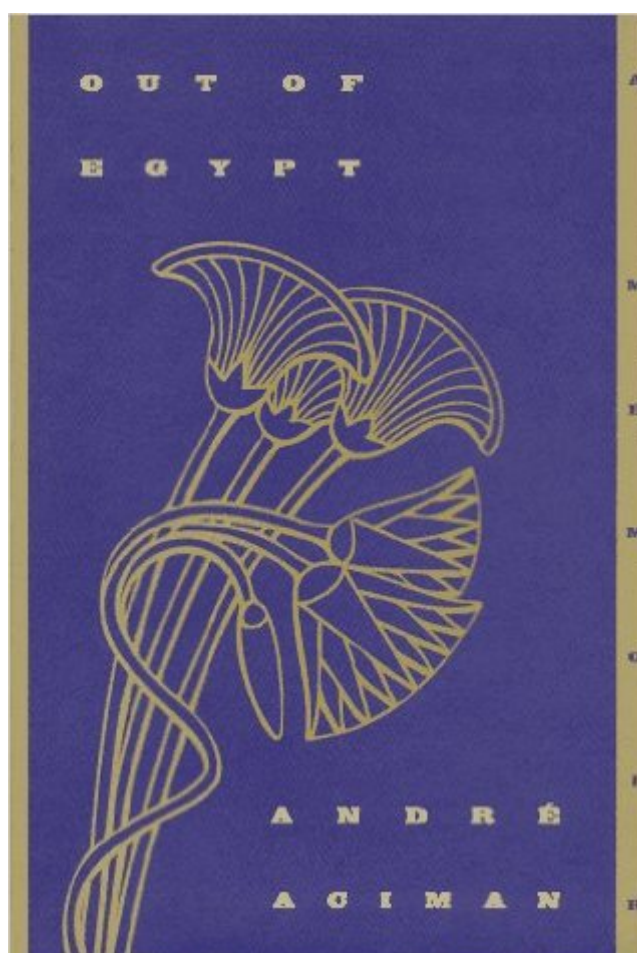


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Out Of Egypt: A Memoir



Synopsis

The son of a flamboyant Jewish clan recounts his family's move to turn-of-the-century Alexandria, its many colorful members, its pursuit of wealth and happiness, and its struggles with anti-Semitic and anti-Western nationalism.

Book Information

Hardcover: 339 pages

Publisher: Farrar Straus & Giroux (T); 1st edition (December 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374228337

ISBN-13: 978-0374228330

Product Dimensions: 1.5 x 6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #614,163 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #512 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Jewish #17114 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Memoirs #152071 inÂ Books > Reference

Customer Reviews

A really absorbing memoir, reminiscent in some ways of Nabokov's "Speak, Memory". Neither sentimental nor self indulgent, clear-eyed, humorous, yet moving and truly interesting. Having lived in Egypt myself around the same time (albeit in Cairo, not Alexandria), I was touched by recognition of places and types: a world "gone with the wind". That is of course very personal, but I believe this book should appeal to any one with a little curiosity about other places, people, times.

Andre Aciman's Out of Egypt is an amazing book, I found it very hard to put down. At a time of increased hostility in the middle east it is heartwarming to read of a time when Jews lived in peace with their Muslim and Christian neighbors in Alexandria. Not a whiff of anti Jewish sentiments was reported by Aciman until after the Suez War. Aciman and his family left Egypt in the sixties. Aciman, like many "Egyptian" Jews preferred to hold European nationalities and in some cases some were French or Italian without ever setting foot in these countries. Europeans had their own courts in Egypt and did not fall under Egyptian Laws. For Aciman, born and raised in Egypt and in many ways no different than many affluent Alexandrians life became unbearable after the waves of Nationalization in the early 60's. Aciman writes of an Alexandria that no longer exists not just for

Egyptian Jews. The population explosion in Egypt has transformed Alexandria beyond recognition; hence Aciman's beautiful writing of Alexandria, its beaches and its tram will bring floods of memories for anyone who's known Alexandria. Affluent Egyptian Jews who left Egypt in the fifties and sixties are not immediately thought of as refugees and there is little discussion on their issues of identity and affiliation in Egypt and elsewhere. Aciman through his acute sensitivity to the people and events around him and his wonderful story telling skills has produced beautifully written and very touching book that subtly challenges many assumptions on all sides. Readers will see the very same Alexandria in Leila Ahmed's *Border Passage* and in parts of Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*. Enjoy

From the very first sentence, Andre Aciman's "Out of Egypt" sucks the reader into the maelstrom of personalities that made up his family--and, more broadly, the city that gave them rise: the whirlwind of peoples, languages, creeds, and nationalities that made up old Alexandria, once the most cosmopolitan city on the Mediterranean. Aciman's family--Jews from Spain via Italy and, most recently, Turkey, who intermarry with Jews from Syria and Germany--are, in and of themselves, a microcosm of bustling, polyglot Alexandria, and what a magnificently sketched crew they all are: Swaggering Uncle Vili, acid Uncle Isaac, calculating Uncle Nessim, melancholy Aunt Flora, bankers, salesmen, auctioneers, musicians, the idle rich, billiard hall proprietors and bicycle shop owners, and, most memorably, his two grandmothers, the Saint and the Princess, who, as the back blurb informs us, "gossip in seven languages." They comprise as flamboyant and eccentric a family as one can imagine--a joy to read about, with a tale as rich a family saga as any in literature. Theirs is a world scented by the tang of the sea blowing over white-sand beaches; sprawling apartments full of objets d'art tended to by generations of Arab servants; balmy Mediterranean evenings spent on spacious balconies nibbling dips, olives, artichokes, and cheeses and sipping raki, and hobnobbing with the city's European elite, whom they simultaneously despise and try desperately to emulate. But that world begins to die in the book's second part, which begins with the chapter entitled "Taffi Al-Nur," (Arabic for "Turn off the lights"): not merely what was screamed in the streets during air-raids, but an apt description of what happened to Egypt under Nasser's Nationalist government, which, slowly at first, but then more and more quickly, chased out all the foreigners that gave Alexandria its cosmopolitan character. Once again, Aciman's family serves as a metaphor for the city as, one by one, they either die off or leave their home for points north and west: Italy, France, England, the United States. It's too trite and cliched to call "Out of Egypt" an evocation of a vanished world. It's a love song, a paean, to the kind of world that both produced, and allowed to flourish,

Aciman's family. Their like will not again be seen, because the world that created them is no more. And even if it's gone forever, the fact that it was captured by as skillful a chronicler as Aciman is reason to celebrate.

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