

Rhyme and reason

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Rhyming Life & Death

By Amos Oz

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Amos Oz is understandably wary of having his fiction typecast: "If I write a story about a father, a mother, a daughter and an allowance, someone will say that the father is the government, the mother is the public, the daughter is the younger generation and the allowance is the economic crisis," he has complained, more than once.

One sympathizes, obviously, although it is difficult not to appreciate the issue from the other end of the argument. Oz, 70 this month and certainly one of the country's two or three foremost fiction writers (if not *primus inter pares*), is also a permanent fixture in the continuing political debates to shape the values of the modern State of Israel. One might be able to separate the man from his work; separating fact and commentary from his fertile imagination poses challenges of a different sort.

Imagination is at the core of Oz's *Rhyming Life and Death* (published in Hebrew as *Harozei Hahaim Vemavet* in 2007 and translated by longtime collaborator Nicholas de Lange). A slim volume, it is an intimate consideration of that peculiarly human condition, insecurity; it is a meditation about dichotomies and the need to categorize according to the binary classification either/or; it is about whether it is ever possible to negotiate a space between one and the other.

It is a stiflingly hot Tel Aviv summer night; the narrator, anonymously named the Author, is expected at a public reading of his new book. He is running late for the event, in part because he dawdles at a coffee shop to admire the waitress. He is overtaken by his penchant for imagining other lives, and he begins to construct an alternate biography for her. He will call her Ricky, he decides: She is a loser in love, after a brief fling with the reserve goalkeeper of the Bnei Yehuda football club.

This distracted state of mind follows him to the reading, where he continues with his little game. He selects random participants from the audience and constructs little interwoven vignettes about their imaginary lives. A youth of 16 or so he imagines as a budding poet, timidly beginning to make his way in the world of letters. A woman, "broad faced, heavily built... [who has] given up caring about her appearance, determined to aspire to higher spheres," he renames Miriam Nehorait. The children in her neighborhood call her Miriam the Horror; he decides that she will cultivate an interest with the young poet. The unlikely friendship is incubated by their shared passion for the high arts, but it all ends horribly wrong.

Oz's fiction is often characterized by a precise, sometimes almost obsessive attention to detail. This is no bad thing; from this detail one can evoke a mood, an atmosphere that suffuses the narrative. In *Rhyming Life and Death*, the prevailing atmosphere is a lingering, almost palpable erotic tension. Beneath the narrator's precise imaginary portraits lies a sexual energy, one that eventually coalesces

outside the Author's make-believe landscape, in the person of the designated professional reader of his work for the evening.

Rochele Reznik reads four short extracts from the Author's book. She is "pretty but shy, pretty but not attractive, a slim demure woman... with a single, old-fashioned plait falling over her shoulder and hiding her left breast." The Author finds himself, despite what one might kindly describe as aesthetic reservations, drawn toward her; the fact that she is evidently in awe of him and his reputation - "reading extracts [from his work] is like playing Schubert when Schubert is in the hall" - scarcely discourages him. In fact, this adds to the allure of his potential sexual conquest. He hovers and vacillates, then determines to go in for the kill.

RHYMING LIFE and Death refers to the title of a poem that runs through the book: "You'll always find them side by side:/Never a groom without a bride." These lines encapsulate the supposed duality of existence: no black without white, no day without night. The Author and Reznik are two sides of the same coin, and whatever happens between them - assuming that anything does - is predicated upon the presumption of this state between them; one confident, the other diffident. But this is too straightforward, of course. Unexpectedly, there is a reversal, and the roles change. The throbbing masculinity of the Author is challenged, and suddenly a new perspective emerges.

Amid all this, Oz uses wry humor and insight to explore that most basic of human failings, insecurity. It's been said many times that storytelling is, in part, about inventing new realities, worlds that we feel more comfortable within. One could argue that the Author's - not Oz's, remember, but the Author's - imaginative flights of fancy are precisely this: creating an alternative world with himself at the center, a nice and comforting place to rest his ego until the bubble of hubris is pricked by reality.

But then, *Rhyming Life and Death* could be about other things altogether. It doesn't take too spectacular a leap of imagination to extrapolate from this slim volume a metaphor concerning - just as an example, taken straight out of the top of my head - the relationship between Israel and her next-door neighbors. But, frankly, does this matter? Perhaps not. Polemical allegories are pretty blunt instruments if they lack underlying literary merit. And *Rhyming Life and Death*, accepted at face value, has an emotional verve of its own that does not need to be rationalized through juxtaposition with political realities. All art, ultimately, should be able to both entertain and inform, but upon its own merits alone.

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