A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ABED SALAMA
— Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy —
NATHAN THRALL

STUDY GUIDE
Welcome to the Study Guide for

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ABED SALAMA

Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal aspects of the story, as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading A Day in the Life of Abed Salama, you may want to wait before reviewing the guide.

GENERAL:

1. In A Day in the Life of Abed Salama, there are a range of relationships with the enemy or the oppressor. Abed's father refuses to take up the traditional position of Anata's mukhtar, village leader, as he feels that the role has been drained of significance and independence. Ibrahim Salama, on the other hand, works closely with representatives of Israel's occupation, even forming warm friendships. Can you identify other Palestinian stances toward Israeli figures? Do you see any contributory factors to the different positions that individuals adopt? Where do you imagine you might fall on this spectrum of relationships?

2. As the book shows, official Israeli discourse tends to cast measures restricting Palestinian freedom of movement as reactive and defensive: checkpoints and different-colored IDs emerged as a reaction to the First Intifada, for example; the Separation Wall was built as a response to the violence of the Second Intifada. Do you feel there is some validity to these arguments?

3. It is said that a firm grounding in history can be an engine of change. A Day in the Life of Abed Salama encompasses a great deal of the history of Palestine and Israel as it was experienced by the book's characters. Did you learn something new about this history, and has it altered your position on any part of the conflict?

4. The Salama family lives in a society that often seems stifling. There are many sources contributing to this sense of claustrophobia—cultural and political, internal and external. Can you list some of the instances that strike you as stifling and trace the cause? Do you think the different kinds of suffocation, internal and external, have a connection to each other?
5. How do you think the author’s identity as a Jewish American might have influenced his approach to the subject? What strengths or limitations might this have posed?

6. With national institutions suppressed and great geographical fragmentation, religious identity and organization seem to offer Palestinians a means of social cohesion. Have you experienced some form of this in your own life or in that of your community?

PART ONE: THREE WEDDINGS

7. On p. 15, the author notes that Palestinian women began adopting the hijab more widely after the start of the First Intifada in 1987 as a symbol of national solidarity. Can you think of other examples in the book or in history when religious observance or affiliation has become an emblem of liberation or struggle?

8. “Rife with collaborators, Palestine had to be one of the most thoroughly penetrated societies in the history of foreign occupation and colonial rule,” the author notes. Can you find examples of how this affects Palestinian society? Have you ever lived in a situation of widespread distrust? How did that affect you and those around you?

9. Abed’s withdrawal of his marriage proposal to Ghazl is one of the first of many instances in the book in which women appear to have little say in major decisions that affect their lives. Can you identify other instances? Does this affect your view of the events in the book? Do you think that Israeli rule over Palestinians plays any role in the restrictions placed on women’s participation in decision-making?

10. After Abed remarries, he begins to pray and regularly attend the mosque. He chooses not to do so at the local mosque in Anata, where the Palestinian Authority censors the sermons. Can you think of other instances in which Palestinians demonstrate an aversion to the Palestinian Authority?

PART TWO: TWO FIRES

11. Huda’s son Hadi is arrested for throwing stones at soldiers and sentenced to sixteen months’ imprisonment. Unlike Hadi, a number of other boys arrested for the same act held blue IDs, which allowed them freedom of movement throughout Jerusalem and Israel. Their sentences were roughly twice as long as Hadi’s. Why do you think their sentences were so much harsher?
12. “Israeli troops were stationed outside Hadi’s school practically every day. To Huda, their presence seemed designed to provoke the students so as to arrest as many of them as possible.” Is this dynamic of provocation familiar to you from other situations?

13. Abed’s father distrusts the local Bedouin. Abed himself disapproves of 48 Palestinians for their accommodations with Hebrew and Israel. Huda feels alienated from her unsophisticated neighbors in Sawahre, and locals resent the Palestinians who returned from exile with Yasser Arafat. These attitudes complicate the commonly held American view of Palestinian society as uniform. Does the book reveal other nuances of Palestinian society that surprised you or that upend entrenched opinions?

14. In 2008, a UN report found that some 700,000 Palestinians had been arrested since the occupation began in 1967, equal to roughly 40 percent of all the men and boys in the Palestinian territories. Beyond the harm done by this mass imprisonment to individuals, to the economy, and to Palestinian society as a whole, the author highlights the particular injury to parents who find that they are powerless to protect their children. Do you agree that this causes an especially intense form of suffering? What might be some other ramifications of this kind of powerlessness?

PART THREE: MASS CASUALTY INCIDENT

15. Eldad Benshtein is a Jewish settler. Dubi Weissenstern and Bentzi Oiring are ultra-Orthodox haredim. Did you have a particular set of expectations as you encountered these characters? In what ways did they confound those expectations?

16. “For Nader, in a crisis, all the different legal statuses of Palestinians were irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was whether the patients were Palestinians or Jews. He could never, under any circumstances, bring someone Jewish to a Palestinian hospital.” Why do you think this is the case?

17. For Bentzi Oiring and Dubi Weissenstern, adherence to Jewish religious law regarding honoring the dead is a core motive for their professional work. Can you identify other instances in the book where religious devotion affects people’s life choices?
PART FOUR: THE WALL

18. Dany Tirza, architect of Israel’s Separation Wall, claims that what matters is “not how much land you get but what you do with it.” In what ways do his plans contradict this claim? Is this principle applied equally to all parties?

19. Israel’s conundrum as it drew the outlines of the Separation Wall is described thus: “How to include as few Palestinians as possible on the Israeli side without conceding an inch of territory.” Based on your reading of the background covered in the book, how does this approach apply to the Israel’s history in Palestine and with Palestinians?

20. “You’ve turned our autonomy into a prison for us,” claimed the lead Palestinian negotiator, Abu Ala. Do you agree with this statement? By what means was this prison created and maintained?

21. Beber Vanunu, founder and leader of Adam, a Jewish settlement near Anata, was proud of his good relations with his Palestinian neighbors. He was grieved by the bus accident and wanted to make clear that his community took no pleasure in their neighbors’ suffering and also bore no responsibility for the crash. A Day in the Life of Abed Salama is suffused with the question of responsibility. What part, if any, did the local settlements play in the bus accident? Is it possible to trace a line connecting the settlements around Anata to Milad Salama’s fate?

22. Ibrahim Salama, Saar Tzur, and Adi Shpeter believe their cooperation helps secure the lives of their communities. Abed Salama disapproves of these relationships, believing that they serve to obscure the vast power differential between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. Which of these positions seems right to you? Or is it possible for both views to be right?

PART FIVE: THREE FUNERALS

23. The families searching for their children after the bus accident are at all times surrounded by relatives, neighbors, and community seeking to offer support and comfort. In what ways is their presence a mixed blessing?

24. In the book, both the Jewish and Muslim communities adhere to religious rituals that govern death, burial, and mourning. Are these rituals always a comfort?
25. After the death of the children, women are excluded from some of the public rituals of mourning. What effect do you think this might have on the process of grieving?

EPILOGUE

26. The reporter, Arik Weiss, is shocked that Israeli students celebrated the death of Palestinian schoolchildren. Abed does not appear to be shocked. What do you think might account for their different reactions?

27. The settler Duli Yariv tells Abed that the school bus “could have been one of ours ... if God had missed by two seconds, it could have been.” He adds, “I don't believe anyone from the settlements here in the area could think how great that it's Arab kids. Because tomorrow it'll be our kids.” Having read the book, are you persuaded by his claims?

28. It could be said that what happened to this school bus is an aberration, a terrible but freakish catastrophe. It could also be said that the bus crash and the death that it caused were the inevitable product of a system put in place and maintained by intention and policy. Which of these two statements do you support and why?

29. The author strove to present the humanity of all the characters in the book, Israeli and Palestinian, and to approach them with compassion. Do you think he succeeded?

30. “We do not see our hand in what happens, so we call certain events melancholy accidents when they are the inevitabilities of our projects, and we call other events necessities merely because we will not change our minds.” —Stanley Cavell
The book opens with this quote. Now that you’ve read it, does the quote resonate with you? How does it apply to the book?

31. Which parts of A Day in the Life of Abed Salama resonated most strongly with you? Were there parts you disagreed with, and if so, why?

32. What purpose do you think the author had in mind in writing the book?