



Monsieur

Lawrence Durrell

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Shimmering with sensuous ecstasy, dark with terror and mystery, this is the extraordinary novel of a "happy trinity of lovers." The diplomat Piers, his sister Sylvie, and the English doctor Bruce are at the heart of Durrell's new creation, as is the medieval walled city of Avignon. And haunting them all is Monsieur, Prince of Darkness, whose ancient satanic rites still flourish in the modern world.

Monsieur Details

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Author : Lawrence Durrell

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From Reader Review Monsieur for online ebook

Marián Tabakovi? says

Zasvätenecký román s viacerými rovinami interpretácie - “pon?kud hore?natý” úvod do gnosticizmu, milostný román, detektívka aj “Inception”. Kniha z konca starých ?ias, ktorá patrí aj do inej fázy môjho života a ktorá túto etapu zrejme definitívne uzatvára. Som otec - a podobu vesmíru, hoci falošného a uzurpovaného demiurgom, som už poslušne akceptoval.

Armin Hennig says

Eigentlich dreieinhalb, der hohe Schrottfaktor des zweiten Bandes betont allerdings bereits im ersten Teil erkennbare Schwächen. Ausführliche Rezi folgt zum Abschluss des Zyklus.

Lynne King says

Review – “Monsieur or The Prince of Darkness” – Lawrence Durrell

Piers “had always ironically referred to himself as ‘the last of the Templars’ and the word expressed not only the family tie, for he was indeed a de Nogaret, but also the Templar pride in the overseas commitment of the order. For such a romantic going to the Middle Orient was a thrilling experience - of a quasi-historical kind. He felt he was returning to the roots of the great betrayal, the roots of all anti-Christian dissent. Piers was a worshipper of the Templar God. He believed in the usurper of the throne, the Prince of Darkness.

Many years ago when I was twenty-two years old and living in Saudi Arabia, an ordinary girl who came from Harrow, a suburb just north-west of London, I met a man, who not only was a very good friend amongst other things but the most superb raconteur. He could turn the most inane or ordinary story, article or piece of gossip into a wondrous account. He introduced me to Lawrence Durrell (LD) and the “Alexandria Quartet”; the first novel being “Justine”. He had read parts to me (a wonderful experience) and I can still hear his voice.

To this day my love affair continues with LD’s works as no fictional author has ever been able to set my heart pounding and my imagination racing to fever pitch in such a spectacular way when I read his incredible prose. Christine Brooke-Rose, briefly entered the equation, and came a close second. I thought that she would overtake LD but finally I considered that I had so many of his books which I love, how could I possibly betray him?

When I initially read this book (the first volume in the Avignon Quintet) about twenty or so years ago I literally sailed through it and if anyone had asked me what I thought of it, what would my reaction have been? Probably, well it’s super and that’s all there is to it. I read the book but at the time didn’t savour all the nuances, turns of phrase, poetry, metaphors, sublime literature, etc. This is metafiction at its best.

The book itself is divided into five sections. The first “Outremer” covers Avignon and the dilapidated chateau in Verfeuille, France. This is a splendid introduction to the main three characters of the book, Piers and his sister Sylvie and Dr Bruce Drexel, her husband. In all they make up a “ménage-à-trois” that I will

refer to as the “trio”. They don’t appear to realise that by being lovers, Piers and Bruce are in reality responsible for Sylvie’s descent into madness and finally ending up in the asylum. Dr Jourdin ensures that she is still taken care of and there are periods of lucidity but it wears on all of them.

There is nothing stranger than to love somebody who is mad, or who is intermittently so. The weight, the strain, the anxiety is a heavy load to bear - if only because among these confusional states and hysterias loom dreadful probabilities like suicide or murder. It shakes one’s hold also on one’s own grasp of reality; one realises how precariously we manage to hold on to our reason. With the spectacle of madness before one’s eyes one feels the odds shorten. The eclipse of reason seems such an easy affair, the grasp on sanity so provisional and insecure.

The reason for Bruce’s arrival is the unexpected suicide of Piers in quite bizarre circumstances and what a merry tale this turns out to be.

Sabine, Toby and Robin Sutcliffe are the other main players.

The second section is “Macabru” which I found to be the most fascinating and yet the most enigmatic part of the book. The trio travelled to this oasis which was found to the east of Alexandria. There they are introduced to Akkard and soon find out, Piers in more depth, about the secrets of the Egyptian Gnostics and what it means to belong to their group, a “suicide club”. The group’s foundation is based on “the sins of the Templars in 1307 and the final end of the order with dire circumstances”, which comes under the auspices of Akkad.

LD often referred to his novels as “sliding panels” and this novel follows in the same vein.

I suppose...that if you wished somehow to incorporate all I am telling you into your own Justine manuscript now, that you would find yourself with a curious sort of book - the story would be told, so to speak, in layers...a series of novels with 'sliding panels'.

Balthazar, p. 338 (Alexandria Quartet)

In the third section, we meet Sutcliffe in Venice and he’s indeed an odd character. I wasn’t too sure if he was part of a novel within a novel or what. But that’s the beauty of metafiction I guess. I rather liked him though even if he was rather a sad person. He had a good friend in Toby.

As for the fourth section with Toby, well you have to read it to appreciate it!

Well upon arrival at the final section, I must admit that I was somewhat bemused until I reached the last paragraph. Of course, how could I have missed the interpretation there. Briefly, Blanford (not too sure if this is a fictional character in this book, or one within another) is dining with the Duchess of Tu who is the best critic of his work, at *Quartila’s silk-lined cellar*. LD had made a comment at some stage that one doesn’t necessarily have to write in a cork-lined room...And this is where the “sliding panels” are so apparent. How skilfully executed.

The backdrop of LD’s personal life permeates throughout this work and gives it a dreamy ambience. He also portrayed the aspects of madness both sensitively and beautifully. He knew exactly what madness or breakdowns were all about as his second wife Eve (his muse) was prone to breakdowns latterly in the marriage, and she finally managed to extricate herself from her demons but at the expense of their marriage. His daughter Sappho (Eve her mother) committed suicide five years before his own death; his third and much beloved wife Claude died from cancer and yet, despite all of this, greatness has been admirably achieved through immense suffering.

A remarkable work.

Megan Kelosiwang says

Hard to define this book. A series of stories within stories, thoughts, musing and poems tied together with beautiful arcane, poetic language. Simmering sexual tension and heartache in every page. Loss, longing and lust without any actual activity. Bit waffley in places and hard to focus but still with a thread pulling you to its end. Feels like a book that triggered my intellect and went straight to my core.

Esdaille says

There is some admirable writing in this but I felt that it missed an opportunity to be something much better. There could have been a very interesting novel on the Templars but somehow the writer missed the opportunity and repeated the faults which mark all his novels but in this one seem to have come to dominate the story. There is some memorable writing here but the trick of a writer writing about a writer has become stale. Lawrence cannot leave off these accounts of writers whose features are vaguely drawn, with their notes about other writers. The last part of the novel seemed to me to degenerate into a series of more or less mainly less interesting notes. I would have given only two stars had there not been occasional insights pithy and beautifully expressed: Durrell the poet is everywhere in evidence here.

Lewis Manalo says

Whoa, dude. This one's out there. Incestuous love triads, Gnostic suicide cults, metafiction within metafiction....In other words, it's freakin' awesome.

Sammy says

We were latecomers to the place, modern scavengers of history upon a scene which had, it seems, long since exhausted all its historical potentialities.

So, there's this author, right? And he's writing a work about characters based on acquaintances of his, but one of the characters is writing his own work, and hates the author, and some of the other characters are writing their own diaries, in which they sometimes doubt the authenticity of each other's works.

Or maybe all of that is a lie.

The question of who, and what, is real seems likely to occupy the future novels in Durrell's "quincunx", but in *Monsieur*, the first of the five, there are bigger issues at stake. A man is dead, his sister has gone mad, and they're all wondering about their gradual awakening to the possibilities of Gnostic mysticism and whether there's a Prince of Darkness rising to usurp the dying/dead God.

It's all a bit heavy.

I adore Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* utterly and completely, and I think, in *Monsieur* (written more than a

decade later when the author was at the end of middle-age), he intensifies what made the earlier work great, but also his flaws are writ large.

The good: Durrell's incisive character work is on display, with flurries of imaginative writing, particularly in the scenes at the Macabru oasis. And his descriptive powers are on point! From an astonishing vision of a crumbling chateau at Christmas to the Nile in all its glory. The poet side of Durrell can expound for pages at a time, capturing the most minute moments and transforming them into sublime highlights.

On the other side of the coin, Durrell is undoubtedly a problematic writer for those of us young people in the 21st century. His white men are all hopeless drunks with university degrees and penchants for uttering half a paragraph in French or Latin (with no helpful footnote to translate); his Jews are always troubled by their feelings of dissatisfaction with their race; his women eternally prone to madness and simplicity; and his Arabs fascinating and enigmatic but also always slightly pitiable. And the less said about the novel's only black character, a jazz-playing, adulteress named Trash who has a seeming inability to grasp the beauty of Western art, the better. I don't think this inherently ruins the book. Durrell, after all, was hardly a stern, racist Britisher. He spent the vast majority of his life outside of England and essentially renounced it altogether. He was fascinated by the people and cultures of the Middle East and North Africa, and by the Jews, as evidenced by his choices of locations, wives, mistresses, etc, throughout his life. Like a lot of educated Sahibs of his era, Durrell wasn't a racist, but he saw the world in a manner perhaps best described as culturalist. People are products of their culture, and people do fall into a lot of broad generalisations - so goes the theory - and the fact that his most penetrating characters are often educated English men is because those are the people he could best understand. The novel's many distressing statements certainly will prevent Durrell from becoming popular any time soon, and I don't think we should ignore his problematic status as a writer. But we also must remember that at no point in this book is Lawrence Durrell the narrator. The book is set thirty years before it was written, and each chapter has a narrative voice. It's complex. Not so complex as to deny there are significant problems, but also not as easy as some readers would like to make it out to be*.

*(All this is written from the standpoint of an educated white male, albeit a gay one, so I'm not claiming in any way to speak objectively about the situation!)

The first half of the book is certainly stronger. The second half collapses a little under the weight of its collective conceits. The 'scraps' and 'vignettes' idea worked better in *Alexandria*, where Pursewarden (who receives a delightful and meta-textual name check here!) had a true pizzazz about him, the most bitter Thersites the writing world has ever known. Here, a lot of the second half is borderline incomprehensible, although part of it is to do with the fact that Durrell is old enough to be my great-grandfather, and was born in a different country in a different time. The meanings his clique could extract from an ambiguous line would be far different than the equivalent for mine. Being fairly well read, I was faring better than most, delighting in the subtle references to Proust and Shakespeare, for example, but I think *Avignon* is even less likely to gain a new generation of fervent acolytes than *Alexandria* is. Nevertheless, the beauty and density here is incredible, even if I have little time for the more hokier superstitious elements that have little merit in the 21st century. I shall carry out to the rest of the Quintet, intrigued to see whether this Angkor Wat of a work becomes more viable with each addition to the structure, or more labyrinthine!

I stored up simply a constellation of moments, a firework display of small but brilliant incidents which were like a set of coloured engravings of this great river with its moods and silences, its strange caprices and impulses.

Cooper Cooper says

Set in Avignon, France and Alexandria, Egypt, this novel follows some of the themes set forth in the

Alexandria Quartet—in particular, modern love and gnosticism. A French brother and sister, descendants of a prominent Knight Templar and possessors of an old chateau in Provençal, hook up with a young Englishman to form a menage à trois. For awhile they dwell in a sort of paradise, but the young Frenchman manages his estate incompetently and eventually has to find work as a diplomat; expelled from paradise, the three are posted for awhile to Egypt where they meet Akkad, leader of a gnostic sect that believes the Devil rules the world and that the only recourse for the enlightened is to quit the world on their own terms—in other words, commit suicide. But it is unseemly, apparently, to do oneself in—so Akkad has set up a lottery in which members of the sect are selected to dispatch other members; the selected member is informed that his/her time is near, but is not told how or exactly when it will happen. The plot revolves around this scheme. Monsieur is reminiscent of the Alexandria Quartet, revealing once again Durrell's genius for imagery and his passion for philosophical/spiritual speculation; however, it doesn't come off quite as well as the Quartet, partly because he gets carried away with description (of the chateau at Avignon, for example), sometimes going on for page after page without a break. Also, there are many set pieces (basically speeches, by Akkad for example) but very little dialogue in the book. In a letter to Henry Miller, Durrell once criticized himself as "too lush" in style, and in this novel, he is. I recommend reading the Quartet before taking on Monsieur, unless you have a particular interest in gnosticism.

Teresa Proença says

"As pessoas que já não podem apaixonar-se só podem definhar, entram em declínio, e escolhem inconscientemente uma doença que fará o trabalho de uma pistola."
(Página 174)

"Dizem que quando se ama alguém, ausência e presença se assemelham; e que realmente não nos podemos libertar um do outro até que a mola principal, a memória, se parta. Mentiras! Sofismas! Invenções!"
(Página 199)

"... tinha por fim descoberto que o amor não tinha importância em si, e que a projecção dos nossos próprios sentimentos sobre a imagem de um ser amado é a longo prazo um acto de automutilação."
(Página 86)

"Que coisa misteriosa!
Deram-me corda um dia como a um relógio
Puseram-me num caminho poeirento
Que eu percorro tiquetaqueando há tantos anos
E onde encontro às vezes outros relógios
Com a corda toda como eu
Andando da mesma maneira que eu
Pensando da existência o mesmo que eu
Tiquetaque, cabeceando sem graça ao passar.
Eles não me parecem tão reais como eu sou;
Não acreditamos que tudo isso acabará um dia
Algures numa montanha de ferro-velho
Automóveis num desvio ferrugento longe da cidade
Oxidados pelo tempo como um coador
Parte da vegetação de ferro do amanhã,"
(Página 134)

(Thomas Lawrence, *Satan Summoning His Legions*, 1797)

Liviu says

Very interesting novel that should appeal a lot to sf lovers for its intricacies; I do not want to reveal too much but the tapestry of personages we meet and their relationships, motives and actions are not what they seem.

While the whole gnosticism theme left me a bit cold - I strongly believe in the exploration of the mysteries of life and the universe through natural philosophy not navel gazing - as a literary device and looked at sf-nally if you want (say an alternate universe where gnosticism is "true" in a sense) they added an extra to the novel.

Started book 2 Livia and i plan to read the whole quintet which if it continues like this may become a big time favorite, though I sort of believe that it would appeal more to people interested in speculative fiction than to ones interested in purely literary fiction the way the Alexandria quartet does...

Jae says

The spirit of place and shifting forms of reality make this an extraordinary read.

Davide Ciancusi says

Está escrito con gusto pero lo veo inconexo.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"I dozed on my bed until sunrise and then set out resolutely to find a coffee, traversing the old city with affection and distress, hearing my own sharp footsteps on the pavements, disembodied as a ghost. Avignon! Its shabby lights and sneaking cats were the same as ever; overturned dustbins, the glitter of fish scales, olive oil, broken glass, a dead scorpion. All the time we had been away on our travels round the world it had stayed pegged here at the confluence of its two green rivers. The past embalmed it, the present could not alter it. So many years of going away and coming back, of remembering and forgetting it. It had always waited for us, floating among its tenebrous monuments, the corpulence of its ragged bells, the putrescence of its squares."

We first meet Bruce Drexel when he is traveling home to Avignon after learning of the "suicide" of his best friend, Piers, who was more like a brother to him. In fact, he was his brother-in-law as Bruce is married to Piers' sister Sylvie. The three of them were close, so close that idle speculation might allude to the fact that Bruce married Sylvie only to be closer to Piers (his lover). Their friend Rob Sutcliffe was so struck by their entwined relationship that he made them the subject of one of his novels. Sutcliffe, too, has perished, but his lingering shadow keeps slithering along the walls of the plot, long after he has gone, by way of his notebooks and letters. Given that I am an amateur reviewer, I couldn't help, but laugh at his description of reviewers.

"The reviews of his new book were all bad or grudging. A critic is a lug-worm in the liver of

literature.”

I can't imagine that Lawrence Durrell ever had to suffer bad reviews, of course not.

This lug-worm in the liver of literature will squirm on.

The fact that Bruce was returning from a post far from the gothic dilapidated halls of Verfeuille and his wife Sylvie left behind begs the question of the current status of their relationship, and with Piers now gone, is the connection too tenuous to continue? There was once passion. *”When I closed my eyes the darkness throbbed around us and once more I returned to relive, re-experience **the soft scroll of her tongue** which pressed back mine and probed steadily downwards across chest and stomach to settle at last, **throbbing like a hummingbird on my sex.** I held that beautiful head between my palms like something disembodied, and memorised the dark hair cropped down, and then spurred up into its chignon, the crumpled ears of a newborn lamb, the white teeth and lips upon which I would soon slowly and deliberately graft back my happy kisses.”*

The soft scroll of her tongue and then *throbbing like a hummingbird* --quick, someone dash a pail of ice cold water in my face. Let me just say, it has been too long since I've read Durrell, but what I do remember from reading him before is the weight of every one of his sentences. His words choices are lush and unusual. His supporting characters are all fascinating, and each adds new levels of interest to the plot and, in some cases, new insight into the trinity of main characters. *”Toby as a victim of the historical virus could not look at the town without seeing it historically, so to speak--layer after layer of history laid up in slices, embodied in its architecture.”* As another sufferer of the *historical virus*, Toby and I would be fast friends or fast enemies if our interpretations of history differed. Or maybe Piers and I would have been that special kind of friends for our mutual love of books. *”Though he had always been a bit of a dandy his choice of apparel was scanty, but choice, with a distinct leaning towards clothes made for him in London. A couple of medium-sized trunks were enough to house personal possessions of this kind; but the books were a different matter--Piers could not live without books, and plenty of them. This explained the sagging home-made bookshelves knocked together from pieces of crate.”*

Probably about 80% of the bookshelves in my house have been knocked together by myself, not of crate, but of cheap pine. I build shelves myself because I have to take advantage of every square inch of my library, so shelves are designed to go from ceiling to floor to not lose precious book inches.

The characters are so interesting, do we even need a plot? Indeed, we do. The issue really revolves around: *”Trash was taking an English lesson with a French whore who had the longest tongue in Christendom. What happiness he knew, in all his innocence, what pride in this girl with the slit of a mouth--so spoiled and gracile a slender body.”* Ok, I'm just messing with you. The plot does not revolve around the whore with the longest tongue. Though once you read those couple of sentences, one can't help pondering the benefits of having such a long tongue, given her chosen profession.

The trio of Bruce, Sylvie, and Piers met a guru who led them into the deserts of Egypt for a mind expanding experience with the help of mind altering drugs. Akkad then infused his discussions with pearls of infinite wisdom that made it seem that he may possess the answers to all the greatest questions. They were all impressed, but Piers felt like he had finally found what he had been looking for his whole life. Something larger than himself to believe in. Is it a religion, a philosophy, or a cult? The most successful spiritual organizations manage to blend some of all three.

The circumstances of Piers's suicide were, needless to say, suspicious. Unless he found and ordered a do-it-yourself guillotine kit or figured out how to rig a flashing blade with springs and levers, then someone had to help him, or should I say murder him? As Bruce pulled the pieces together, it became more and more clear that the cult in the desert may have very well had a hand in executing, as Piers liked to call himself, the last

of the Templars.

The subtitle of this novel is *The Prince of Darkness*, and certainly there are gothic overtones throughout the whole novel. The setting is around World War Two, but the book has a decided Victorian feel to it. There is more light in the world in the 1940s, but this novel definitely feels like a time when darkness was only lightened by flickering candles and dancing gas flames. The writing, as I've mentioned, is so evocative and so succulent that I had black ink on my teeth and (normal lengthed) tongue as I masticated each sentence, trying to steal Durrell's vast talent...and make it **mine**.

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Kirsty says

Monsieur, or the Prince of Darkness, the first novel in the Avignon Quartet, provided my first foray into Lawrence Durrell's work. In *The Times*, Susan Hill writes that the novel 'contains some of the finest descriptive set-pieces even Durrell has ever written.' From the beginning, indeed, his descriptions are wonderfully evocative, and sometimes even breathtaking, and effortlessly set the scene.

The plot did not seem overly original, and I found it even a little lacklustre at first, but it did become more vivid toward the end. Whilst I enjoyed Durrell's prose, I found that there was actually little to connect with here, when one discounts Avignon itself. The Avignon Quartet is therefore not a series which I will be continuing with, but I would like to try another of Durrell's books to see how it compares. I have decided to give *Monsieur* three stars overall - four for the quality of the writing, and two for the ensuing plot and characterisation.

Stenwjohnson says

Lawrence Durrell's 1974 novel "Monsieur" is the first in the "Avignon Quintet" (1974-1985), a sequence of interrelated volumes in the manner of the "Alexandria Quartet" (1957-1960), his most famous work.

The classic "Alexandria Quartet" is an experiment in multiple perspectives, with a range of characters offering differing insights into a series of common events. "Monsieur" takes the concept further, employing a story-within-a-story-within-a-story technique to question the idea of authorial authenticity. What begins as a seemingly conventional gothic tale of a narrator investigating his friend's suicide and possible connection to a Gnostic cult changes unexpectedly as the validity of the events, as well as their true author, are questioned.

Because the reader's expectations are continually subverted, "Monsieur" feels less like a unified whole than a succession of fragments. Details are brilliantly rendered in dense and occasionally fragmentary prose in the manner of Durrell's breakthrough novel "The Black Book" (1938). The world of the novel is often reductive, effete and aristocratic; in Durrell's hermetic universe, populated by patrician aesthetes and picturesque locales (Avignon, Venice), characters quote each other and, less directly, the world of Durrell's earlier fiction. The various ingredients of "The Alexandria Quartet" (religious esoterica, torturous and oblique meditations on love) arrive in a steady parade.

"Monsieur" is a virtuoso, if occasionally frustrating, work where Durrell's verbal genius is on full display. Yet its insights refer less to identifiable experience than the closed universe of his previous novels. For all its

high-minded chatter on matters of the heart, it largely appeals to the head.
