

by Arthur Salm - CNS

"A Pigeon and a Boy," by Meir Shalev; Schocken; 320 pages; \$25.

'A PIGEON AND A BOY' - Meir Shalev's 'A Pigeon and a Boy' is the 17th book from Israel's acclaimed author. In the opening pages of acclaimed Israeli author Meir Shalev's new novel, "A Pigeon and a Boy," a man remembers a homing pigeon rising from a grim, blasted-out battlefield during Israel's 1948 War of Independence: "All the weapons fell silent for a moment. Ours and theirs. Not a single gun fired, no grenades exploded, and all the mouths stopped shouting. It was so quiet that we heard the wings beating the air. For a single moment every eye and every finger was following that bird as she did what we all wanted to do: Make her way home."

As Shalev himself, at age 55, has finally done.

Although he was born on a moshav (a farm community similar to a kibbutz), he has lived most of his life in Jerusalem - and longing to get away from it. He likes Jerusalem, but not as a place to live, he said on the phone from his second, newer home in the Jezrael Valley, in the north of Israel between Haifa and Nazareth.

"Something about the architecture of the house I liked a lot. I felt at home immediately, something I never felt in any place. First my parents, then my wife, made me stay (in Jerusalem). Finally, at 50, I showed the first step of independence and bought this house."

Shalev now divides his time between the Jezrael Valley and Jerusalem, where he is a columnist for Yediot Ahronot, Israel's largest-circulation daily.

"The love I had for this place on first sight, it motivated me to write this book," he said. "Homing pigeons came in later, first as a metaphor for home, love of home, longing for home. Then, I did a little research and

found literary potential in the homing pigeon, and made it part of the plot. 'Home' was yeast, the little molecule that made this book."

It's Shalev's 17th, an output that includes children's books and essay collections as well as novels ("A Pigeon and a Boy" is his sixth).

Although his work has been translated into more than 20 languages and he has received literary awards in France and Italy as well as in Israel, his original career goal was zoologist. Academia was not to his taste, however, and he drifted into Israeli television, where he spent 15 years, including a number of years hosting a talk show.

"But I got fed up with that, too," he said. "I thought I would like to try another thing in life, so I started to write books," adding, "I always knew I could write," which would come off as cheeky were he not able to back it up with his genes. His father was a poet, and his uncle and two of his cousins are successful writers as well - as are, now, both of his grown children. (Some of the zoology must have stuck, though, for he received official recognition from scientific societies for his descriptions of insects in his first novel, "The Blue Mountain," and homing pigeons in his latest.)

His own kids, not surprisingly, were the inspiration for most of his children's books, with his wife spotting the potential in family events. When his daughter was 4, for example, his wife took note of her reactions to her father's behavior in public; the result was "My Father Always Embarrasses Me." Their daughter also longed for dimples, which emerged in print as "Zohar's Dimples."

Apparently loath to let go of a good hook, Shalev also used dimples, to heartbreaking and - typical for this author - comic effect, in "A Pigeon and a Boy." After their mother's death, the narrator and his brother get into a bitter argument over whether she had had a dimple in her left cheek or her right cheek when she smiled. Incensed, the narrator rifles through family photographs and comes to realize that their mother never smiled for the camera.

"Many times my writing has been compared to South American literature," Shalev said, particularly for what is seen as its qualities of magical realism. "But I think this happens because they don't know my real sources: Thomas Hardy, Natalia Ginsberg, Sholem Aleichem, Nabokov, Bulgakov, the Bible - the Old Testament! - and Greek mythology.

"But a lot of American writers, too. Faulkner, Mark Twain, Melville. My father kept hitting me with books he thought I should read, and when I was 16 he gave me 'Walden.' The first time I came to the U.S., I made a pilgrimage."

Although his English sounds pretty good on the phone, Shalev has read all these books in translation. He's aware that, as they say, things can be lost, and he takes care to see that as much as possible of his stylistic essence survives the trip from Hebrew to whatever. Shalev doesn't speak the other languages into which his work is translated, "but with English," he said, "I can go over text (with translator Evan Fallenberg), give my remarks - sometimes foolish remarks, but I do help him with some scientific terms."

Translation from Hebrew, he said, can be especially tricky. "In Hebrew, biblical layers of language are still very strong, very vivid. And in Israel, slang, modern street talk, is highly developed. So you can have in one sentence (a phrase) based on something from the Bible, and mix it with slang. This can't be done in other languages, and the translator has to find a solution. ...

"The thing that really concerns me is the rhythm and music of text. Sometimes, I read aloud a page or two of the English translation, just to feel it. I also ask translators (into other languages) to read the work aloud to me.

"As a reader, you see, I'm experienced. I've read many more books than I've written."

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