely misunderstood as to have become almost useless. Too many people think it refers to a hawkish attitude to the Palestinians or a maximalist position on territory. But it was originally the name for the revolutionary belief that Jewish life could only thrive, that Jews could only be complete, if they lived as a free people in a land where they could govern themselves. Yehoshua is a lifelong peacenik, fierce in his opposition to the occupation – but, in this classical sense of the term, he is also a diehard, unbending Zionist.

Which means he believes that for Jews to live outside Israel, as a minority in the lands of others, is to live an innately "neurotic" life, where their identity is unclear: are they a nation or a religion, an ethnic minority or what exactly? Only Jews who live in the ancestral homeland, speaking Hebrew, the rhythms of their life set by a Jewish calendar and, most important of all, taking responsibility for the decisions of the world's only Jewish society by participating in its democratic decision-making – only those Jews can be described as "complete".

At intervals, Yehoshua delivers this message to diaspora Jewish audiences, usually in the US, offending them in the process. He did it again in 2013, telling young Americans they were only "partial Jews" and that they should move to Israel. It caused a rumpus. But that is chiefly because these days few dare voice such a thing out loud. There was a time when it was the standard catechism of Zionism. But among 21st-century Jews, especially in the US, it is deemed impolite, judgemental and insufficiently respectful of difference.

For some it makes Yehoshua a dinosaur, clinging to a theoretical, hardcore doctrine that no longer fits the way Jews have chosen to live. But it is deeply challenging. When we meet, he cheerfully declares that I too am a "partial Jew" while he is a "total Jew". He contrasts me with Salim Joubran, the Palestinian Arab judge who sits on Israel's supreme court and who in 2011 upheld the sentencing of Moshe Katsav, the country's former president to seven years in jail for rape and sexual abuse. Joubran "knows the language, Hebrew and the legal code" that has emerged from three millennia of Jewish jurisprudence, Yehoshua says. "As an Arab, he was helping to define a new moral code in the Jewish tradition." Of course, he is not suggesting that Joubran is a Jew or somehow more Jewish than me. But he is raising a profound question about Jewish identity and, especially, what meaning it contains outside a society with a Jewish majority.

If the criticism of Yehoshua is that he has remained too stubbornly loyal to his brand of paleo-Zionism, he has not remained fixed on the Palestinian question. He opposes calls for a cultural boycott of Israel, believing that dialogue and the free circulation of ideas are essential. But he is flexible on matters others regard as non-negotiable. "We have to rethink the two-state solution," he says. "We were repeating all the time 'two states, two states, two states' for 45 years. We cannot just repeat it," not when the two peoples themselves clearly do not favour it enough to have made it happen.

Rather than do nothing, simply waiting for the distant day when the two sides make peace – "I cannot wait for the Messiah!" – better to do what can be done now to reduce the occupation. To that end, he suggests Israel give full voting rights to those Palestinians living in the so-called Area C of the West Bank, where most of the settlers live, so that that part of the territory is absorbed into Israel proper: Jews and Palestinians there will then come under the same single legal system. It is strange to hear this – a call for annexation of occupied territory – from a titan of the Israeli left, but you can see what has brought him to this point. "This is my target: to stop or reduce occupation."

He is committed to that end, but insists he is "open" on the means. It could be "an intermediate" spell of Israelis and Palestinians living in a single binational state, with a view to forming two states later. Or perhaps a confederation, of Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Yehoshua even has a name for such a place, a compound word formed (like "Benelux", he says) from the first syllable of each country's name in its own language. It would be Isfalur: Israel, Falestine and Urdun. "Its a beautiful word," he says. "It sounds good." And Yehoshua – both the novelist and the political thinker – smiles.