

CONFESSIONS OF A GOOD ARAB

By Yoram Kaniuk

Translated by Dalya Bilu

First published in Hebrew by Kinneret, 1985

English translation published by Peter Halban, 1987

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is narrated by Yosef Rosenzweig, also known as Yosef Sherara, who is both a Jew and an Arab: his mother Hava is an Israeli heroine who drove an armed convoy to Jerusalem during the War of Independence in 1948, and his father is Azouri, a moderate Arab intellectual and aristocrat with friends on both sides of the political divide. Yosef tells his family's story, beginning with his grandfather Franz, who fought in the Prussian army in World War I but left Germany for Palestine in 1936 when it became clear that Jews were no longer welcome. Yosef tells also of his love for Dina, the Jewish daughter of Holocaust survivors, whom he meets in grade school and then follows through her enlistment in the Israeli army, a privilege that is denied to Yosef on account of his complicated background. Consumed by anger at his rejection by both Israelis and Arabs, Yosef becomes a double agent, serving in the Mossad and in Palestinian terrorist organizations. Throughout this novel we are witness to the pain of his alienation, and his longing to be accepted as part of the nation of which he is a part, and the state in which he lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yoram Kaniuk was born in Tel Aviv in 1930. After being wounded in Israel's 1948 War of Independence, he moved to New York for ten years. A novelist, painter, and journalist, he has published 17 novels, a memoir, seven collections of stories, two books of essays, and five books for children and adults. His books have been published abroad in 25 languages. Kaniuk has been awarded many literary prizes, including the Ze'ev Prize for Children's literature (1980), the Prix des Droits de l'Homme (France, 1997), the President's Prize (1998), the Bialik Prize (1999), the prestigious Prix Mediterranee Etranger (2000), the Book Publishers Association's Gold Book Prize (2005), and the Newman Prize (2006).



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. At the beginning of his confessions, Yosef remarks that he has “two histories which both told the story of the same events from an opposite point of view, the events of which I was the victim” (p. 9). What are the two opposite points of view to which he refers, and why is he privy to both? In what sense is Yosef a victim? And if he is a victim, what is it that he has to confess?
2. The Holocaust provides an important backdrop to Yosef’s family’s story, beginning with his grandparents’ decision to leave Germany in 1936 and come to Palestine. How does Yosef speak about the Holocaust? What does he mean when he says that “Israel was a necessary, if impossible, answer to the Holocaust” (p. 175). Why necessary? Why impossible? Do you agree with his conviction that “if a Jewish state had existed here then two million Jews would still be alive” (p. 212)?
3. Describe Yosef’s relationship with the two most important women in his life, Dina and Laila. Can you see any pattern in terms of when he turns to one rather than the other? To which woman is he ultimately closer, and does that say anything about Yosef’s sense of his own identity?
4. Yosef experiences several moments of painful rejection either by individual Israelis or by the Jewish state. Consider, for instance, when Giora’s father throws him out of Giora’s house, or when he is searched at the roadblock on his way to visiting Dina, or when he is denied the opportunity to serve in the Israeli army. How does Yosef react on each such occasion? Do you sympathize with him in these moments?
5. Yosef, in arguing with Laila, tells her: “You’ve got twenty-two Arab states, why don’t you move up a little, why do you have to have this lousy little strip of land precisely? You belong to the great Arab nation, you’ve crushed Jews for a thousand years, give a quarter of a percent of your territory to my mother” (p. 119). What voice is Yosef impersonating here? Who makes these types of claims today? How do you react to this statement?
6. In trying to discourage Hava from marrying Azouri, Kathe pleads, “I have lived here in the heat and the noise between sweating Jews and Arabs with daggers drawn, and I know. This is a hard place, a hard language, everything is strange, what will become of you with one strangeness stuck to another?” (p. 127). What is Kathe so worried about? Are her worries justified?
7. During the early years of Yosef’s life, which are spent in Paris, his father is working on “a vast study, two hundred years of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine” (p. 132). What are Azouri’s conclusions, and do you agree with them?
8. Yosef relates that during a camping trip in Tiberias, he once found himself searching an Arab’s pockets, where he found a sharp knife (see p. 195). How does Yosef handle the situation? What does his reaction reveal about his own internal conflict? Why is the Arab so contemptuous of him after this encounter?



9. Is Yosef a religious person? Why does he insist on having a Bar Mitzvah? (see p. 175). How do his friends and family react?
10. Why does Yosef refer to his parents as “Hava my mother on Azouri’s side” and “Azouri my father on Hava’s side”? When is this type of language generally invoked? What sort of comment is Yosef making about the nature of his family?

REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of Yoram Kaniuk and his work? Do you agree with the claims they make?

“Kaniuk, a respected Israeli writer...makes a welcome return with a passionate novel that is at once a powerful indictment of the Zionist dream and a keen study of alienation, isolation and longing.”
--*Publishers Weekly*

"Yoram Kaniuk is one of the most innovative, brilliant novelists in the Western World."
--*The New York Times*

"Of the novelists I have discovered in translation...the three for whom I have the greatest admiration are Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Peter Handke, and Yoram Kaniuk."]---*Susan Sontag*

"A masterpiece of inventiveness, compassion, and stylistic virtuosity."
--*Jewish Spectator*

"Mr. Kaniuk is a lively writer, although his energizing language often seems planted only for its shock value. But when he orders his central characters to declare at the end, "I'm a dirty Arab" and "I'm a bloody Jew," the reader knows the novelist's message is just the opposite: that both must somehow get together in mind and spirit."
--Herbert Mitgang, *The New York Times*



OTHER BOOKS BY YORAM KANIUK AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH

The Last Jew (Grove/Atlantic, 2006)

Exodus: The Odyssey of a Commander (Grove/Atlantic, 2000)

Adam Resurrected (Grove/Atlantic, 2000)

His Daughter (George Braziller, 1989)

Aunt Shlomtzion the Great (Harper & Row, 1978)

Rocking Horse (Harper & Row, 1977)

Himmo, King of Jerusalem (Atheneum, 1969)

The Acrophile (Atheneum, 1961)

