

# Akhenaten

**Ahdaf Soueif wrote the following piece for the book:  
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Philip Oltermann**

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Can a poet and philosopher also be an effective ruler? Is it impossible to be both a good person and a good politician? What is ‘good’ anyway and who is it good for? These questions crowd your head when you contemplate Akhenaten (1352-1336 BC), a king who was rooted in tradition but also believed in innovation, in ‘progress’. For him, one was born of the other. The act he is most famous (or infamous) for—the promotion of the worship of the Aten—was the imaginative sequel of a dream dreamed by his grandfather, Tuthmosis IV. His placing of his wife, Nefertiti, as co-monarch side by side with him on the throne was consistent with Egyptian Law which saw men and women as equal. His (in)formal royal portraiture of himself with his infant daughters playing on his knee expressed the culture’s well-publicized celebration of children. His reign let loose an eruption of brilliant and original art. Yet he is deemed to have failed.

He was a man of questing and intelligent spirituality, a man who both loved and liked women and was decent on gender issues, a brilliant poet and an affectionate father and an original thinker. A man whose influence caused those around him to blossom. And yet for the state of Egypt, he was a disaster; by the time he died the treasury was empty, there were rebellions—inursions even—on the borders, and there was no clear succession. It took Akhenaten’s opposite to save the day—or the millennium: Horemheb, Commander General of the army, eventually staged a coup, took the throne and shrewdly passed the succession to the family who became the Ramessides, thus not only preventing Egypt’s collapse but setting the country on the path to the thousand years of the New Kingdom.

I visit Akhenaten in the Cairo Museum whenever I’m in Egypt. There’s a model there of what a house in Tel el-Amarna, his capital, would have looked like. And there are the remnants of a mosaic floor. His time must have been a time of graciousness and beauty. We look at it now and we know that it was doomed, short-lived, aborted. Does that devalue it? Or does it make it more precious, bringing to mind much that is beautiful, “that opens up too easily and dies”?

Ian Hamilton, my husband, and I were walking with our two sons through Khan el-Khalili Bazaar in Cairo one summer evening seven months before we

knew he had cancer and sixteen months before he died. The boys fixed on this mask of Akhenaten. I made them walk on—what a silly, touristy thing to do, to buy a fake pharaonic piece from the bazaar. But their father said ‘why not?’ So we turned back, haggled a bit and bought it. We carried it all the way back to London where life, and death, overtook us and it sat—wrapped in a blanket—in a corner of the spare room for almost four years. When I got my act together to hang it, neither of the boys wanted it. It was childish, a piece of touristy tat; they would have none of Akhenaten’s mask.

Was it the memory of that August evening? Fealty to a dead Egyptian king? Or a kind of bloody-minded housewifely thrift that made me hang it in my study? He watches over me as I write, or fail to write. Akhenaten, my ancestor. He sets trains of thought in motion. I don’t know if they’re distractions or inspirations. He makes me think that perhaps questions sometimes matter more than answers. And he reminds me that we—those of us who have died and those who have not yet—are part of one process; a process of feeling, questioning and creating. We have our parts to play, and the part played by those who have died is not over while we, who connect to them, live.