



Book Guide

A Pigeon and a Boy by Meir Shalev

About the Author

One of Israel's most celebrated novelists, Meir Shalev was born in 1948 in Nahalal, Israel's first moshav. He is a bestselling author in Israel, Holland, and Germany; and he has been translated into more than twenty languages. Shalev's writing is often compared to Gabriel Garcia Marquez for his ability to "create worlds inhabited by the richness of invention and obsessiveness of dreams" (NYTBR). He has written twelve children's books, as well as four collections of essays. Meir Shalev is also a columnist with the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot and has given lectures on literature and the Hebrew language at Judaic programs nationwide. Shalev is the recipient of the The Brenner Prize of 2006—the highest Israeli literary recognition—for his novel, *A Pigeon and a Boy*. He lives in Jerusalem and in the north of Israel with his wife and children.

Other works by author Meir Shalev

- *The Blue Mountain (Roman Russi)*
- *Esau*
- *As a Few Days*, also called *The Four Meals*
- *The Loves of Judith*
- *His House in the Desert*
- *Fontanelle*
- *A Pigeon and A Boy My Russian Grandmother and Her American Vacuum Cleaner*
- *Beginnings: Reflections on the Bible's Intriguing Firsts*
- *Two She-Bears*

Guide to the characters

Yair: A tour guide in contemporary Israel in his early 50s

Raya: His mother

Yordad: Dr. Mendelssohn, his father, a prominent pediatrician

Benjamin: Yair's younger brother

Liora: Yair's wife, an American businesswoman

Meshulam: A successful contractor

Tirzah: Meshulam's daughter, also a contractor

Gersham: Meshulam's son, killed in the Yom Kippur War

1940s characters

Dr. Laufer: A German immigrant pigeon handler who heads up the Homing Pigeon division of the Palmach

His protégés:

Miriam: A pigeon handler setting up a base on a kibbutz

Baby A young pigeon handler on a kibbutz

Girl A young pigeon handler in Tel Aviv

Boy The girl's neighbor in Tel Aviv

Glossary

The Yishuv is the term referring to the body of Jewish residents in Palestine, before the establishment of the State of Israel. The term came into use in the 1880s, when there were about 25,000 Jews living across Palestine, and continued to be used until 1948, by which time there were about 700,000 Jews there. During this time, the *Yishuv* evolved into an autonomous society; "a state in the making,"

The Palmach, established in 1941, was the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv during the period of the British Mandate for Palestine. By the outbreak of the Israeli War for Independence in 1948 it consisted of over 2,000 men and women. The Palmach contributed significantly to Israeli culture and ethos, well beyond its military contribution. Its members formed the backbone of the Israel Defense Forces high command for many years, and were prominent in Israeli politics, literature and culture.

Israel's War of Independence broke out following the rejection of the United Nation's Partition Plan, Resolution 181 of the General Assembly (November 29, 1947), by the Arab states and the Arab Higher Committee. After Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, the fighting intensified with other Arab forces joining the Palestinian Arabs in attacking territory in the former Palestinian mandate. On the eve of May 14, the Arabs launched an air attack on Tel Aviv, which the Israelis resisted. This action was followed by the invasion of the former Palestinian mandate by Arab armies from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. Saudi Arabia sent a formation that fought under the Egyptian command. The war ended in January 1949.

A Kibbutz is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture. The first kibbutz, established in 1909, was Degania. Today, farming has been partly supplanted by industrial plants and high-tech enterprises. Kibbutzim began as utopian communities, a combination of socialism and Zionism. In recent decades, some kibbutzim have been privatized and changes have been made in the communal lifestyle.

The Battle that took place at the San Simon Monastery referenced in the novel was a part of the greater **Battle for Jerusalem** which occurred from December 1947 to 18 July 1948, when Jewish and Arab population of Mandatory Palestine and later Israeli and Jordanian armies fought for the control of the city. In particular, the Arab forces tried to cut off the road to Jerusalem from the coastal plain, where the majority of the Jewish population resided. The Arabs blocked access to Jerusalem at Latrun, a narrow valley surrounded by Arab villages on hills on both sides. The breaking of the siege on Jerusalem and became a primary goal for the Israelis in the War of Independence.

Discussion Questions

1. The narrative moves between the past and the present. Why does Shalev tell these parallel stories? What is the result of the back and forth between stories and periods of time?
2. Sometimes Yair is clearly in dialogue with his mother, using “you”, sometimes he refers to her but does not address her. “And one more thing” he tells his mother, “you are not the central character of this story. I am. Not you but your son.” What do you make of this relationship, his engagement with her through his journey and his competition with her to be the central character of his own story?
3. How do the metaphors of homing pigeons and building a home resonate throughout the novel? What is the relationship between these two metaphors?
4. Is there a character you identify with? Why? A favorite character? Why?
5. Memory plays a central role in the novel. “His mind (the America) was shelves of memory while mine was rolls of conjecture.” (Chapter One). What is Shalev saying about memory?
6. Why did Shalev choose not to identify Baby and the Girl, as well as the Boy, until later in the book? Why does he keep their identity secret?
7. The Baby sends a final “message” to the Girl with a homing pigeon. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said the readers temporarily accept as believable events that would ordinarily be seen as incredible, because the writer is able to infuse a “human interest and semblance of truth” into a fantastic tale. What do you make of that “message”? How do you come to terms with it?
8. What do you make of the violent scene in which Yair kills and eats a pigeon?
9. Consider the variations of families in the book. What messages do you come away with?
10. “A story, and a place of one’s own. Do you understand what every person needs, Yair?” Asks his mother. How are having a home and a story related?