



## Between Friends

*Amos Oz*

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### **Between Friends** Amos Oz

'On the kibbutz it's hard to know. We're all supposed to be friends but very few really are.'

Amos Oz's compelling new fiction offers revelatory glimpses into the secrets and frustrations of the human heart, played out by a community of misfits united by political disagreement, intense dissatisfaction and lifetimes of words left unspoken.

Ariella, unhappy in love, confides in the woman whose husband she stole; Nahum, a devoted father, can't find the words to challenge his daughter's promiscuous lover; the old idealists deplore the apathy of the young, while the young are so used to kibbutz life that they can't work out if they're impassioned or indifferent. Arguments about war, government, travel and children are feverishly taken up and quickly abandoned - and amid this group of people unwilling and unable to say what they mean, Martin attempts to teach Esperanto.

At the heart of each drama is a desire to be better, more principled and worthy of the community's respect. With his trademark compassion and sharp-eyed wit, Amos Oz leaves us with the feeling that what matters most between friends is the invisible tie of our shared humanity.

### **Between Friends Details**

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## **Teresa Proença says**

Oito contos, ligados entre si, cuja acção decorre no mesmo tempo e lugar, e em que algumas personagens são comuns às oito narrativas; umas vezes como principais, outras secundárias. No todo, apresentam um quadro de como era a vida israelita num kibutz, nos anos 50.

### **O rei da Noruega**

Tsvi é um jardineiro, com cinquenta e cinco anos, a quem os outros membros do kibutz apelidam de Anjo da Morte porque o assunto preferido das suas conversas são as tragédias ocorridas no mundo.

### **Duas mulheres**

Boaz abandona a mulher, Osnat, e vai viver com Ariela. Durante um tempo, as duas mulheres escrevem bilhetes uma à outra.

### **Entre amigos**

Edna, a filha de Nahum, vai morar com David, o qual tem a idade do pai.

### **Pai**

Moshe é um adolescente cujo pai está num sanatório de doentes mentais.

### **Menino pequeno**

Yuval tem cinco anos. Como todos os meninos do kibutz, vive no infantário comunitário. É um menino solitário, infeliz e maltratado pelas outras crianças.

### **À noite**

Yoav é um dos responsáveis pela organização do kibutz. Embora casado, uma noite quase caiu em tentação por outra mulher a quem desejava há muitos anos.

### **Deir Ajloun**

Hania tenta, junto da comunidade, a permissão para o seu filho tirar um curso universitário - o que ele escolher e sem cumprir o tempo obrigatório de trabalho agrícola no kibutz.

### **Esperanto**

Martin é um judeu sobrevivente do Holocausto. Um idealista que acredita num mundo igualitário e pacífico, o qual será possível se todos os seres humanos falarem uma mesma língua.

*"No tempo da guerra escapei aos nazis, Osnat, mas cheguei a vê-los bastante perto algumas vezes. Não eram monstros, mas rapazes simples, um pouco infantis, turbulentos, gostavam de brincar, de tocar piano, de dar de comer aos gatinhos, mas tinham-lhes feito uma lavagem ao cérebro. E foi apenas por isso que cometeram as atrocidades que cometeram, embora naturalmente não fossem cruéis. Tinham sido corrompidos por ideias perversas."*

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*"Quando era criança, queria crescer e ser um livro. Não um escritor, mas sim um livro: podiam-se matar pessoas como formigas. Escritores também. Mas os livros, mesmo que os destruíssem sistematicamente, restaria sempre algum exemplar perdido nalguma prateleira, no fundo de alguma estante esquecida de uma biblioteca longínqua...."*

— **Amos Oz** (Uma História de Amor e Trevas)



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## Paul says

*On our kibbutz, Kibbutz Yekhat, there lived a man, Zvi Provizor, a short fifty-five year old bachelor who had a habit of blinking. He loved to transmit bad news: earthquakes, plane crashes, buildings collapsing on their occupants, fires and floods.*

With these opening two sentences I am *there*. I know exactly who Zvi Provizor is, and I know who we're dealing with in the opening story of Amos Oz's latest collection of short stories. These are a series of eight vignettes set in a fictional collective settlement of late '50s or early '60s Israel. It's a place that the reader will come to know surprisingly well for so slim a volume. The tales are above all about humanity.

I lived on a kibbutz once for several years, and no one of those communities is quite like another. That said, there are though certain traits and themes and character types that do tend to crop up in every one I ever encountered or heard about. Oz has captured with an amazing economy of words, and a clarity that is so satisfying, precisely who might live there and what preoccupies them.

In "The King of Norway" our blinking bachelor Zvi and Luna Blank, a widow, fall into a new routine - talking every evening. "Two Women" exchange letters - Osnat the launderess has recently become separated, and Ariella, who works in the chicken coop and heads the culture committee, is the tall, slim divorcée to whom Boaz has run. The title story sees Nahum, a widower of about fifty, approaching the subject of his only remaining child, Edna, having moved in with David Dagan, a teacher and one of the kibbutz founders and leaders - a man his own age.

"Father" is a story which I think is the most autobiographical: Sixteen year old Moshe is a 'boarder' newly arrived at Yekhat after his mother has died, and father and now uncle have both fallen ill. With the greatest poignancy we see Moshe finish work early one day and make the difficult trip to visit his ailing father. To anyone who has read Oz's 'A Tale of Love and Darkness' - this is a glimpse of what might have happened next. I was extremely moved.

"Little Boy" is another heartbreaker: The emotional volatility of the shared children's housing hits dad Roni in a way that doesn't quite affect mum Leah the same way. "At Night" sees Yoav the kibbutz general secretary turn night guard for the week. Nina needs his help with a problem that won't wait until morning. In "Deir Ajloun", Yotam the young adult son of another widow, Henia, receives an invitation from Uncle Arthur to study in Milan. Whatever will the general assembly have to say?

The final story, "Esperanto", is about an older member of the kibbutz - Martin, a holocaust survivor who hid from the Nazis in Holland. Martin is the community shoemaker and is a former Esperanto teacher; he has trouble breathing and is dying. He is an anarchist to the very end:

*And once, when two brisk nurses came in to change his pyjamas, he grinned suddenly and told them that death itself was an anarchist. 'Death is not awed by status, possessions, power or titles; we are all equal in its eyes.'*

All of the characters we've met are present in this final tale, though they crop up here and there in the other

stories - maybe on the path, or making a speech in a meeting - just as they do on any kibbutz. Amos Oz has written a first class and moving collection of interwoven stories. The final mosaic is a piece of art to behold. I had to pace myself to read this book as slowly as I could, I wanted to savour its quality for as long as possible. (Perhaps I should have just torn through it and reread it immediately?) Five stars and highly recommended.

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### **Teresa says**

This is a quick-reading collection of interrelated stories that are deeply affecting despite their superficial simplicity. The themes of loneliness and the lack of true friendship on a kibbutz, where everyone is supposedly friends, and of individuality-versus-the-collective become more complex and thought-provoking as one reads on.

The stories of certain characters, such as the five-year-old boy who is bullied mercilessly in the children's house, become almost poetic in parts, but only rarely. The prose is not ornate at all and my only issue with it is that a few stories, especially those in the beginning, hold a bit too much repetition for such spareness.

But neither the plots nor the characters, though they are rendered with much empathy, are what is front and center: instead, it is the mood Oz evokes of a time and place, of a community that could be confining in its idealism and, especially to the younger generation, must have felt at many times like prison.

The last line of the last story is perfect and is partly why I rounded up my original thought of 3.5 stars to 4.

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### **Jill says**

This spare and elegant little book from Israeli author Amos Oz is composed of eight interlocking stories that begin with the heralding of deaths – and ends with a real one. Yet its real theme is not the deaths of individuals as much as it is the death of a utopian dream.

That dream: kibbutz life, based on social and economic parity. Or, to put it another way, the whole has to be greater than the sum of its parts. In reality, a life without self-fulfillment and self-actualization is a life of self-sacrifice, loneliness and an increasing rigidity in roles.

There's David Dagan, for example, a kibbutz founder who has become immune to criticism, living with his good friend's 17-year-old daughter. There's Zvi the gardener, who can't wait relay all the bad news to the community and who turns rigid whenever he's touched. There's Roni, the father of a bullied son, who cannot protect him because all children are the "property" of the kibbutz, not the parent. And there's Moshe, a sensitive animal lover, who is only permitted to leave the community overnight to visit his sick father.

Gradually – and this is no accident – the lone characters that we meet begin to interact with other characters by appearing in other stories. The individuals who are in conflict with themselves eventually are also in conflict with other individuals and ultimately, with the ideal of communal living.

Mr. Oz writes, "The old-timers are actually religious people who left their old religion for a new one that's just as full of sins and transgressions, prohibitions and strict rules. They haven't stopped being true believers; they're simply exchanged one belief system for another. Marx is their Talmud. The general meeting is the synagogue and David Dagan is their rabbi."

In the end, no ideal can ever eradicate the very human traits of envy, pettiness or greed. Yet humankind can still dream and even plan for a community that's denied it. Amos Oz's triumph is in recognizing both the good and the bad in kibbutz life and the conflict that is inherent within it. Translated flawlessly by Sondra Silverston, these stories are deceptively simple and beautifully rendered. 4.5 stars.

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### **Natira says**

4,5 \* und nur deswegen nicht 5, weil ich mir doch mehrfach ein nicht ganz so offenes Ende gewünscht hätte (z.B. in Bezug auf Roni, dessen Liebe zu seinem Sohn solche Früchte trägt, oder in Bezug auf Mosche und seinen Vater).

Im Übrigen faszinieren mich die in den Kurzgeschichten gewährten Einblicke in das Leben im Kibbutz, sowohl in organisatorisch-gesellschaftlicher Art (Ausschüsse, Wehrdienst und Arbeitsjahre, Kinderhaus etc.) als auch in Bezug auf das zwischenmenschliche Zusammenleben (ich frage mich, wie ein paar der Ehen in den Geschichten wohl zustande gekommen sind). Für mich zeigt sich in jeder einzelnen Geschichte, dass das Leben in einer Kibbutz-Gemeinschaft sowohl Segen als auch Fluch für die Menschen bedeutet, wobei ich die wirtschaftliche Komponente ebenso meine wie die emotionale und psychische.

Gelesen wurde das von mir gehörte Buch von Christian Brückner, und zwar - um es in einem Wort zu sagen - ganz wundervoll.

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### **Will says**

*"Marx is their Talmud."*

Life on a kibbutz, an Israeli utopian, agricultural community, in the 1950s was an ideological powder keg. Less than a decade after Israel's independence and the atrocities committed during the war, leftist Israelis envisioned a life of socialist community, where workers were allocated jobs and living quarters and children were raised communally.

The idea of the kibbutz is incredibly compelling for me: communal dependence, a dedication to work and learning, the building of a new, better society literally from the ground up. But Amos Oz in this masterful collection describes what life was really like on the kibbutz behind the utopian image. People schemed, politics dominated every decision, individual interests were sacrificed ostensibly "for the greater good," but often because of jealousy.

In "Deir Ajloun," a young man fresh out of the army wants to leave to study in Italy at his uncle's expense, but the kibbutz members' jealousy of his uncle, who left them to run a successful business, halts the young man's dreams, leaving him to wander in a burned out Arab village in a haze, confused and conflicted. He wants to take a break, but is it worth leaving everything and everyone he knows?

Marriages break up, ideological purity is used as cover for philandering, and isolation overcomes communal living. Daily life was not glamorous, even if the ideas of self-sufficiency, duty, and communal responsibility are, at least to me.









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## Marica says

### Dare la libertà a una gallina

Ho letto questo libro con grande piacere e scrivo il commento per stare ancora un po' nell'atmosfera della storia. Le vite di vari abitanti di un kibbutz negli anni '50 sono raccontate da un loro compagno non caratterizzato, sembra quasi che il kibbutz stesso racconti. All'interno di questa struttura vivono circa trecento adulti: si tratta di una comunità in cui tutti lavorano secondo le loro capacità per il benessere comune e non c'è alcuna proprietà privata, anche i bambini sono considerati patrimonio comune e infatti dormono non coi genitori ma nella casa dei bambini. Non tutti sono contenti di questo tipo di vita: c'è chi la accoglie come il coronamento di un ideale socialista e chi si sente soffocare e vorrebbe andare all'estero. Come in tutte le piccole comunità, la vita è poco privata e molti commentano e dibattono i fatti degli altri: ci vogliono nervi solidi. Alcune storie sono particolarmente belle, per esempio quella del ragazzino dato recentemente in affidamento al kibbutz e che va a trovare in ospedale il padre così malato che appena lo riconosce: il ragazzino lavora nel pollaio, è triste per il destino dei polli e sogna di rubare una gallina per darle la libertà: però sa che non lo farà, perché la gallina finirebbe subito in pasto a uno sciacallo. Mi è anche sembrata bella la storia dell'elettricista che non condivide la scelta della figlia e vorrebbe sbattere il libro sul tavolo ed esprimere la sua contrarietà, ma non lo fa; riesce solo a dire "non è giusto", posa il libro con garbo e chiude la porta con dolcezza: e' un uomo mite, non sa uscire dalla sua mitezza. Sono storie malinconiche, raccontate con realismo e grande finezza psicologica. E' un'occasione preziosa per avvicinarsi alla realtà di un kibbutz dall'interno, perché Amos Oz, come il ragazzino, ci arriva da solo a 15 anni e ci sta per 30 anni, e infatti non racconta la vita nel kibbutz ai giorni nostri, ma quella negli anni '50, quando il paese era giovanissimo e gli entusiasmi erano grandi. Sembra che Amos Oz, dopo tanti anni, abbia voluto rendere omaggio all'istituzione che gli aveva offerto una seconda possibilità di vita, raccontandone con onestà la solidarietà e la complessità del vivere comune.

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## Nat says

I watched Natalie Portman's **A Tale of Love and Darkness** last year, which is based on the autobiographical novel of the same name by Israeli author Amos Oz. But this collection of eight short stories was my first read by the author and now I'm intrigued to find more of his works.

Amos Oz's compelling new fiction offers revelatory glimpses into the secrets and frustrations of the human heart, played out by a community of misfits united by political disagreement, intense dissatisfaction and

lifetimes of words left unspoken.

Ariella, unhappy in love, confides in the woman whose husband she stole; Nahum, a devoted father, can't find the words to challenge his daughter's promiscuous lover; the old idealists deplore the apathy of the young, while the young are so used to kibbutz life that they can't work out if they're impassioned or indifferent. Arguments about war, government, travel and children are feverishly taken up and quickly abandoned - and amid this group of people unwilling and unable to say what they mean, Martin attempts to teach Esperanto.

While **Between Friends** was certainly a quick read, only two tales out of the eight stood out in my eyes. The first one being the introducing story, "The King of Norway," which chronicles the life of Zvi Provizor, a middle-age bachelor who likes to carry the sorrows of the world on his shoulders. (*"Closing your eyes to the cruelty of life is, in my opinion, both stupid and sinful. There's very little we can do about it. So we have to at least acknowledge it."*)

This story resonated deeply with its discussions of Provizor's emotional issues, in particular the fact that he doesn't like being touched.

*"Never in his adult life had he touched another person intentionally, and he went rigid whenever he was touched. He loved the feel of loose earth and the softness of young stems, but the touch of others, men or women, caused his entire body to stiffen and contract as if he'd been burned. He always tried to avoid handshakes, pats on the back, or the accidental rubbing of elbows at the table in the dining hall."*

And the following tale I liked was titled "Father," which follows sixteen-year-old Moshe Yashar with his quiet and gentle manner. It delivered everything I didn't know I wanted from this collection. And the one thing that stood out the most was this next paragraph on animal cruelty and veganism.

*"Someday, Moshe thought, a future generation will call us murderers, unable to comprehend how we could eat the flesh of creatures like ourselves, rob them of the feel of the earth and the smell of the grass, hatch them in automatic incubators, raise them in crowded cages, force-feed them, steal all their eggs before they hatch, and finally, slit their throats, pluck their feathers, tear them limb from limb, gorge ourselves on them and drool and lick the fat from our lips."*

Such a powerful passage to secure my ongoing interest. To paraphrase Moshe, I kept finding myself deeply touched by the enigmas contained in these pages. Discussing "big, simple truths: loneliness and longing, desire and death."

However, one subtle thing I noticed the more I read on was how similarly the inner qualities of the narrators were described. The word 'quiet' was used an absurd amount of times to describe every single one of them. We had "quietly persistent," "quiet" and "composed," "quiet persistence," etc. So either the translator or the author went a little overboard... And this then lead to each short story blending into the next one, until it became difficult to distinguish the voices.

On a brighter note, I did enjoy the fact that all the tales were connected in one way or another, so that we got closure on certain storylines that weren't quite finished before. Also, I cherished the fact that these quietly moving stories were set on around the kibbutz movement.

All in all: This was a great introduction to Amos Oz's writing style and I'm eager to continue on.

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## Marc says

Eight short stories, situated in an Israeli kibbutz, in the 1950s, thus in the pioneering years of the Jewish state. I must admit that I wasn't really familiar with the kibbutz model; I knew that it was a form of collective working and living, mostly inspired by marxism and focused on self-sufficiency. Amos Oz makes that image much more concrete, but in a way that is not very flattering for the big ideals. Gradually, the kibbutz community appears to be really suffocating, erasing the individuality of the members and leaving little room for human feelings. The portraits that Oz paints of the 'little people' of this community are endearing and degrading at the same time, so that he exceeds the narrow frame of the kibbutz and portrays the 'tristesse' of the human condition in general. This also seems to show a slight frustration of Oz himself about the illusion of the manufacturability of society: "*and she said to herself that most people apparently needed more warmth and affection than the others could give, and that none of the kibbutz commissions could ever match the difference between supply and demand The kibbutz, she thought, had changed the social order a bit, but you did not change the nature of the person, and that nature was not easy to deal with. You could not abolish jealousy and small-mindedness and envy once and for all by voting on it in the kibbutz organs*".

Oz' mastery as a writer also shows stylistically: the succession of short, descriptive sentences, and the subcooled tone make the little human dramas all the more poignant.

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## Cathrine says

Love this :-)! Will be looking for more by him!

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## Natalie says

Ooooo...mene ovo nije baš oduševilo. Naslov "me?u svojim" pa ne znam...ovi likovi "nisu bili svoj sa svojim" :)))

Život u kibucima nije onakav kakav sam mislila da jest. Nema tu radosti, opuštanja...zapravo sve suprotno. Puno ogovaranja me?u ?lanovima, podjeb..., gaženja, isticanja...ne, hvala ne bih izdržala u takvoj zajednici. Meni osobno baš nije ova knjiga "sjela" kak ima biti :)

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## Leka says

Questo libro continuo a tenerlo vicino al letto. Perché prima o poi (forse più poi che prima) devo rileggerlo. Un dovere, perché mi è rimasto il dubbio che la traduttrice (sempre lei, la stessa di Nevo!) *pasticci* un po'. Non so perché tutt'a'un tratto m'è presa questa insofferenza. E magari lei non ne ha nemmeno nessuna responsabilità.

Però l'ultimo scorcio dal Kibbuz -esperanto- è davvero molto bello (o almeno a me è piaciuto tanto). Sarà per la lingua costruita per affratellare tutti i popoli... -e per eliminare tutti i traduttori (?)- ma è di una poesia

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estrema. Estrema, come la morte.

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