

Reading Guide

A Woman in Jerusalem

By A. B. Yehoshua

Translated from the Hebrew by Hillel Halkin

Winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award

Critical Acclaim for *A Woman in Jerusalem*

“This novel has about it the force and deceptive simplicity of a masterpiece . . . embedded in this simple story are fundamental questions about identity, selfhood, belonging.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A sad, warm, funny book . . . that has deep lessons to impart.”—*The Economist*

Introduction

Award-winning novelist A. B. Yehoshua takes us to the heart of remembrance and identity in this tale of a woman whose death brings gentle transformations to the strangers entrusted with her burial. The victim of a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem market, she is identified by a pay stub from the bakery where she worked as a cleaning woman. Despite a clerical error that kept her on the payroll when she was no longer employed, a Jerusalem newspaper reporter accuses the bakery of “gross negligence and inhumanity toward an employee” for failing to provide appropriate funeral arrangements. Soon the bakery's human-resources manager is charged with the task of locating her relatives, leading him to make surprising discoveries and take an unforgettable journey to her homeland in the former Soviet Union.

Capturing both the essence of contemporary Israel as well as the universal experiences of atonement and compassion, master storyteller A. B. Yehoshua has once again crafted an astonishing literary achievement. We hope that the following questions and topics for discussion will enrich your reading of *A Woman in Jerusalem*.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What is the effect of the namelessness in the novel? Why might the author have chosen to name Yulia Ragayev but not the other primary characters? How do the characters balance anonymity and intimacy?
2. How is it appropriate for the novel that the employer is a bakery? What does the company's product—bread—signify?
3. Ultimately, what do you believe the company's responsibilities were to Yulia after her death? What were the responsibilities of Israeli institutions, such as National Insurance? To what extent should the cause of her death have been a factor in the debates about her remains? How would a similar scenario have played out in your community?
4. In the morgue, the resources manager encounters a lab technician who tells him, regarding the topic of information being leaked to the press, “Nothing is illegal when

there isn't any choice." Does this statement prove to be true throughout the resources manager's journey? How does he handle the choices, and the lack of choices, he is given?

5. At the end of part two, chapter three, the resources manager wonders if his daughter gives up on life too easily. How does he cope with the aftermath of his divorce? In what ways does his attitude toward his daughter shape his determination to act nobly toward Yulia?

6. What is the effect of the novel's italicized passages? How does the story change when the perspective changes? How does Yulia's situation appear to onlookers?

7. In part three, chapter two, the resources manager engages in a philosophical debate with the journalist. What does this conversation reveal about the differences and similarities between their perspectives on love and the soul?

8. Does the journalist display any noble qualities? Is sensationalism his only motivation, or has he genuinely taken on the cause of justice? What do you predict he will say in the story he will file at the end of this sojourn?

9. How do the realities of Yulia's life, from her background as an engineer to her estrangement from her husband and son, compare to your initial impressions of her? How significant was physical beauty, even exoticism, in her ability to gain attention after death?

10. What is your interpretation of the dream described in part three, chapter four? In what ways does it underscore the meaning of this journey? What does it suggest about the continuum of love and passion, terror and sacrifice?

11. Compare the Cold War installation to the landscape of Jerusalem that launches the novel. What national scars are borne by both of the novel's locales?

12. Discuss the notion that Jerusalem is everyone's city. What does it mean for Yulia to have made a home in Jerusalem, and for her mother (a non-Jew) to make a request that undermines everything the resources manager had come to believe about Yulia?

13. The author dedicated this novel to the memory of a friend who died in a 2002 terrorist attack. How does this knowledge shape your reading of *A Woman in Jerusalem*? Does fiction have the power to make sense of senseless acts?

14. Does *A Woman in Jerusalem* revisit themes in previous novels by A. B. Yehoshua that you have read?

About the Author

One of Israel's preeminent writers, A. B. YEHOSHUA has been awarded the Israel Prize, the Koret Jewish Book Award, and the National Jewish Book Award. Born in Jerusalem, he lives in Haifa.

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Discussion questions written by Amy Root