



## 'In our DNA are books of memories'

Sarit Yishai-Levi's latest novel spans three generations of women, sweeping from Paris, pre-World War II Yugoslavia and Jerusalem to 1970s Tel Aviv. **Ayelet Tsabari** speaks to the author about the passions that inspired her book

**S**arit Yishai-Levi is living proof that it's never too late to follow your dreams. At the age of 65, she published her first novel, *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, to an astounding success. The book sold over 300,000 copies in Israel alone and was adapted into a Netflix series.

Her second book, *The Woman Beyond the Sea*, weaves the stories of three women, who are tied together by an inheritance of loss. As a baby, Lily was left on the doorstep of a monastery in Jerusalem. Only when she gives birth to a baby boy does she learn the meaning of love. But when he dies, she loses her mind to grief and is unable to properly mother her daughter, Eliya.

When we first meet Eliya, she is entangled in a toxic relationship: on a visit to France, her husband abandons her one day in a Parisian café. What follows is a

sweeping historical saga about mothers and daughters that explores the way maternal love – or lack of it – shapes us. The book also offers, for discerning readers, an unexpected, delightful nod to *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*.

Yishai-Levi, once a renowned journalist who interviewed figures such as the former PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Muhammad Ali, transitions effortlessly into her role as an interviewee. She is warm, candid and exudes a youthful energy. Our conversation could have easily lasted many more hours.

**AYELET TSABARI:** *The Woman Beyond the Sea* feels like a love letter to Tel Aviv. How do you create that sense of place?

**SARIT YISHAI-LEVI:** In *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, as I wrote about Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market, I felt I could really smell the rotten fruit and the shit of the horses. I could feel its inner energy. It was important that readers would feel the same – as if they were seeing a movie.

In my new book, I give so many details. Someone who lives in Tel Aviv will know exactly what I'm writing about when I describe the Dizengoff Centre, the beach, the streets, the old coffee houses, the music and boutiques. In all my writing it is very important for me to make the reader feel as if they are in the place I'm writing about.

**AT:** The sea is a character itself. It's a place of healing and of starting again, as well as danger. What is the significance of the sea in your life?

**SYL:** I grew up in Jerusalem. When I was 18, I joined the army and served in the intelligence unit. The base was close to Tel Aviv, and when I had leave, I didn't go home. I went to my boyfriend who lived in Tel Aviv. My mother said that when I was three years old, I started saying, "I'm going to live in Tel Aviv." I love the sea. At the age of 20, after I finished in the army, I settled in Tel Aviv and I've lived there ever since.

The sea is part of my life. I used to go daily to Sheraton beach (now Metztizim Beach). Now, every day I walk to the port and back. I used to call the sea my psychologist. In the book I've just finished, which doesn't have a name yet, the heroine goes to the sea and purifies herself in it.

Eliya, in *The Woman Beyond the Sea* wants to die in the sea. She can't suffer her pain anymore. So it's dangerous, but it's also the place where she meets her real love, Eldad, the man who saves her from drowning – and she saves him.

**AT:** Like *The Beauty Queen*, the story is about different generations of women, connected by one bloodline. What fascinates you about these family stories?

**SYL:** I believe there is a thin line that connects us to our ancestors.



What happened to my great grandmother affected my grandmother, and then my mother, and then me. I affect my daughter and my daughter will affect my granddaughter.

I believe that in our DNA are books of memories, from a time that we didn't even live. Secondly, the relationship between mothers and daughters is the most interesting and complicated in the world.

**AT:** How does your experience as a mother and a daughter inform your characters?

**SYL:** I did not have a good relationship with my mother. It's a sad story. The character of Luna from *The Beauty Queen* is based a bit on her. She was a party girl, very

fashionable. She loved life and dancing. Then I was born and she was too young to be a mother. It was during the war of independence. One day, she went out to get milk and there was a bomb in Ben Yehuda Street and many people were killed. She was wounded. She went to hospital for three years. I was seven days old.

My father was a soldier, so my grandmother and my aunts took care of me. When I was three, she came back home with a baby. She became pregnant while she was recuperating in hospital. The doctor [told my parents] that she needed to get pregnant to heal her womb. She came back with my brother Raphael. And it was difficult for her to connect with me right up until she died. I'm very sorry about not making peace with her, but I was not clever enough to understand that not to do so was going to hurt me all my life.

But my mother had a fantastic relationship with my daughter Mia. She took my place.

In my own relationship with my daughter it was so important that she should be with me all the time. I didn't let her go. I was a journalist and took her to work. She grew up in our editorial office. Now we have a very close relationship but we are different. She inherited my writing skills (she writes content for TV), we depend on each other, we talk to each other a lot – but we fight a lot, too.

**AT:** What autobiographical elements of your life found their way into this novel?

**SYL:** None of the characters are similar to me. I never experienced the sort of crisis they did. I never tried to kill myself.

But there's one element that comes from my life. I also had a child who died when he was one year old. It was important for me to have another child straight away, not to carry the pain more than I needed to, to go back to work, back to life. That's what I did. When I wrote *The Woman Beyond the Sea*, Lily's pain is my pain. I put in a lot of my feelings about what it feels like when

you lose a child. Lily asks herself: What terrible thing did I do in a previous life that I should have such punishment in this life? She says there is no greater punishment on Earth for a human than losing a child. That's what I felt.

When the book came out my ex-husband asked to talk at the launch. He said that when he read the book he cried like a baby. All the feelings that he had when we lost our child came back to him. He said I depicted it so strongly that it almost killed him.

There's one other personal story in the book, Eliya's paternal grandmother tells Eliya about the family that they left in Bitola in Macedonia. Her husband wanted to come to Israel and the rest of the family didn't want to leave. During World War II, those who stayed were sent to Treblinka, and died in the Holocaust.

This is my personal story. I'm from eight generations of family in Jerusalem, but my paternal grandfather is from Bitola. We knew nothing else about him. We never met his relatives. We only know that he came to Israel with three children. I was very curious about this, so I went to Macedonia and visited Bitola. I found out that most Macedonian Jews were killed in the Holocaust. I'm from a Sephardi family. I never thought anyone from my family was killed in the Holocaust. When I came home, I wrote a big newspaper article about it and swore to myself that I was going to examine it in a bigger way.

**AT:** How significant is your Sephardi background in your writing?

**SYL:** In Israel they tend to include the Jews that come from the Arab countries in the definition of Sephardi. I would say they are Mizrahi and it is a completely different culture from the Sephardi one that originates from Iberia. I'm from an ancient Jerusalem Sephardi family.

But my parents were part of the pre-independence generation. They were in the Palmach [the underground military group who fought in Israel's war

of independence]. So we spoke Hebrew. I didn't know Ladino. My grandparents spoke Ladino between themselves. I never called my grandfather and or my grandmother Ladino names such as 'nona' or 'nonno'. I called them 'saba' and 'savfta'.

I knew nothing about Sephardi customs or superstitions. Later I read about it from a book written by my mother's cousin [Hamsa by Benny Nachmias (Modan)]. He wrote a non-fiction book about the Sephardi community in Jerusalem, in which I found out that my great grandmother was a healer. I asked my aunt to teach me some Ladino I could use in my books. She is 93 years old and an archive of memories. She also helped me to write about the Jerusalem of her youth.

People travel to Poland, Germany or Morocco to look for their roots. But in Jerusalem I can see where my parents and ancestors were born, where they lived, the schools they went to. I feel pure Israeli.

**AT:** You've led many lives. You were a journalist, you lived as a hippie in Tel Aviv and London and you were an actress. Would you ever write a memoir?

**SYL:** I'm asked to write a memoir all the time. But I will never write one because there are so many stories that are secret. People think I'm an open book because I talk about things freely. But about the important people in my life, I talk less. I protect my children and my ex-husband. There are things that should be private. I'm just a writer, I'm not the Beatles.

**AT:** You started writing novels when you were 65 years old. Do you have a message for anybody who believes it's too late to fulfil their dreams?

**SYL:** When I was a journalist, I dreamt about becoming a novelist. David Grossman was a journalist for The Voice of Israel radio and Meir Shalev, whom I worked with, had a TV show. I saw them succeed as writers. But I never dared say, "I want to be a writer". The moment I became a writer, at a very late age, when most people put their dreams in a drawer, it was amazing. I became a best-selling novelist! Apart from the Netflix series of *The Beauty Queen*, there will also be a play of the book.

Never give up your dreams. There's no age limit. I became a very happy person at the age of 65. It changed my life. ■

*The Woman Beyond the Sea* by Sarit Yishai-Levi, trans. by Gilah Kahn-Hoffman, Amazon Crossing, PBO, 2023, price £8.99. *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* is on Netflix. **Ayelet Tsabari** is the author of *The Art of Leaving*, which won the Canadian Jewish Literary Award, and *The Best Place on Earth*, which won the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature and was a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice.