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Q&A

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trapped in a psychological Pale of Settlement?

**MS:** The Pale of Settlement is a place of historic memory, yet its shadow still hangs over both Israeli and Diaspora Jews. I can't speak for Israelis, but from my own experience and imagination it seems that the Pale—a vanished place where Jews were forced to live, and later one of the sites of the Holocaust—is the dark mirror image of Israel, the modern Jewish state. The word "pale" comes from the Latin *palus*, which means "stake," in the sense of a staked boundary line. I chose the title because so many of the stories have to do with boundaries and border crossings, with that liminal place where history, memory, and myth meet. Susan, an American born to Israeli parents, is constantly moving back across the border between the U.S. and Israel, trying to figure out who she really is.

**RJ:** Susan studies old photographs of family members as if stills will

reveal hidden truth. What role do photographs play in this process?

**MS:** Photographs are tangible images of the past that appear to represent actual truth, but it's not that simple. In reality, my grandparents had this box of old photographs, and often they would go through the images and say, "Oh, I don't remember who that person is," or "I don't remember what that was all about." It was a mysterious and wonderful box of clues about unknown aspects of the past.

In "Lila's Story," a photograph of Susan's grandmother changes subtly each time Susan comes back to look at it. If Susan is looking for the truth about the past, she leaves feeling somewhat frustrated with the realization that even a fixed image can be elusory.

**RJ:** On the book jacket it says you write fiction and creative nonfiction. What are these stories?

**MS:** Amos Oz likes to say there's no such thing as fiction. He points out that James Joyce took the trouble to measure the precise distance from Bloom's basement entrance to

the street above. I write in the tradition of realistic fiction, where everything is plausible and rooted in the details in the real world; only the characters are invented. The exception is "Lila's Story," which is based in part on my memories of the stories my grandmother told, and which at times crosses the border between fiction and nonfiction. Some particulars, like the narrative of the extramarital affair Susan imagines her grandmother having in the 1940s, are clearly inventions. And, of course, even memories may not be truth. As anyone knows, your memory of a story someone else told you may be far from accurate.

**RJ:** Considering that this, your first book, also won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, you must feel encouraged as a writer. What are you working on now?

**MS:** Currently I'm in the early stages of a novel set in London at the time of the 2005 Tube bombings. I continue to write creative nonfiction as well as short stories, and hope to put together a new collection soon. □