



Clea

Lawrence Durrell

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Clea

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The magnificent final volume of one of the most widely acclaimed fictional masterpieces of the postwar era.

Few books have been awaited as eagerly as *Clea*, the sensuous and electrically suspenseful novel that resolves the enigmas of the Alexandria Quartet. Some years and one world war was after his bizarre liaisons with Melissa and Justine, the Irish ?migr? Darley becomes enmeshed with the bisexual artist Clea. That affair not only changes the lovers, it transforms the dead as well, revealing new layers of duplicity and desire, perversity and pathos in Lawrence Durrell's masterly construction.

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Clea Details

Date : Published July 12th 1991 by Penguin Books (first published December 1960)

ISBN : 9780140153224

Author : Lawrence Durrell

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, Northern Africa, Egypt

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From Reader Review Clea for online ebook

James says

Without question the weakest volume of the *Quartet*. I thought it had a really pointless, tacked-on, *Godfather III* quality. Durrell admitted in a *Paris Review* interview that he had a tendency to procrastinate and then work really quickly when he found himself in severe financial straits. "Ideally, had I not been short of money, I would have written the four, and matched them properly, because there are still quite a lot of discrepancies which will have to be tidied up if the thing is gathered. But shortage of money made me compose them one after the other." He spent, he said, a total of seven weeks on *Clea*.

As a result, I think, his prose frequently suffers from a deadly combination of pretension and inattention. Someone who goes on about the role of the Artist as much as Durrell does shouldn't be so indifferent to the discipline of craft. When he's on, as he is, for example, in the carnival episode of the *Mulid* of *El Scob* that effectively concludes *Clea*, Durrell evokes the physical world with a pleasingly impressionistic synesthesia. His "A"-game prose is poetic in the best sense of that over-used word. When he's not on, the effect of the purple description can be nauseously over-rich, the narrative consists of endless passages of soporific and shallow self-examination punctuated by calculatedly shocking plot-goosing, and the characters come across as either iterations of the same narcissistic hothouse flower or absurdly cartoonish caricatures. In *Clea*, three characters do page-long 'impressions' of the dead Scobie, presumably because Durrell couldn't bear to part with the 'colorful' comic qualities of a character he'd thoughtlessly killed off.

Mostly dead wood, I'm afraid.

Teresa Proença says

*"Para alguns, entre nós, o implacável dia chega
Da grande escolha, da grande decisão
De dizer Sim ou Não.
Aquele que em si sentir a sede de afirmar
Pronuncie-se sem demora.
Os caminhos da vida abrir-se-ão para ele
Numa cornucópia de benesses.
Mas o outro, o que nega,
Ninguém o poderá acusar de falsidade,
E repetirá cada vez mais alto a sua descrença.
Está no seu direito — e, contudo, esta pequena diferença.
Um "Não" por um "Sim" — afunda uma vida inteira."*

Konstandinos Kavafis

Quem pretender ler algo sobre **O Quarteto de Alexandria**, de Lawrence Durrell, pesquise outras opiniões que, por aqui, foram publicadas e não perca tempo a ler o que se segue, pois se trata de pouco mais que devaneios meus...

Fica a sugestão. Quem quiser continuar, depois não se queixe...

Há livros que, por vários motivos, estão ligados à nossa vida pessoal o que torna a sua leitura especial. Comprei o Quarteto há anos; li as primeiras páginas e, não sei porquê, arrumei-o na estante. Algures no tempo e indirectamente, foi "um bater de asa de uma borboleta" que provocou um "tufão" na minha vida.

Continuou à espera. Há dias, chegou o momento porque ele esperou para me levar de regresso ao Egipto... Nada acontece por acaso...

"Mas podemos deixar de amar secretamente os lugares onde mais sofremos?"

E pudemos deixar de amar secretamente os lugares onde fomos felizes?
Fui feliz, há muitos anos, no Egipto com dois seres a quem muito quero.
Fui feliz, nestes últimos dias, em Alexandria com Justine, Baltasar, Mountolive e Clea; com Leila, Narouz, Darley e Liza; com Nessim, Amaril, Melissa e Scobie, Ah! E com Purswarden!
Nunca nunca deixarei de os amar!

Ingleses, egípcios, irlandeses,...; judeus, árabes, coptas,...; escritores, pintores, médicos,... e uma cidade mágica onde vivem homens e mulheres livres e, simultaneamente, acorrentados ao que faz mover o mundo: O Amor! O amor em estado puro que não se subjuga a raças, religiões, sexos...

Durrell é magnífico! Quer na criação de gente, quer na forma como nos conta as suas vidas, as suas paixões.

O romance foi estruturado, segundo disse Durrell, tendo como base a Teoria da Relatividade. Os três primeiros livros representam o espaço e o último o tempo. Em Justine - o primeiro - as personagens são apresentadas e revelados os principais acontecimentos: quem faz o quê; quem ama quem; e até quem morre. Nos dois livros seguintes as situações são aprofundadas e acrescentados novos pormenores. No entanto, a evolução temporal só acontece no volume final.

Não posso dizer que seja uma leitura simples, não só pela extensão (quase mil páginas), mas porque exige alguma concentração para não nos perdermos devido ao grande número de personagens e histórias secundárias. Tem, também, algumas partes que me custaram muito a ler; relatos de uma crueldade atroz, e cuja arte narrativa de Durrell as gravou, dolorosamente, na minha mente.

Além das personagens que enumerei e de muitas outras que faltam, há duas que, embora não correspondam aos padrões, estão quase sempre presentes: a cidade de Alexandria e Kavafis, referido várias vezes como "o velho poeta da cidade".

*"Continua a voltar frequentemente e a tomar-me,
sensação amada continua a voltar e a tomar-me —
quando acorda a memória do corpo,
e desejo antigo volta a passar no sangue;
quando os lábios e a pele se lembram,
e sentem as mãos como se tocassem de novo.*

*Continua a voltar frequentemente e a tomar-me à noite,
quando os lábios e a pele se lembram..."*

Konstandinos Kavafis

Susanne says

2,5 - Clea ist der Abschluss des Alexandria Quartetts. Die Handlung ist schnell zusammengefasst. Der Protagonist des ersten Teils, der irische Schriftsteller Darley, kehrt nach einem langjährigen Exil auf einer griechischen Insel nach Alexandria zurück und versucht sich in der Stadt wieder heimisch zu machen. Alexandria hat sich vor allem kriegsbedingt verändert. Italienische Flieger bombardieren es in der Nacht an und tagsüber prägen Soldaten das Bild der Stadt. Für Darley spielt die Wiederannäherung an seinen alten Freundeskreis jedoch eine sehr viel größere Rolle als der Krieg. Nacheinander begegnet er seinen alten Freunden und Bekannten, die der Leser aus Justine, Balthazar und Mountolive bereits kennt, oder hört über andere von ihrem Schicksal.

Nach einem interessanten zweiten und großartigen dritten Teil, wurde ich hier leider enttäuscht. Während die beiden Vorgängerbände je einen eigenen, völlig anderen, überraschenden Blick auf die Geschehnisse des ersten Bandes werfen und besonders in Mountolive die Fäden der Handlung zusammengeführt und zu einem Abschluss gebrachte werden, bleibt im letzten Teil eigentlich nicht mehr viel zu sagen. Clea liest sich daher eher wie ein Epilog, in dem Durrell noch einmal jeden Charakter und sein Schicksal seit den Geschehnissen von Mountolive wie nach einer Checkliste abarbeitet. Dennoch hat er auch in diesem letzten Teil Episoden von großer Eindringlichkeit und Schönheit beschrieben, so dass ich meine 2,5 Sterne-Wertung aufrunde.

Alan says

Clea is the fourth and final installment of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. If you have not already done so, you should read the others—in sequence—before starting this one. I toyed with the notion of reading these out of order myself, but in the end I'm glad I stuck with the way Durrell presented them. And if you thought perhaps Durrell would run out of material after writing three other books on the same subjects... quite the contrary; there are many revelations here, events not visible from the perspectives of the earlier books, and some shocking turns that—retroactively—force significant reassessments of his subjects.

Clea herself, of course, is the beautiful blonde artist, whose entanglement with the dark and lovely Justine added some salacious interest to Justine, and who created the portrait of Justine that gives the narrator Darley such comfort in his island exile... we've met her before, briefly, but despite having been given a few of the best lines in the earlier books, Clea's been very much a peripheral character up till now. And—unlike Justine and Mountolive—Clea takes her time appearing on the stage even in her namesake book.

Balthazar also delayed his appearance, but unlike his analytical, other-directed presence in Balthazar, once Clea does come under our direct gaze, she is fully present. Her opinions and desires consume both Darley's full attention and our own.

Clea is, to a greater extent than its predecessors, explicitly about the interplay between men and women, and it is the only volume of the four to contain passages that I would consider purely and unself-consciously erotic. In returning to a tight focus on Darley and one woman, from a more mature (or at least more experienced) perspective, Durrell does something quite opposite to the prospect Pursewarden deplores so loudly—in no way does he "put a tea-cosy over reality" (p.137—o felicitous phrase!).

Where Clea isn't about Darley and Clea, in fact, it's primarily about Pursewarden—the fragile, brilliant author whose notebook "My Conversations with Brother Ass" makes up a big chunk of this book's middle third. Pursewarden's thoughts, and by that we must mean Durrell's own, could make a whole book of aphorisms in and of themselves:

The imperatives from which there is no escape are: *Laugh till it hurts, and hurt till you laugh!*

—Pursewarden, p.138

And the intriguing notion:

I mean, wasn't the idea of the individual soul grafted on to us by the Greeks in the wild hope that, by its sheer beauty, it would "take"—as we say of vaccination?

—Pursewarden, p.148

But then also this bit of weirdness:

For culture means sex, the root-knowledge, and where the faculty is derailed or crippled, its derivatives like religion come up dwarfed or contorted—instead of the emblematic mystic rose you get Judaic cauliflowers like Mormons or Vegetarians, instead of artists you get cry-babies, instead of philosophy semantics.

—Pursewarden, p.141

Am I disloyal in wanting to read Pursewarden's idealized and cynical books—the missing fifth element of the *Quartet*, presented here only in fragments—perhaps even more than Darley's own *memoir*? No, for Darley, as a surrogate for Durrell though far from being his wish-fulfillment "Mary Sue," admits that he himself would rather read Pursewarden's prose. Darley says, after his reading of "Brother Ass" has ended,

And realizing this I was suddenly afflicted by a great melancholy and despair at recognising the completely limited nature of my own powers, hedged about as they were by the limitations of an intelligence too powerful for itself, and lacking in sheer word-magic, in propulsion, in passion, to achieve this other world of artistic fulfilment.

—Darley, p.177

Not that Darley is any more generally reliable or truthful in this novel—with the reader or with himself—than he is in *Justine*. He congratulates himself (on p.56) upon his insight into Woman: "the fecund passivity with which, like the moon, she borrows her second-hand light from the male sun," forsooth! Quite possibly Durrell himself did not feel this way, but even so there is not in Darley's phrase the slightest hint that he's aware of how ridiculous this denial of independent agency might appear to half of the human race.

And yet, elsewhere, observations such as this ring true to me:

"{...}women instinctively like a man with plenty of female in him; there, they suspect, is the only sort of lover who can sufficiently identify himself with them to... deliver them of being just women, catalysts, strops, oil-stones."

—Clea, p.108.

The covers of this particular edition, I must admit, are not all that great. I like the narrow font, and the whimsical placement of each title on its respective cover. And the photographs are good enough, evocative of Egypt without being too specific as to place or time. But those images do not evoke for me any sense of Durrell's four novels as a unified work, nor do they imply—as I think they should—the explicitly *four-dimensional* aspects of the *Quartet*. For Durrell's project is nothing less than the construction of a multidimensional perspective on a single series of events, a "science-fiction" (in his own words) based on a view of space-time as a unified continuum.

This view jibes so well with my own opinions about how the universe works that I have a hard time being objective about it, but I do believe that Durrell succeeded admirably. From the myopic focus of Justine, peering through the space between two lovers lying eye to eye, to the horizontal separation in *Balthazar* with its idyllic island exile, to the aloof view from above in *Mountolive*... and now, in *Clea*, Durrell returns to Alexandria and to a tighter focus on two lovers, but views them from the irremediable perspective of time.

That recurring word, "irremediable," seems to set the key note—the events of the earlier books have receded inexorably into the past. The advent of World War II, as well—long looming in the other books—affects both the tone and the view of Clea's Alexandria:

It had come so softly towards us over the waters, this war; gradually, as clouds which quietly fill in a horizon from end to end. But as yet it had not broken. Only the rumour of it gripped the heart with conflicting hopes and fears. At first it had seemed to portend the end of the so-called civilised world, but this hope soon proved vain. No, it was to be as always simply the end of kindness and safety and moderate ways; the end of the artist's hopes, of nonchalance, of joy. Apart from this everything else about the human condition would be confirmed and emphasised; perhaps even a certain truthfulness had already begun to emerge from behind appearances, for death heightens every tension and permits us fewer of the half-truths by which we normally live.

—p.21

If I were designing new covers for these volumes, they would each show the same scene, through the four panes of a single window in Alexandria... One pane would be dedicated to each volume, but each volume's pane would be in color for that book only, and each pane would be zoomed in differently: close focus for Justine; in the middle distance for Balthazar; a wide-angle view for Mountolive, and... for Clea, a cracked and long-neglected glass filmed over with brown dust.

"This world represents the promise of a unique happiness which we are not well-enough equipped to grasp."

—Balthazar, p.23

Taken as a whole—and perhaps that is how I should have read the *Alexandria Quartet* anyway, as a single omnibus volume (such editions do exist, though that is not the one that came to my hand)—the *Quartet* is much more than the sum of its parts. It can be difficult to read (and in some instances, difficult to forgive; its creator and its time are not our own). But it is a landmark work of 20th-Century literature, and I am very glad to have read it.

Islam says

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Paul says

The final part of the Quartet and it's been a wonderful journey. Not quite as strong, I thought, as the other three. It is set about seven years later. Darley has been living on a Greek island looking after Melissa's daughter (with Nessim). Balthasar arrives with information and writing from the late Pursewarden. Many of the aps from the previous novels are filled in.

Darley returns to Alexandria, reuniting Nessim with his daughter. He bumps into Clea and begins a romantic relationship with her. It is Clea and her relationship with Darley that takes centre stage. The Quartet seems to hang together as a result of this novel and the prose is still wonderful. There were one or two ends that didn't quite convince me (Justine for instance), but on the whole again Durrell has created a masterpiece. Darley is as short-sighted as ever when it comes to his romantic entanglements. The events of the war intertwine this novel and Alexandria is in the hands of the Free French. There are some neat comic touches; the late cross-dressing Scobie is now an unofficial saint and has his own feast day. All of the main participants take some sort of bow.

Durrell indulges himself in all sorts of meditations covering art, the novel and creativity, set within the outstanding writing and the Freudian allusions. The fragments from Pursewarden add a great deal and an edge of cynicism and weirdness. At the centre of it all though is the nature of love and more particularly how miserable it can make you! The whole thing is a look at modern civilisation and its decadence. I also think Durrell is looking at the nature of truth because he looks at events from several different angles and points of view making the reader question their original judgement.

The Quartet is a great achievement and the prose so beautiful it defies description. I enjoyed the first three slightly more than this one, but they stand alone as a whole.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

This Precious Image

"*Mountolive*", the third volume in "*The Alexandria Quartet*", initially alienated me, but totally turned me around.

"*Clea*" started in the same manner, but more patient this time, I let it work its magic. It fell into place much

more quickly, and the rewards came sooner as well.

Initially, I wondered whether it might be a grab bag of ideas and impressions stitched together as an afterthought to what might otherwise have constituted a trilogy.

Even if it had been conceived of as a trilogy, "*Clea*" fits in neatly. It is set some years later, both during and after the war. Whereas some of the relationships in the earlier volumes were still jostling around with the heat, by now they have started to settle. People have matured. They've worked out what they're seeking after. They've started to find it. Some, however, have moved on or shuffled off this mortal coil.

Most importantly, for the narrator Darley, he's now remote enough from the original events that he has lost some of his timidity, he has emerged with a perspective (or at least a composite of multiple perspectives), he has realised that he is ready to write about these events, and he has decided what form his project should take:

"It had been so long in forming inside me, this precious image...the old story of an artist coming of age."

The Kingdom of Your Imagination

So, just as the Quartet is a story about Alexandria and its inhabitants ("*When you are in love with one of its inhabitants, a city can become the world*"), it's also a story of an artist delving into the past and readying himself to write about it.

Although Darley feels that "*the whole universe had given me a nudge*", it's Clea who has seen what the universe had in store for him and, indeed, for herself:

"As for you, wise one, I have a feeling that you too perhaps have stepped across the threshold into the kingdom of your imagination, to take possession of it once and for all."

Each is now "*a real human being, an artist at last.*"

Finding Your Self in the World

"*Clea*" is probably the densest of the four novels in terms of plot. It's also the most linear, to the extent that it even hints at a happy ending.

However, its concerns seem to revolve around the questions: what does it mean to live? What does it mean to love? What does it mean to be an artist? What does the imagination have to do with the truth?

In concepts (if not necessarily language) that evoke Hegel, the writer Pursewarden theorises:

"The so-called act of living is really an act of the imagination. The world - which we always visualise as 'the outside World' - yields only to self-exploration!"

Thus, we have to explore ourselves in order to understand the world. By the same token, if we explore the outside world, we will also understand ourselves better.

Hence, by understanding the city, we will understand its inhabitants. And vice versa.

Pursewarden's Inkling of the Truth

Pursewarden often seems to be the vehicle by which Durrell allows Darley to acquire wisdom, without necessarily realising the immediate or abstract significance of what is happening before his very eyes. Part of the novel's metafiction involves Darley reading Pursewarden's correspondence, journals and draft fiction and verse:

"Seeing Pursewarden thus, for the first time, I saw that through his work he had been seeking for the very tenderness of logic itself, of the Way Things Are; not the logic of syllogism or the tidemarks of the emotions, but the real essence of fact-finding, the naked truth, the Inkling...the whole pointless Joke."

Action and Reflection

Another writer character, Keats, adds, *"The man of action and the man of reflection are really the same man, operating on two different fields. But to the same end!"*

For an artist at least, you need to be both a man of action and a man of reflection. Each quality informs the other.

Meddling with Time

Pursewarden makes a similar point in relation to Proust:

"Time is the catch! Space is a concrete idea, but Time is abstract...In the scar tissue of Proust's great poem you see that so clearly; his work is the great academy of the time-consciousness. But being unwilling to mobilise the meaning of time he was driven to fall back on memory, the ancestor of hope! Ah! But being a Jew he had hope - and with Hope comes the irresistible desire to meddle."

This passage seems to imply that Proust focused on memory in the absence of action in the present. Yet, it also suggests that Proust was prone to hope and meddle, presumably in relation to the future. Perhaps, then, Pursewarden (in contrast to Proust) focuses more on the present than either the past or the future. The present is the only facet of Time that can be immediately influenced and mobilised by Man.

Yet Pursewarden suggests that, in trying to mobilise the progress of Time into the future, this other manifestation of Man (*"we Celts"*) has the opposite problem to the Jewish predicament of hopefulness:

"We Celts mate with despair out of which alone grows laughter and the desperate romance of the eternally hopeless. We hunt the unattainable, and for us there is only a search unending."

Selective Fictions

No matter what the characters think they can achieve by acts of will, a sense of determinism occasionally creeps into the novel.

The past seems to shape both the present and the future:

"It was indeed another island - I suppose the past always is. Here for a night and a day I lived the life of an echo, thinking much about the past and about us all moving in it, the 'selective fictions' which life shuffles out like a pack of cards, mixing and dividing, withdrawing and restoring."

If at times we seem to be actors on the stage of life, have our lines already been written for us? Or are our choices simply limited to the number of cards in the pack?

The Seeds of Future Events

Darley, looking back on events in the the past, in preparation for writing about it, says:

"It is not hard, writing at this remove in time, to realise that it had already happened, had been ordained in such a way and in no other. This was, so to speak, only its 'coming to pass' - its stage of manifestation...The seeds of future events are carried within ourselves. They are implicit in us and unfold according to the laws of their own nature."

It's almost as if our character determines our fate. Perhaps, not just our own fate, but we all contribute to the passage of history, which is just a record of the passage of Time.

In a beautiful musical analogy, Darley writes to Clea that the individual events in our lives might *"plant themselves in the speculative mind like single notes of music belonging to some larger composition which I suppose one will never hear."*

The Poisoned Loving-Cup

Throughout the novel, various permutations and combinations share a loving cup. But Darley refers to it as a *"poisoned loving cup"*.

Obviously, some lovers were never meant for each other at all. However, Clea is the first to appreciate that love can often be a matter of timing. It doesn't help that this is love during wartime:

"I shall see if I can't will him back again. We aren't quite ripe for each other yet. It will come."

The Richest Love

Durrell reserves some of his most beautiful writing for these moments of intimacy:

"So it was that love-making itself became a kind of challenge to the whirlwind outside which beat and pounded like a thunderstorm of guns and sirens, igniting the pale skies of the city with the magnificence of its lightning-flashes. And kisses themselves became charged with the deliberate affirmation which can come only from the foreknowledge and presence of death. It would have been good to die at any moment then, for love and death had somewhere joined hands."

*"It was an expression of her pride, too, to sleep there in the crook of my arm like a wild bird exhausted by its struggles with a limed twig, for all the world as if it were an ordinary summer night of peace." **

But perhaps it should be Pursewarden who has the last word:

"The richest love is that which submits to the arbitration of time."

We must love as if this is the only time available to us. Because, when all is said and done, this much is true.

REVIEWS OF "THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET":

"Justine" (Vol. 1 of 4)

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

"Balthazar" (Vol. 2 of 4)

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

"Mountolive" (Vol. 3 of 4)

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

FOOOTNOTE:

* When I read John Hawkes' *"The Lime Twig"*, I didn't think to look up the literal meaning of its title. This second reference impelled me to:

<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birdlime>

<http://en.m.wiktionary.org/wiki/lime-...>

Bruce says

In this final volume of the *Alexandria Quartet*, Durrell returns to Darley's active narrative. Darley has now departed his Aegean island and returned to Alexandria, resuming his story there during World War II when the city is held by the Free French and is periodically being bombed by the Italians. Some of his old friends have died, but their stories are very much alive and inform the plot. Others have aged but take up their friendships with him. He and Clea, the enigmatic painter, become lovers, and the first third of this novel is told through their conversations with each other. We learn that Nessim and his family are impoverished, Nessim himself, now an ambulance driver, having lost an eye and a finger. Justine and he live together in bitterness, and she has become hardened and unattractive. The writing is lyrical and beautiful, almost impossible to describe. Alexandria itself is as much a state of mind as a geographical location.

The middle portion of the novel is an extended portion of the deceased Pursewarden's journal, a portion addressed to Darley himself that Darley is given by Clea to read. In it Pursewarden, a novelist of great accomplishment, philosophizes about art and literature, the role and the life of a writer, and the function of art in the world. One wonders if this is meant to expound Durrell's own views. At the very least, the thoughtful reader will take away these insights and hypotheses and use them in his own critical reading of literature. Among other things, Pursewarden, in this extended reflection on the nature and meaning of art, raises an insight that rings true, at least to me. He states that art is the product of the working of the imagination, and religion is the function of art being taken too literally. That is consistent with my own conviction that religion is metaphor, the error being that people fail to realize this and then force the

metaphor to be “factual”.

The last third of the novel traces the fates and trajectories of the lives of the main characters, most of whom at the end of the War leave Alexandria for lives in Europe. What is difficult for me to convey is the beauty of Durrell’s prose, his sensitivity to place and nuance, his insights into human personalities and their motivations and intuitive knowings. This fourth volume of the *Quartet* contains some of the loveliest and most poignant love prose that I have ever read, the relationship of Clea and Darley, with all of its moods and fluctuations, being painted with exquisite delicacy, very moving.

The *Alexandria Quartet* is one of the most beautiful and haunting works of fiction that I have encountered. It must be read in the proper sequence, without much spacing between the novels, because it truly is one continuous story somewhat arbitrarily divided into four parts. Durrell has created a world that is unforgettable, characters that are unique and vivid, and a story of great psychological depth and variety. His prose is unimaginably lovely.

Judy says

Sadly, I have come to the end of The Alexandria Quartet*. It has been a revelatory reading experience and I now see why this dated collection is still read, praised, even loved.

I found *Clea* the weakest of the four, perhaps because Durrell is winding down, as is the historic city of Alexandria. (These days it is considered an unsafe location for tourists.) During the time covered by *Clea*, the British Empire's heyday is coming to a close. In his inimitable way, Durrell infuses all of this into a sad farewell.

Clea, who had always been a shadowy presence in the earlier novels, now has her day. She is an artist, a painter. Of all the women in the Quartet, she comes across as the most well balanced; a sort of Earth Mother figure and the feminist of the bunch. The narrator (whom I assume is Durrell himself) finally has a love affair with her. He is older and wiser now, but Clea is wiser still.

The End.

*The Books of the Alexandria Quartet:
Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, Clea

Angie says

To finally have finished the fourth in this amazing quartet of books feels like a journey of sorts.

I have really adored being immersed in the lives of this group of individuals, thrown together through public and political life in a backdrop of exotic Egyptian locations and traditions starting in the romantic 1930's through to wartime. The contrast between the British characters: Mountolive, Darley, Pursewarden and others, (many eccentric tales there), to the Egyptian wealthy socialites, wealthy landowners and dignitaries

such as Justine and Nessim; characters they grow to know, love and interact with was interestingly portrayed.

This book follows the pattern of the previous three in that many passages branch off to tell stories of each of the characters, often not related to the flow of the plot but which fill out your knowledge of their complete selves and how they fit into the sequence of events. You can then look at each of them in a different way, when reading of their progression and how their lives intertwine, often with tragic and unpredictable outcomes. Much of the book is concerned with the tangled sexual and artistic lives of the characters and their passionate affairs with each other. At the close, the feeling of time having passed and events having changed their futures and impressions of each other are felt as they move on to the next phases of their lives.

The near catastrophic climax of this 4th part dramatically unfolded in unexpected ways, the culmination of the narrator's (Darley) time before returning to Europe. Seeing this through to the end has highlighted that each individual book is only a step towards this point, another aspect of the story, sometimes told by other characters, (like links in a chain) the end of the whole read, and I think you have to plough all 4 to appreciate the work in its entirety.

Ploughing through it is a good way to describe it as it hasn't been an easy read overall, often very dense in parts (I really think you would either love or hate it), however, above all it is the writing and the way in which Durrell paints his evocative, sensual world of Alexandria in that glorious era, is the overriding joy and reward of these books. The writing is breathtaking throughout and it has been an immensely enjoyable and challenging reading experience for me over this summer - one which I think will be hard to follow (and one I may well repeat in the future).

Julia says

Last of the Alexandria Quartet. I've quoted from the other three, so here's a bit of Clea: "A phrase of Pursewarden's came into my mind as I softly closed the door of the ward. 'The richest love is that which submits to the arbitration of time.' "

Individually, any of the four is a gem. Altogether, the Quartet is magnificent. I don't love, or even like, Elizabeth Gilbert, but I read a quote of hers a bit ago about listening in a college freshman English class to some dude saying how Harper Lee was a one-hit-wonder. And how ludicrous that is to say about someone who wrote a definitive (perhaps the definitive) novel on racism in America.

I feel similarly about Durrell. I don't care if he wrote another damn word, because the Quartet is a masterpiece. The language is eloquent, the plot more intricate and surprising than I could have anticipated, and the total accomplishment is beautiful. It's hard, perhaps impossible, to summarize four unique novels succinctly, let alone attempt to describe their cohesive whole. But, a treasure!

Jonfaith says

Like all young men I set out to be a genius, but mercifully laughter intervened.

Wow, I didn't expect such a sudden dislike. Allow me to retreat to my hutch to scratch together a review.

John David says

“Clea,” the fourth volume of Lawrence Durrell’s “Alexandria Quartet,” opens with several years having passed since the events of the first three volumes. Darley, the narrator, is living on a Greek island with the six-year-old illegitimate daughter Nessim fathered with Melissa. After running into Balthazar and his Inter-Linear, he eventually heads off for Alexandria again with the child, full of both trepidation and anticipation about the past and the people he knew there.

When Darley arrives in Alexandria, almost immediately he runs into his old artist friend Clea, and consummates a formerly Plutonic relationship, now that their circle of friends is unencumbered by the presence of Melissa, who has died, and Justine, who is under house arrest for the duration of the novel. More than in any of the others, this novel has several meta-fictional aspects: meditations on art, creativity, and the novel (especially as revealed with Pursewarden’s letters), and some of Clea’s ideas about painting. All of this is, as always in this tetralogy, tied in beautifully with Balthazar’s earlier analyses shot throughout the Inter-Linear.

Reading these four novels has been one of the more powerful set of experiences that I have recently had. Most readers will probably not enjoy this; it’s not action-packed and full of adventure. But if you admire writing that tries to capture the uniqueness of inner coruscating experience, the complexities of passion and romantic relationships, and realizes the inability to tell “the whole story,” even after nearly one thousand pages of trying, I hope you will appreciate this as much as I did. As I said in my review of “Mountolive,” I have simply run out of things to say about how much I loved this. Sometimes admiration must finish itself off in silence.

David says

After an absence of 7 years or so we return to Alexandria during the last year of WWII with the reliable Darley as narrator. It seems that Durrell actually intends to give us some resolution to this multi-faceted story, so we revisit the same cast of characters, some now dead, some forever altered ..it's difficult to even conjure up the first impressions I had of this exotic bunch.

Of course, the emotional thrust of the story revolves around Clea, someone that we've only met obliquely in the earlier books. She is an interesting study, but perhaps less interesting than when she was only a hint. But then again, Darley doesn't always get things right, and he's not even convinced that he is a worthy writer. To be honest, I didn't like Durrell's last picture of Justine, arguably the linchpin of these books. But is this Durrell's perspective or Darley's, or is Darley just a self-effacing projection of Durrell?

I've talked too much. The ending contains a nice edge of your seat adventure and a smile on your face conclusion. And of course the language is rich and sometimes surprising. It's all been a rewarding journey and I will miss these friends.
