

A TRUMPET IN THE WADI

By Sami Michael

Translated by Yael Lotan

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English translation published by Simon & Schuster, 2002

Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is the story of two Christian Arab sisters who live in the Arab quarter of Haifa with their widowed Christian mother and irascible Egyptian grandfather. Huda, the narrator, falls in love with Alex, the Russian Jewish immigrant who plays his trumpet on the roof of their building. Her younger sister Mary rejects the advances of Zuhair, the son of their difficult Muslim landlord, and chooses instead her uninteresting but dependable cousin Wahid. The story of the two sisters' coming-of-age is narrated against the backdrop of escalating Arab-Israeli tensions in the months leading up to the 1982 war between Israel and Lebanon, which ultimately brings Huda's romance to a tragic end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sami Michael was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1926. He served as an advocate against the oppressive national regime during World War II, before fleeing to Iran and then to Israel in 1948. Michael studied Arabic Literature and Psychology at Haifa University. For 25 years, he worked as a hydrologist, mainly on the Syrian border, and wrote about his experiences. He published his first novel in 1973. Michael is the author of eight novels. He has received many literary awards, including the WIZO Prize, the ACUM Prize, the Brenner Prize, the Ze'ev Prize for children's literature, an IBBY Award, the Israel Prize for Literature and the President's Prize for Lifetime Achievement (2005). The film adaptation of *A Trumpet in the Wadi* won the 2001 Israel Academy Film Award for Best Drama. For his work for peace, he has been honored by the UN-supported Society for International Development, and the Association for Promotion of Peace in the Middle East (Italy), and has been awarded honorary doctorates by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1995), Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (2000), Tel Aviv University (2002) for his literary work and contribution to inter-communal reconciliation. He lives in Haifa, Israel.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. On the opening page of the novel, Huda declares, "I'm trying to be more Israeli than the Jews themselves" (p. 3). And so she reads Israeli writers and poets, to give just one example. Why does she do this? Does she ultimately succeed in her endeavor to remake herself?
2. How does Huda react when Boaz speaks about his son in the army (p. 32)? How does this scene cast light on the differences between Huda and her co-workers?
3. Huda remarks, "Freedom...is a weighty burden which not everyone can bear, especially not women, most especially not Arab women" (41). Does this quote resonate with Huda and Mary's experiences in this novel? In what way are the sisters free, and in what way are they bound – either by ethnic identity, or by circumstances, or by the men in their lives? Are the male characters generally more free than their female counterparts?
4. What happened to Huda's mother's brothers? Where do they live now? How much does she understand about their story? (See, for instance, p. 62-3.) Does the story of her mother's brothers become a part of her identity? How does it affect her conflict about belonging to the larger society?
5. How are Muslims distinguished from one another by the characters in this novel? How do the Muslims describe the Jews? And vice versa? Consider, for instance, Abu Nakla's comment on p. 64 that "We Muslims . . . are not like the Jews and the Christians."
6. After Alex intercepts Zuhair on the stairwell, Huda remarks, "The Arab street kept silent in defiance and with gritted teeth. Another Jew beating up an Arab. And although I was wholeheartedly on Alex's side . . . I felt the Arab street's pain" (p. 74). What are Huda's conflicted loyalties? Why was this situation so open to misinterpretation?
7. Huda's mother and grandfather do not see eye-to-eye when it comes to the significance of ethnic differences. Describe each of their attitudes. Is one more realistic than the other? With which side do you tend to agree? See, for instance, their disagreement on p. 76.
8. As an outsider to Jewish life, Huda has her own perspective on Jewish identity. Consider her description of Shirley and Kobi on p. 105. How does she characterize the difference between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews (p. 105)? Does this distinction have any significance to you as an American Jew?



9. Midway through the book, Huda laments that "in a country torn by antagonisms and living in a state of war it isn't possible to cultivate an oasis of love on the border between two nations seeking to strangle each other" (p. 130). And yet she and Alex decide to get married nonetheless. What do you think of their decision? Do you think that Alex and Huda's relationship was doomed from the very beginning? Or was there a chance they could have made a life together?
10. Huda's mother tells her daughter that Israel is not a good place to bring up children because the country is cursed (p. 131). Do you agree with her comment? What are the unique challenges that Israel poses to parents raising young children? Would you consider raising children there?
11. What does Wahid mean when he refers to a "good Arab" (p. 182)? Who has the right to confer this designation on someone? Who are the "good Arabs" in this story?
12. Huda teaches Alex Hebrew and irons his army uniform. Is there irony in these situations? How does Huda explain her actions to herself?
13. Why does Alex's mother hate Huda so much? What does Huda represent for her? Is her hatred personal, or is it instead about what Huda represents?
14. Do you think that Huda will raise her child as a Jew or as an Arab? Why?



REVIEW QUOTES:

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

"This spirited, bittersweet novel captures the Arab-Israeli conflict in microcosm... the novel deals cleverly and humorously with complicated relationships."

--Publishers Weekly

"A Trumpet in the Wadi is a subtle, touching portrait of love and heartache. The layered complications of Arab/Jewish relationships in Israel and the country's myriad social ills are laid bare with humor, poignancy and clarity set amidst the brewing conflict in Lebanon. Sami Michael illuminates the dark places of the heart with his shining prose."

--Jon Papernick author of *The Ascent of Eli Israel*

"Sami Michael leaps headlong into the magic and tragedy of lives tossed by history and in so doing captures polyglot Haifa in all its unvarnished humanity. The pages all but sing in your hands. You will not forget these characters."

--Rachel Kadish, author of *Tolstoy Lied*

"The political cannot help but be personal for these unforgettable characters: the result is heartbreaking truth. Sami Michael has written a book which is essential in its beauty and wisdom."

--Binnie Kirschenbaum, author of *An Almost Perfect Moment*

"Sami Michael has written an inspiring, insightful novel that dismantles long-standing clichés about the separation of Arabs and Israelis."

--Diana Abu-Jaber, author of *Crescent*

OTHER BOOKS BY SAMI MICHAEL AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH

Victoria (Macmillan, 1995)

Refuge (Simon & Schuster, 1989)

