

STARING THE PAST IN THE FACE

A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS AMOS OZ

Translated by Nicholas de Lange
Chatto and Windus, 2004, hb 517pp £17.99

Amos Oz's new memoir is a searching, affectionate, painful, humorous and truthful excavation of his childhood, his parents' marriage and lives that lead eventually to his mother's suicide at the age of 38. I carried this hefty tome around with me for many days to work and back, to bed and on the tube and laughed and cried my way around London as their lives unfurled. The book is magnificent and I defy anyone to be disappointed by even a page of it.

The book is skilful in managing to depict events at once through the eyes of both a young Amos and a mature Amos who has the benefit of hindsight. The boy ('his highness') is a loveable innocent and the man insightful and full of love and understanding for the characters he portrays. Twice in the book Oz refers to incidents that occurred to him as a child which he ran from and which he describes himself as *still* running from. I would dispute this and say that this is the book of a man who is firmly standing still and staring his past in the face with courage, warmth and honesty.

At the same time that the child Amos grows up, so too does the state of Israel. The Israel portrayed here is an innocent one but not one of youth-group fantasy. In the same way that Oz lays bare his family with love but always uncompromisingly, so he treats his beloved Israel. And as ever the voice of hindsight echoes like a motif in the background. The description of Israel is often very funny because Oz exposes its pretensions and ambitions.

Yet some of the most moving passages in the book tell of the love of Israel felt by Oz and other characters. His aunt's description of arriving on its shores remains with me and his account of the wait for the results of the UN vote perfectly captures the mood of a nation collectively holding its breath.

Without ever being obvious, the book shows how Oz's own political stance developed over time. His encounters with Arab neighbours and shopkeepers are some of the most poignant passages in the book. The young Amos is such a sensitive child that his experiences and the issues they raise

jolt us back to simple questions about love, humanity and hatred that today become submerged in political wrangling.

We also see the development of Oz the writer, from a child who wants actually to be a book to a child who devours every book he can, to one who tells stories to the boys in the playground so that they won't bully him. Later he describes how as a young boy he makes up imaginative stories about the lives of people he sees in coffee shops and on the street. Later he reads Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg* and describes it as:



"A dreary tangle of sadness and pretence, of longing, absurdity, inferiority and provincial pomposity, sentimental education and anachronistic ideals, repressed traumas, resignation and helplessness."

Discovering this book helps him to realise that his own stories of 'normal' life are also valid and that "the written does not depend on Milan or London, but always revolves around the hand that is writing wherever it happens to be writing." Thus Oz begins to write his Israel and tell the stories of his family and the people he sees in coffee shops.

The characters in this book are beautifully and painfully rendered. Oz's portrayal of his parents takes the breath away in its vividness, and honesty. He says that this was made easier because at the

time of writing the book, he himself was old enough to be parent to these two people he writes about. Like a kindly father he takes a long look at them – at their circumstances, their failings, their ambitions and their actualities.

The librarian father, whose dreams of becoming a lauded scholar are thwarted by a combination of history and personality, is not mocked at all by the adult Amos who sees that the Israel in which he lived was one full of over-qualified intellectuals. The chapter in which Oz's father visits him on the kibbutz where he has fled from his father and his life is perhaps the most beautiful in the book, because of the understanding with which the adult Amos imbues the situation. At once you feel the pain of the young Amos, his father and the older Amos who looks on.

Similarly the portrait of his mother is so real that you want to reach out a hand and save her before it is too late – for the child Amos and for the adult Amos who obviously still misses her so.

Nicholas de Lange's translation is absolutely beautiful and the prose flows deliciously from beginning to end so that I don't skip over even a passage in the rush to find out answers to the questions of when, where, how, why that hover over the book, necessarily like dark shadows. The narrative skips back and forward between times, countries, narrators and themes and yet is never disjointed. Each passage sheds more light on the darkness.

There is not a shred of arrogance in the book. Oz quotes his own works occasionally but never boasts of his achievements and how these have clearly surpassed those of his parents and relatives. He shows clearly how his early life acted as the catalyst for his interest in the family and what happens within its confines, an interest that has informed most of his wonderful books.

In this way it seems that this book is the pinnacle of his career so far. It is a book about the family he feels the most love for, the family whose secrets he knows and bravely shares with his readers. It is an honest book, and one that we are fortunate to be able to read, and then to close with a lump in our throat, knowing that we have read a great work by an author of good heart and wonderful genius.

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