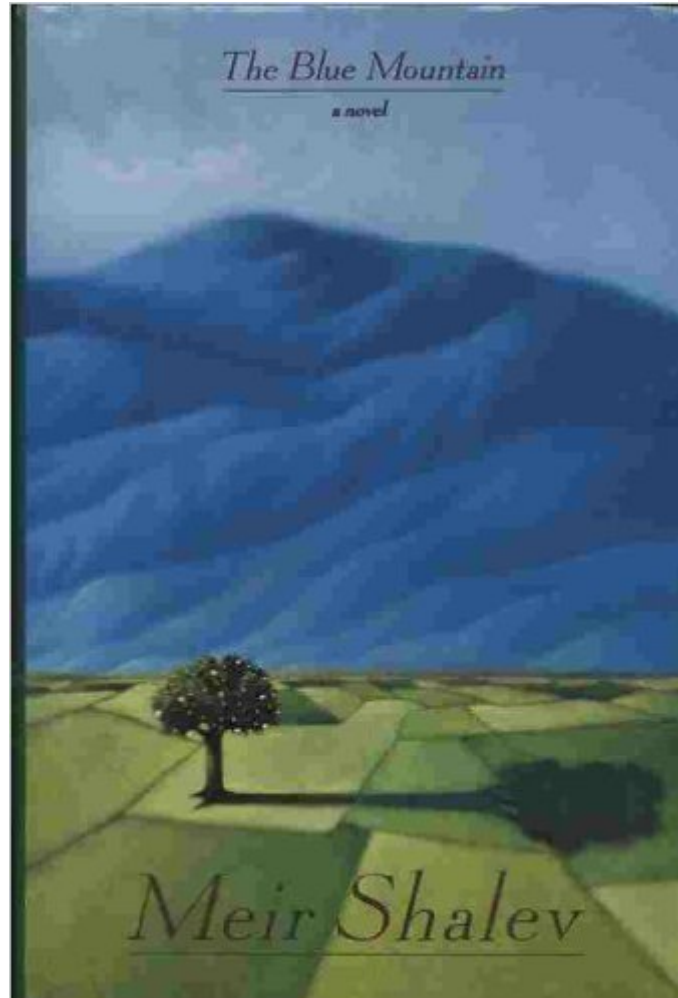


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The Blue Mountain: A Novel



Synopsis

TheÂ absorbing first novel by one of Israel's most important and acclaimed contemporary writers focuses on four idealistic early settlers of theÂ modern state of IsraelSet in a small rural village prior to the creation of the State of Israel, this funny and hugely imaginative book paints an extraordinary picture of a small community of Ukrainian immigrants as theyÂ pioneer a new life in a new land over three generations. Narrated by Baruch, a grandson of one of the founding fathers of the village, this lyrical novelÂ transcends time and place by touching on issues of universal relevance, showcasing the skill of a master storyteller who never fails to entertain.Â

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Eastern European emigrants to Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century assured that what would become known as the 'Second Aliyah' would bear a Yiddish accent, a socialist ethic, and a hard-nosed disdain for the religious Zionism of some fellow travelers. Meir Shalev provides us an angle on their experience that makes it difficult to reduce their exploits to those of secular saints and impossible not to love them for their deeply human foibles. In *Blue Mountain*, Shalev has given us a great read, portraying the intersecting loves and hates of his semi-fictional village with an unflinching eye and a deeply sympathetic voice. Halkin's English translation comes off the page as anything but a translation, and so places this moving novel into the hands of a public many times broader than the original. The narrator poses as the grandson of one of the original pioneers, bequeathed by his parents' early death into the legacy and kindness of two such oldsters. One is his grandfather, the other the village's hilariously didactic schoolteacher. Growing up as they grow old,

'Baruch's' narrative voice conveys to us his guardians' memory of the Second Aliyah even as we look in on that scene with considerably less innocence about the consequences of Jewish immigration to Palestine than his fictional villagers could have imagined. With reason, Shalev's style is compared to Gabriel García Márquez' 'magical realism', though the flights of fancy in *Blue Mountain* are fewer than those in García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. They also owe more to the no-nonsense raw edges of the pioneers' gritty socialist experiment than to the porousness of metaphysical boundaries. Transplanted to their unpromising environs by events as much as by choices, these Jews from Russia and the East had little time for the cultural adjustments and incremental synchronization that easier times allow. They drained the swamps and hauled orchards out of dry land by means of certainties that, if they seem quaintly humorous in hindsight, get no apology from those who felt compelled by the tenuousness of survival to exercise them. That is not to say they lacked affection for the Arab inhabitants of the land they cultivated, for these appear from time to time on the margins of village life as respectable passers-by. Rather, they simply had no time, nor could pausing to reflect upon the pogrom-punctuated Russia they had left behind accomplish much but distract them from the new thing to which they had put their hands. Time, such as it was, existed in order to invent a better way to milk the cows, apply folk genetics to the citrus, and cultivate the large loyalties and enmities that flourish in small towns. Shalev narrates those times. He speaks through Baruch, who should have been a farmer but instead earned millions by turning the family farm into a cemetery for the Second Aliyah's finite number of dead, those who arrived pale from New York and were buried for thousands, as well as those buried fresh and for free from the village's old folks home. Shalev is a widely-read Israeli author of essays, novels, and children's books. To some, he is best-known for his compelling newspaper columns that, not surprisingly, argue that grace and sanity like those with which Baruch narrates the history of the *Blue Mountain*, ought to be cultivated in the hot zone of the Palestinian-Arab conflict. (See 'In the end, it is the violin that wins', [...]) 'Uncle Baruch' finishes his tale only when a new generation, sprung from the union of Uri, the village's randiest returned exile, and Nehama, the daughter of the alarmable village cantor, returns to grow up on the land that their forebears had turned to green and to call him 'Uncle'. Perhaps Shalev would tell us that it is by such affectionately-termed traditioners that the story passes from one generation to its successor, so that it remains tell-able and well-told to those who will never drain swamps or walk with as much certainty as the Second Aliyah's 'Movement' found it necessary to do. Or perhaps he simply enjoyed telling the tale.

Told with tenderness, humor, and just the right touch of fantasy, Shalev has fashioned a wonderful

novel. The characters are vivid and imaginative. The descriptions of nature are enchanting. The story itself is a metaphor for the way in which the Zionist dream has played itself out among successive generations. Don't miss it!

Blue Mountain is wonderful! A bit tough going at the beginning, but by mid-way you'll be glad you made the effort. Meir Shalev may turn out to be the best Israeli writer of his generation. His writing still lacks the depth and focus of an Allende or Hesse, but he's learning fast, and the richness and complexity of this tale are hard to match. After reading it on a friend's recommendation, I ended up giving four copies as gifts. A most enthusiastic "10!"

A story of early settlement in Israel, beginning shortly after the Balfour Declaration (during WW I), when thousands of immigrants arrived from Russia and the Ukraine. Our narrator is a young man in more recent times who listens to old timer's tales about the early days before the village declined in population. He tries to sort out fact from fiction in the heroic stories. The chapters go back and forth in time, foreshadowing and repeating and adding to the major stories. He lives in an agricultural village co-op (not a kibbutz, which is a different thing, apparently because farmers in the co-op own their land). His parents were killed by a terrorist firebomb and he was brought up by his grandfather, whom he idolizes. He also idolizes his older male teacher who just overflows with knowledge and enthusiasm and recognizes in the youth one of his best pupils in a lifetime of teaching. So this bright young man devoted to two older men lives by himself on a farm. We learn nothing about his sex life other than that women don't interest him. One of his hobbies is to spy on others in the village so we learn a lot about what's going on with other families in the co-op that way. In a sense it's a sad story of a boy who never grew up. He has the idea of creating a cemetery on his farm and discovers that he can make more money by selling burial plots than by farming. Families bring the bodies of former co-op residents from other area of Israel and from New York and Europe to be buried. As the narrator learns, we also learn a lot about nature from the stories of the teacher and about farm techniques and agricultural experiments from both men, so in part this is a nature book; a lot of farm lore, information about the seasons, and naturalists stories about birds, animals and insects. It's an intriguing book and a pleasant read.

I have never been to Israel. Know little of the enterprise set out here: the return of the exiled to the earth. So for some time in this tale I was lost. But then I was caught up in the lyrics, the twisting

images and the oddly wrought characters. I was sorry to leave the village. Outstanding.

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