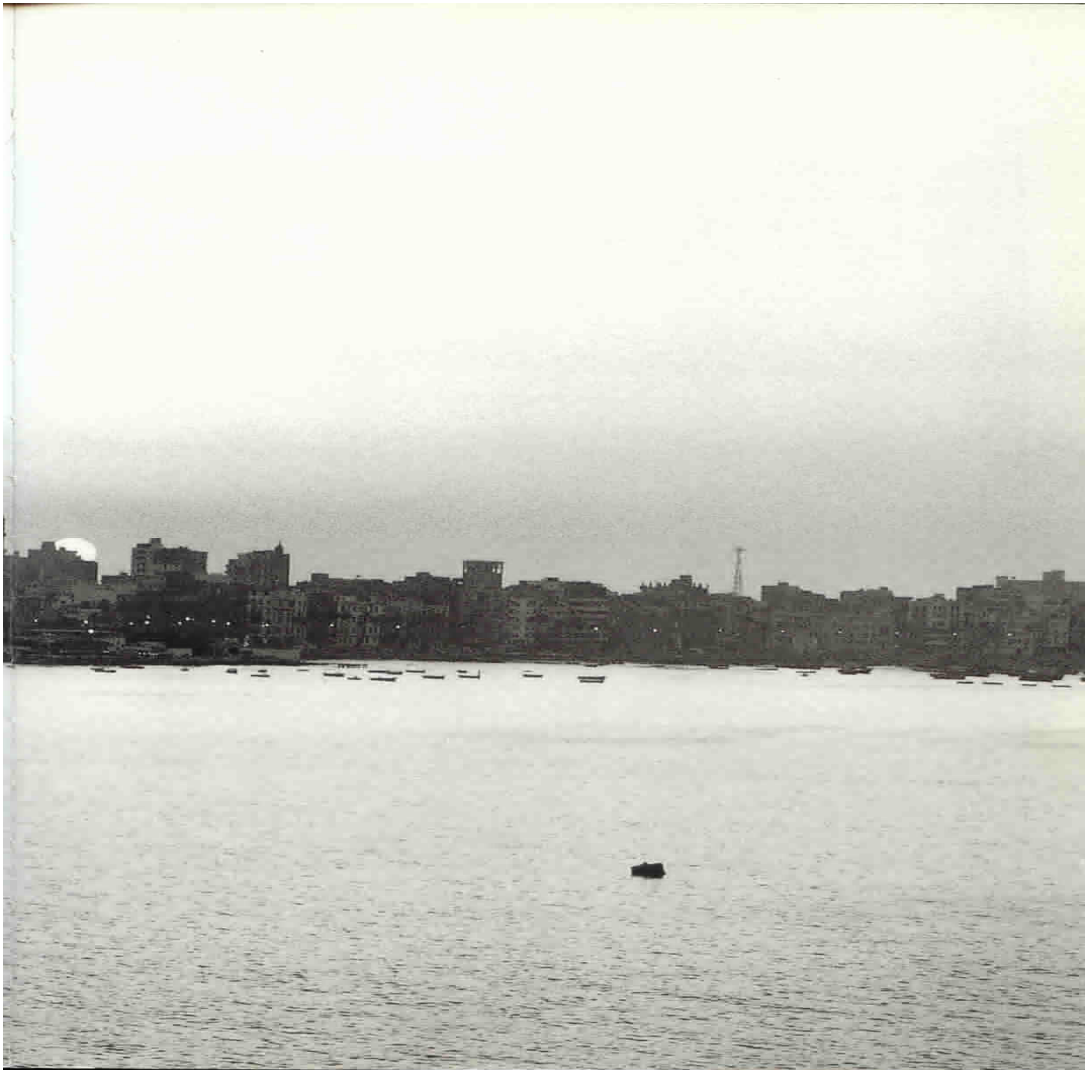


Modern & Contemporary Alexandria in Fiction

A Bibliography



Few cities have been as cosmopolitan as Alexandria. It had two golden ages, first as intellectual capital of the classical world under the house of Ptolemy; then as the largest port in the eastern Mediterranean in the 19th and early 20th centuries, under the house of Mohammed Ali.¹

Poets, historians, and travelers from ancient to modern times have never ceased to be fascinated by Alexandria, the great Egyptian city on the Mediterranean founded by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.²

Yet, a certain fact is, that different people never agree on an interpretation of the same thing, and the more complex this thing is, the more inspirational and controversial, as we see in the following statements by different authors:

Daniel Rondeau tries to link the character of modern Alexandria to its historical roots where he states:

“Alexandria, since Alexander, was also this: an extraordinary collection of destinies. Not only heroes, Argonauts, war leaders or philosophers did come here to relish the glory of their conquests and give away to the strong currents of their dreams, but also poor men, historically overcome people, and escapes of war and mass graves, of disappointments and failures. They also came along all aspired by this benevolent eye of the cyclone, where they have tried, more modestly, to conquer their own life, which was not really that bad. Armenians came from Caesarea, Smyrna, Mouch and Constantinople, traders and jewelers, whose wives were called Anahide or Eranie. Maltese, Lebanese, Syrians, Italians, French people and Franco-Levantines, Russians, Jews, who were then settled at the canopic way since the establishment of the city. Typographers, tailors, bankers, employees or fishermen: The Menasces, The Aghions, The Lumbrosos, and The Venturas. And of course the Greek, merchants of cotton, poets or grocers.”

“Their souvenirs draw an arc of dreams on the city. This invisible memorial supports the imagination of its habitants. It fortifies not only the strong conscience they have of their singularity but also the romantic essence of all existence”.³

In *Alexandria: City of Memory*, **Michael Haag** has written a brilliant portrait not only of Alexandria, but also of an international city:

“Set between the desert and the sea, with the promise and menace of Europe on the horizon, modern Alexandria was the creation of Mohammed Ali, ruler of Egypt between 1804 and 1849. He started a policy of attracting British,

¹ Philip Mansel , “Alexandria Leaving” , **Guardian Unlimited** (13 November 2004) , <http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5061170-99937,00.html> .

² Joan W. Gartland, “Vrettos, Theodore, Alexandria, City of the Western Mind”, **Library Journal** 127, no. 4 (1 March 2002): 121.

³ Daniel Rondeau, **Alexandrie** (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

French, Italians and Greeks to settle in the city, which he had made his summer capital. Between the landing of British troops in Alexandria "to restore order" in 1882, and the departure in 1952 of Mohammed Ali's great-grandson King Farouk, it was one of the most sophisticated cities in the Mediterranean. "

"An Alexandrian like Eve Cohen, who met Lawrence Durrell in 1943 and later married him, spoke Spanish, French, English, Italian, Greek and Arabic. Spanish was a language of Sephardic Jews. French was a language of the streets, as well as the salons. British battleships were stationed in the harbor, to show who was master of Egypt. Alexandria's paving-stones were Italian, laid by immigrant Sicilians. Greeks ran the groceries - and much else besides. Egyptians provided the state structure and cheap labor".¹

Whereas Daniel Rondeau and Michael Haag reviews are more historically oriented, we find **Naguib Mahfouz** revealing a different, more sentimental aspect of the city:

"Every time I arrived at Alexandria, I always had the impression of being abroad. We only spoke in French or English."

"I loved Alexandria for its freshness, its exoticness and because – like all other major ports of the world – it's a city of the joy of life. I could pass whole days without even reading a newspaper, it was totally indifferent. The popular (overall) joy shone everywhere."²

Edward Al-Kharrat emphasizes this spirit by admitting:

"To me, Alexandria is not just a beautiful geographical site, not is it a stage, where people meet and crash everyday-people who work hard and struggle and live and die on the land of everyday life. Neither is it a tank of accumulated ancient and modern civilizations and cultures. To me, Alexandria is all of this melted together. It is also a spiritual state, a real adventure of acquiring inner facts and facing the eternal that is expanded on the surface of a sea that falls awash to an endless horizon". "To me, Alexandria is a magical city, a real land of Saffron. Maybe that is why my third novel was called "Torabha Zaafaran – Land of Saffron." It is a beach that borders of the sea of infinity, on verge to eternity".³

¹ Philip Mansel, " Alexandria Leaving", **Guardian Unlimited** (13 November 2004) , <http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5061170-99937,00.html> .

² Daniel Rondeau, **Alexandrie** (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

³ إدوار الخراط، **مهاجمة المستحيل: مقاطع من سيرة ذاتية للكتابة** (القاهرة: دار المدى، ١٩٩٦).

As opposed to Mahfouz and Al-Kharrat is Youssef Bazzi who also reveals a sentimental overview but with a totally different perception:

“When you are in Alexandria, you realize that everything that is out of use, out of service, everything that is not usable outside, in the world of consumption, continues to live and function here, very much like the cars of Havana and Cuba. It is from this present antiquity that the Lyric and Nostalgia which give things and elements a sentimental value with a supplementary vitality, are born. This justifies the nostalgia, this chronic and painful illness that became synonymous with the name of the city. It burdens its visitors upon their arrival, it tortures its inhabitants, even those who have just come from the country are immediately taken by the glorious past that the city implies. This dissolution seems inherent in everything: everyday conversations, literary texts, the ancient luxurious buildings, the tramway, the esplanades which reveal a certain spell, the disappearing beach, full of memories of the movies, of love stories and festival joy. You cannot escape this longing which is embedded in the ruins, in the place and even in the nearby sea.”

In this same article, Bazzi also reports the recollections of his old Alexandrian taxi driver, recollections of the city in the beginnings of the past century:

“In the thirties, the city harbored more than a hundred thousand Greeks, sixty thousand Italians and another hundred thousand of descendants of other nationalities. It was a place filled with richness, of luxury and of comfort. Its inhabitants never surpassed sixty thousand, and even if they were not all rich, yet the general impression that the city emitted was of prosperity.”

“On Sundays, everywhere you would find concerts of classical music. In the cafes set alongside the beach or in the public gardens. Women also had their own societies. They were very rich and very elegant. Every one of them had a day when she held a reception at her home. Sometimes they even invited singers or dancers. In the big and famed resorts, like San Stefano, there was even a beach reserved exclusively for women”.

Safwan continues to remember: “During summer, the king and his court, as well as the secured bourgeois and the intellectual elites moved to Alexandria. During this season, the city became the nation's capital”.¹

¹ Youssef Bazzi, “Une ville méditerranéenne par excellence”, **Babelmed**, <http://www.babelmed.net/index.php?c=1098&m=&k=&l=fr>

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