



# BLISS:

A NOVEL

by O. Z. Livaneli

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*A  
Reading  
Group Gold  
Selection*



## A Conversation with O. Z. Livaneli

*Could you tell us a little bit about your writing background, and how you came to be in publishing?*

I began my career as a publisher; I had a publishing house in Ankara. So I was somehow always related with the world of books. When my publishing house was shut down by the military junta and I was imprisoned, I chose to continue my relationship with books through the act of writing. I've been writing ever since.

*“At night,  
I slept in the  
boat with  
the novel under  
my pillow.”*

The desire to write was always there in me from my youth onwards and I began by writing stories. One of my stories, “A Child in Purgatory,” was filmed by the Swedish and German televisions. This year *Bliḍs* will be the basis for a movie. I think I have a special liking for novels that can be adapted for cinema. For me it indicates that the book has a decent story and characters.

*What was the book that most influenced your life or your career as a writer—and why?*

Ernest Hemingway's entire work and especially *The Old Man and the Sea* influenced my life and career to a great extent. I first read Hemingway when I was a kid and he immediately became my idol. I not only admired him as an author but also because of the feeling of adventure that he aroused in so many young people all around the world. After having read *The Old Man and the Sea* many times—I had even memorized some parts of it—I had decided to be a writer myself and lead a life of adventure just like he had done.

At my parents' home in Ankara, the walls of my room were full not with photographs of famous



people from the world of music and cinema but with portraits of Hemingway. I had read all his biographies. On Saturdays, I used to go to the American library in Ankara to check whether there was anything new about him in the journals. In time his influence over me grew to such an extent that when I was sixteen years old, during my summer holiday, I went to a fishing village, without letting my parents know, to live like him. I started to work in a fishing boat. At night, I slept in the boat with the novel under my pillow. At the end of two months, I had to return to my parents' house, but at that point I knew for sure that I was going to be a writer.

*Do you have any special writing rituals? For example, what do you have on your desk when you're writing?*

No rituals really. I have on my desk my notes, my reference books, and a cup of coffee...

*If you had a book club, what would it be reading, and why?*

If I had a book club I would start by reading *Don Quixote*, as everyone well knows today it represents the true beginning of the art of the novel.

*What tips or advice do you have for writers still looking to be discovered?*

I believe that one just has to write and write until one finds his true voice.

*Is there anything else you can tell readers about the reality of honor killings in Turkey?*

In Turkey, honor killings are most frequently seen in regions where tribal/feudal ties and relations

*“The problem of honor crimes cannot be solved by legal measures alone ... what is needed is a change in consciousness.”*

continue to exist. In certain parts of Eastern Anatolia, patriarchal norms and hierarchies can still be found in their harshest and most anachronistic forms and women are denied all of their rights.

In recent decades, as a result of migration, honor killings have started to become more common in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and other major cities in Turkey. In fact, the arrival of this ruthless tradition to the metropolis is how many people living in western Turkey have come to be aware of the seriousness of the problem. According to a report prepared by a commission appointed by the Turkish National Assembly, the majority of the officially registered honor killings between 2000-2005 have taken place in Western Turkey, whereas the majority of the suspects and victims come from Eastern Turkey.

For many years, Turkish laws have reinforced the unequal treatment of men and women. However, in the last decade, important steps have been taken to improve the situation. Changes and amendments have been made to the Constitution, the criminal code, the civil code, and the laws regarding the family. Obviously, the problem of honor crimes cannot be solved by legal measures alone. Much more importantly, what is needed is a change in consciousness, which can only be achieved through education and economic development.



**O. Z. LIVANELI** is one of Turkey's most prominent and popular authors as well as an accomplished composer whose works have been recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra. He was held in military prison during the coup of March 12, 1971, and lived in exile for eight years. He studied music in Stockholm, then lived in Paris and Athens, returning to Turkey in 1984.

Livaneli has been nationally and internationally active in promoting human rights, the culture of peace, and mutual understanding between people. Being one of the foremost defenders of Turkish-Greek friendship, in 1986 he founded the Greek-Turkish Friendship Committee together with the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis. In 1995, he was appointed as a Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO in recognition of his contributions to world peace. From 2002-2007 he served as an elected Member of Parliament.

His books are published in twenty-two languages, becoming bestsellers in his own country and abroad. His other works of fiction are *Leyla's House* (2006), *One Cat, One Man, One Death* (2001), *The Eunuch of Constantinople* (1996), and *A Child in Purgatory* (1978). He lives in Istanbul.

*In His  
Own Words*

Photo Credit: Adil Gultekin





*The following is an excerpt from a speech the author gave at Harvard University, May 2007*

### **“Peace Building and Early Childhood Education: A Critical Alliance”**

*“There [is] a connection... between [an] individual’s inner peace and peace in the external world.”*

In the span of a century, humanity has achieved enormous technological developments. It’s impossible not to acknowledge the progress and the level of civilization that’s been reached. However, we also can’t help being alarmed!

Violence and wars are threatening the future of humanity and the world. We see that violence is increasing in the private and public spheres. How should we deal with the dilemma of a supposedly increased level of civilization on the one hand and increasing violence on the other? These concerns are not new, of course. We have had them for quite some time now.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century... the situation seems to be getting worse. One of the main characteristics of the age we live in is violence. Be it religious, political, ethnic, or sexual; a culture promoting violence is tightening its grip on our lives.

Unfortunately, popular culture and the entertainment industries around the world act as accomplices in this process by continuously providing all sorts of images of violence. The Constitution of UNESCO begins with the following sentence: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”



And the best defense for peace is culture. Culture in itself is an action for peace. What do we understand when we say culture? Culture is not an instrument of leisure as the entertainment industry promotes it to be but it's a foundation upon which all kinds of human relations are built. In this general sense, culture does not refer only to artistic creation but to an accumulation of human values and experiences. If we want to guarantee peace on earth, it's for the improvement and enrichment of this foundation that we should be striving towards. Peace, children's rights, women's rights, and democracy are all closely related.

As I was writing my novel *Bliᄁᄁ*, I had all these concerns on my mind. The three characters of my novel are the victims of different kinds of violence in Turkey.

The professor, İrfan, assaulted by vulgarity, insincerity, and ignorance, escapes his life in Istanbul. Meryem, a fifteen-year-old young girl from Eastern Anatolia, is the victim of rape and she's trying to escape the fate facing many other young women who have been so-called "stained." Cemal [is] a commando who's back from fighting with the Kurdish guerillas. Toward the end of the novel, fate brings them together and this becomes an opportunity for each to purge themselves of the long-lasting effects of their experiences of violence. Finally they all opt for peace.

There's a much bigger connection than we think between the individual's inner peace and peace in the external world. A culture of peace includes both.

## *Historical Perspective*

It might sound utopian, but what we should aim for is an all-inclusive civilization of peace. And peace education has to start with children.

In a period of growing international tensions, terrorism, and wars, in order to combat the prevailing culture of violence, we need to educate our children on peace and nonviolence.

It means that we have to teach our children about democracy and human rights; tolerance; social and economic justice; gender equality; respect for different religions and cultures; environmental sustainability; disarmament; traditional peace practices; reconciliation; and nonviolent conflict resolution.





## Recommended Reading

Reading  
Group  
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William Faulkner

### *Light in August*

I read William Faulkner's *Light in August* when I was young, and I felt that it would change my life. The novel elevates a local crime to the level of a universal human tragedy, and hence creates a sense of identification with the events that may have taken place anytime, anywhere in the world. Although its style has an archaic air reminding one of the Old Testament, it at the same time has a very modern quality. Faulkner creates a shadowy atmosphere even in those parts of the novel where the events take place in daylight and in this way represents the dark and shadowy nature of our consciousness. I must say I tried hard to get rid of Faulkner's influence.

I always think that certain characteristics of the nineteenth-century Russian novelistic tradition have somehow been transferred to twentieth-century American literature. I find similarities between Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev and Faulkner, Caldwell, and Steinbeck.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

### *Crime and Punishment*

One of the things I most like about this novel is the way in which Dostoevsky describes St. Petersburg; the city reflects the inner worlds of the heroes. Also, Raskolnikov's pangs of conscience due to his crime and his confession move me deeply. Today those who commit a crime go on with their lives comfortably as long as their crime remains unknown. It may be said that Dostoevsky is idealizing the human heart. Only this can explain the fact that at the end of all the novels of this great author, whose main concern is analyzing the depths of human psychology, there appears the light of hope.

*Keep On  
Reading*

*“It’s not a coincidence that… Bliss has a chapter called ‘At Night Don Quixote, Sancho Panza in the Morning.’ ”*

Ernest Hemingway

*The Old Man and the Sea*

See Conversation with the Author.

*The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*

I think that this unique masterpiece of Eastern literature with its multitude of stories that intertwine and form a labyrinth have influenced many writers in the world, such as Jorge Luis Borges and others. Told by a woman, these stories on the unfaithfulness of women stand somewhere between life and death. This book is an infinite source of inspiration for any writer.

Rumi

*Masnavi*

Another masterpiece of Eastern literature, this is written by Jalal ad-Din Rumi, the great Sufi poet and thinker of the thirteenth century. Composed of intertwining tales and stories, *Masnavi* surprises the reader with its depth and it’s full of modern thoughts. As early as the thirteenth century, Rumi opposes all kinds of religious, ethnic, and sexual discrimination. In my own books, I frequently quote stories from the *Masnavi*.

Leo Tolstoy

*Anna Karenina*

I have always admired the way Tolstoy identifies with women in love and studies carefully the depth of their feelings. It’s interesting that in nineteenth-century Orthodox Russia, this old count with a white beard is telling the story of a woman who would in the end commit suicide because of a desperate love. How could this be explained by anything other than the ability of great writers to identify with different people and situations around the world?



Gustave Flaubert  
*Madame Bovary*

I like this book for similar reasons as *Anna Karenina*. I have always admired Flaubert's strict loyalty to details and his ability to bring to life visually each scene, place, and person that he describes.

Gabriel García Márquez  
*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

This short but intense novel tells about the people of a village who are very well aware of a murder being committed in the name of tradition yet remain quiet. Although the suspects brag about the crime, people seem to ignore it. I like this book very much because it has so much to say on the conflict of tradition and modernity, an issue which I am dealing with all the time in my own country.

Yashar Kemal  
*Memed My Hawk*

The most cherished classic of Turkish literature has instilled in all of us, during our youth, a feeling for the necessity of struggle against injustice.

Miguel de Cervantes  
*Don Quixote*

In this masterpiece which I've read over and over again, I find a very sad side to the desperate struggle of Don Quixote, who tries to defend values that are being worn out by a changing world. It's not a coincidence that my novel *Bliss* has a chapter called "At Night Don Quixote, Sancho Panza in the Morning." I believe that every one of us is like this a little bit. At night, we're full of idealism and sublime feelings, but in the morning, reality makes us Sancho Panza.



## Reading Group Questions

1. Discuss the reasons why the author may have chosen the title *Bliḏḏ* for his novel. What is its significance?
2. Did you have any ideas or opinions on Turkey before reading the novel? Take a moment to talk about your collective knowledge of Turkish history and culture before and after reading *Bliḏḏ*.
3. Who is your favorite character in *Bliḏḏ* and why? Are there those you like who are, in fact, “unlikable?” Take a moment to talk about the cast of characters—and range of personality types—in the novel.
4. Discuss the two distinct settings of the novel—the small rural village and the larger-than-life city. What does each locale mean to each of the main characters?
5. In what ways do Meryem and Cemal’s encounters with different people on the train shed light on the problems of identity that characterize contemporary Turkey? Also, in what ways is sailing the Aegean Sea symbolic for them both?
6. What are the themes of tradition and modernity, religion vs. secularity, and male domination and female empowerment that resonate throughout *Bliḏḏ*?
7. Each of the main protagonists in *Bliḏḏ* experiences tragedy on a profound, indeed existential level. How would you describe each character’s personal transformation? What unites them in their struggle to overcome their demons?



8. How do you interpret İrfan's final resolution at the end of the novel about what kind of a life he's to lead? And what about Meryems?
9. How would you describe İrfan's relation to Hidayet, a character who never appears in the novel but who's always in İrfan's thoughts?
10. One of the chapters in the novel is titled "At Night Don Quixote, Sancho Panza in the Morning." Were there times in your life when you felt the same? Please discuss.
11. At one point in the novel İrfan likens himself and all Turkish intellectuals to "trapeze flyers." Why?
12. Why is İrfan's relationship with his parents marked with deep feelings of guilt?
13. What are the differences between İrfan's and Cemal's attitudes about national identity and belonging?
14. Discuss the ambassador's comment that there are three phases in the life of an individual: camel phase, lion phase, and childhood phase.
15. There are numerous references to mythical figures and stories in the novel. Why do you think the idea of myth has such an important place in *Blişş*?