

Meeting: Chez LaCroix with Whitney Lloyd contributing snacks. The tasty Israeli and Mediterranean foods connected to our book.

Book: Elsewhere, perhaps, by Amos Oz

We began the meeting with introduction of guests, and happily there were plenty
Linda Tobin-Sarah Gable and Jonathan
Rebecca and Irad Carni

James Saunders presented the new amplification system- as a trial. It comes with a sizable amplifier and speaker. At each meeting, the host of the subsequent meeting will take it with them.

Peter Haas became the first Novel Club member to deliver his bio on the mike.

Amos Oz was a highly regarded author in Israel and was known for his strong support for a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Oz was born in 1939 as Amos Klausner in British mandatory Jerusalem. He grew up in one of the first Jewish suburbs outside of the walls of the Old City. His parents were right-wing nationalists and spoke many languages, but wanted to raise him speaking only Hebrew. His mom committed suicide when he was 12. Two years later Amos announced he was joining a left-wing socialist kibbutz and left home. To mark this break with his family, he changed his last name to Oz, meaning courage. He worked as a farmer but managed to arrange release to study at Hebrew University and then at Oxford University in England. At first the kibbutz allowed him only one day of writing but as his fame grew he was eventually allowed three and then four days a week for writing. After the 1967 "Six Day" War he became a backer of a two-state solution and remained an ardent "peacenik" for the rest of his life. His writings explore the various fissures in Israeli society such as Socialism vs nationalism, generational conflicts, social tensions, etc. He was committed to Zionist idea, and lamented the passing of Enlightenment optimism as gave way to a harsh Israeli nationalism. He died of cancer at the end of 2018.

Please see the bio on the website for the complete paper

Leon took over to read his critique, but did not use the mike. Nobody seemed to mind

Leon provided historical context for the book and recalled the year he spent on a kibbutz and the challenges for leadership that naturally arise. He pointed out that in a small community, there are bound to be problems. In this book, for instance, we have double adultery. Tensions are found in all areas: Ezra vs Harish intellectual vs. non intellectual, diaspora. Simply put, Leon felt that Oz should have given us something better if he wanted to present this tension. Instead, however, this book presents a soap opera.

Leon noted that in the 1980s Kibbutz were on brink of bankruptcy, signaling the end of socialist collectivism. Now, he pointed out, Kibbutz manufactures material for body armor and members

go on cruises with their extra money, which hardly seems in keeping with the original intent of the organization. Kibbutz now are on the verge of becoming privatized. Capitalist enterprise. It has become a tourist mecca. Kibbutz members are maids and cleaners of an upscale tourist business. Where does the critic stand on the book? It is cheap and tawdry, bottom line.

For questions, Louise took the floor, gamely using the mike.

The first question: What holds the members together? Irad- felt it was important to begin by correcting some facts: Kibbutz failed from beginning. Members never were able to provide children a safe environment. He said this story is accurate. Parents expected to give up children. Financial model did not work. Government provided subsidies: they were not able to sustain themselves. In the late 80's stopped subsidies and kibbutz collapsed. This book was written when Oz was 20s in mid 1960s, before collapse. He describes everything that led to collapse. Oz makes clear that holocaust has impacted all lives. He is not passing judgement on choices people made. Irad found it a wonderful story that accurately describes conflict. While the club digested this information, Leon returned to his question, saying that the Kibbutz held together because of well-defined ideology and language. Tom and Jonathan wondered if it was the outside threat that kept them together because that often bonds people together. Perhaps they had nothing to go back to, as many are refugees.

Conversation moved on to characters. Leon found the author's voice sounded older than the narrator of this book, who does not sound like a 27 year old. Linda posited that this book was not about Kibbutz, rather it is story about a small number of characters who happened to live in kibbutz. Victoria agreed that the kibbutz was setting where human issues explored. Peter agreed that yes, it's a setting where human drama was occurring. The mountain is there, looming. Poet's name Harish means mountain. Molly didn't think of it as soap opera; rather they seemed like normal human problems, and she saw the Kibbutz not just as a setting, rather a part of who they were. She pointed out also that this work is difficult to discuss now in light of current politics. It was written in the 60's. Lloyd noted that while he is not well versed in Israeli history, soap opera is a pejorative term and this is more complex than that. Does a disservice to the work to label it a soap opera. Louise- it's about people trying to create utopian environment. It was a moving, mythical, narrative. Jay-We're missing one theme Oz is trying to put across=what is the best role for post holocaust Jew? Three choices 1 Hard working 2. Corrupt, living in Germany 3. Intellectual who doesn't get anything done. Peter-those 3 names in the book, likely not coincidentally were names of people returning from Babylonian exile.

The microphone continued to sit on the coffee table.

Question 1 was read, which was not clearly recorded by this secretary. It may be possible to discern the question via the responses, but possibly not.

Rebecca began by saying this not warfare. The people in the Kibbutz were finding their way even from different areas of Europe. They were trying to work hard and also be intellectual.

Trish said that Rueben, the teacher, was talking about children of German and Russian, trying to use background of children to develop lessons, and that he was a better teacher than father.

Question 3 How would privatization effect kibbutz? Larry-kibbutz and mushabs were meant to indoctrinate people. Israel today is an assimilation. Very capitalist, has moved away from socialism. We can compare them to Shakers- experiment that didn't work. Louise commented about the author's voice. Was judgement passed? She found the mother's voice interesting, but not the girl Noga. Whitney then asked for clarification about what was happening politically at the time and many weighed in. Irad said this was a border Kibbutz, meant to be a fortress. Lee returned to the question by saying privatization would affect Kibbutz but not relationships. Leon-Kibbutz is wealthy now. Members take Caribbean cruises with the money.

James threw in a new question at this point: Why female narrator? Leon found that one easy: narrator is the village gossip, women are typically the village gossip. Rebecca remarked that the language is extraordinary, a stream of consciousness. To her it recalled Faulkner, Joyce. This was a story of resilience. At the end of it families are together, Zigfried is gone, Orin is a disturbed kid, but kibbutz has kept him in their fold. Louise was reminded of Eudora Welty especially with the description of sound of rain in gutters. Tom brought up the Dutchman. Was he a trojan horse? What was he doing? Rob fielded the question by saying book had lots of themes about morality- Dutchman was collective dealing of moral issues. Ezra, a man of action, did not suffer as much as others did with words. Forecast of doom ended with Rueben's death, ending with evil man having to leave. Molly-Rueben dies while battle is going on. It's a literal funeral pyre. Center of aggravation for community. When he's gone, it's tranquil. Louise thought the Dutchman is meant to be the chorus, but it doesn't come through.

The mike was picked up at this point, at the urging of this secretary.

Question 4 was about the narrator's viewpoint of Ezra and the girl, although clearly this, as with most aspects of the book, had been touched on already. Lloyd believed the narrator found good quality in all people, may be a testament to communal living. They work out because of commune. He wondered if the narrator would be different in this era of MeToo... Louise was disappointed wife did not sock him. Linda wanted to know what happened with her. She asked what went on between them? It seemed to be left unanswered.

Louise asked, with mike, was this novel a success?

Majority seemed to agree that yes it was. A plethora of thoughtful comments and questions followed with and without the mike. James noted that Town Like Alice has the same narrative voice, and this book reminds him of novel by Thrity Umigar. He asked, though, what the girl saw in the truck driver. Louise, in response, noted that he is muscular and sweaty, and that must be a rhetorical question. Victoria brought up a point not previously touch upon: Why were they encouraging abortion? Seemed surprising. There were no clear answers for us. Deanne said it would save community face for her to not have child. Peter wondered how it would it be for the child.

Discussion wrapped up at this point with James calling vote- do we like the mike? Majority yes.

Catherine called the next vote on the timing of the meeting. Do we like the earlier time of 7:15?
Majority yes.

The meeting ended with Novel Club members believing that we would meet next at Jonathan Frielich's house, with the mike.