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Talk With Amos Oz: Kibbutznik as Novelist

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Editor's Note: Israeli novelist Amos Oz (Elsewhere, Perhaps My Michael; The Hill of Evil Counsel) is known for his observations on contemporary Israeli life. He spoke in Boston this week.

"In Anglo - Saxon tradition, writers are viewed as the descendents of entertainers or clowns. But in Israel, they're expected to be prophets. There's high respect for literature in Israel, sometimes to the point of embarrassment."

There are big differences between writers in Israel and the United States, says novelist Amos Oz, in Boston to mark Israel's thirtieth anniversary celebration. Israel is a "small, familial country," he says, where even minor journalists are known to a significant por-

tion of the population. "If such a person were suddenly to come out with a novel, everyone would say: We know this guy. Who is he to step into the prophet's shoes? Is he a fool, or just crazy?" There is no Israeli parallel to the "young American star rising out of nowhere," Oz explains, no "new, authentic voice from the Midwest or Arizona." All Israelis are seen as "known - quantities," and that makes artistic acceptance more difficult.

Known for searing tales of alienation, sexual unrest and

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(Continued from Front Page) psychological erosion against the background of Jerusalem, Oz himself is a kibbutznik who says that his birth as a writer was "the longest delivery ever." After serving in the Israeli tank Corps, the blond, athletic Oz went back to the cotton fields of Kibbutz Hulda in the Jerusalem corridor.

"Everyone in the Kibbutz knew I was writing things,"

he says. "Finally I got the courage to ask for a day off to write. The kibbutz assembly said okay, let him have it so he won't leave us. We need him in the cotton fields. My great breakthrough came after I'd published several short stories and gathered the courage to ask for a second day off. I handed the few dollars from my stories — a literary income — to the kibbutz treasurer, and this convinced him."

At that point Hulda residents began to take Oz seriously. A few years and a couple of books later he applied for a third day off. And now he could write full time — if he wanted to.

"I have the rare liberty not to write when I don't feel like it," Oz says, "a privilege most American writers don't have. I don't need a publisher's advances. I don't have to meet deadlines." Oz says that his entire literary income — which at this point, must be substantial — goes into the Hulda treasury. But that's no problem, he comments, because whenever I want funds for anything — a trip, enough to hole up and write in a hotel for a few days — all I have to do is ask. Oz adds that not all kibbutz artists can operate so freely. They must first convince fellow kibbutzniks that their talent warrants the investment.

At various times in his life

Oz has worked as a tractor driver, youth instructor and agricultural laborer. While he is probably one of the few Israeli novelists who could support himself on writing alone, he says that there are at most only three in the country who actually do. The rest hold part - time jobs in journalism or academia. "I even know one who works as a bus driver," he quips.

Oz steers clear of the literary life flourishing in such places as Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. "If I lived in the city I'd be surrounded by intellectuals discussing reviews all the time. On the kibbutz, real life is constantly going on around me."

"Hulda is big for me," he adds. "There are 350 living souls representing a tremendous variety of backgrounds. I know these people inside out, know them genetically. If I lived in New York City or Tel Aviv I would never have such an intimate knowledge of so many. I write stories about men and women. Surroundings, history, time and place are all essential."

Commenting on politics, the novelist and self - proclaimed dove says: "I'm not a member of any political party. I get involved guerilla style, emerging out of the bush to write an article or issue a statement and then retreat into the bush again."

"If I wanted to make a political statement I wouldn't write a novel," he adds. I never introduce characters to present a political idea, but I have presented political talk to illuminate characters; in Israel, politics are a matter of live and death. When reviews pour in," he smiles thoughtfully. "I become aware of the political consequences. But ultimately, I'm using my fiction to say something much more complex."