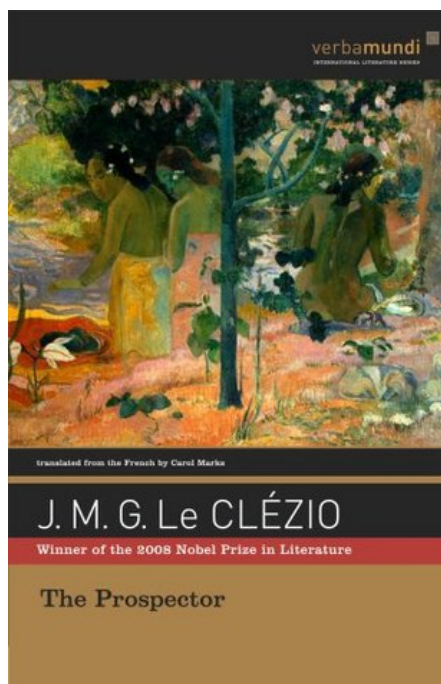




The Prospector

J.M.G. Le Clézio

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The Prospector

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The Prospector J.M.G. Le Clézio

The Prospector is the crowning achievement from one of France's preeminent contemporary novelists and a work rich with sensuality and haunting resonance. It is the turn of the century on the island of Mauritius, and young Alexis L'Etang enjoys an idyllic existence with his parents and beloved sister: sampling the pleasures of privilege, exploring the constellations and tropical flora, and dreaming of treasure buried long ago by the legendary Unknown Corsair. But with his father's death, Alexis must leave his childhood paradise and enter the harsh world of privation and shame. Years later, Alexis has become obsessed with the idea of finding the Corsair's treasure and, through it, the lost magic and opulence of his youth. He abandons job and family, setting off on a quest that will take him from remote tropical islands to the hell of World War I, and from a love affair with the elusive Ouma to a momentous confrontation with the search that has consumed his life. By turns harsh and lyrical, pointed and nostalgic, The Prospector is a parable of the human condition (Le Mond) by one of the most significant literary figures in Europe today.

The Prospector Details

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Author : J.M.G. Le Clézio

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From Reader Review The Prospector for online ebook

David Smith says

« Il a défait ce qu'il avait créé, pour être enfin libre. » I will remember much from this beautiful book but that's the line that's likely to stick with me. If I didn't want to go to Rodrigues before, I certainly do now. Thanks to Sophie Sebirot-Nossoff for helping me feel much better about writing from Ile Maurice. Paul et Virginie get several mentions in Le Chercheur d'Or.

Elizabeth Grubgeld says

Can't decide what to make of this book. It seems to embody every cliché of the novel or memoir concerning a disaffected member of a colonial class: the idyllic lost childhood, the family's good relations with the indigenous people, the feckless father's loss of fortune and the family's decline into isolation and poverty, the other colonists who are rich and ruthless, the gorgeous indigenous woman, etc.

I cannot tell if I'm to take the narrator seriously or whether I'm to see this as a satire. I think it's the former, and that's what is troubling.

Pamela says

One star for a Nobel Prize-winning author! Contentious, I know. However, I think the fact that I had to renew this book *five times* from the library says something about the enjoyability of this book.

First off, we get the dull, overlong setup of an idyllic childhood in Mauritius. On page 25, I know exactly where this is going to go: Alexis is going to travel the world, hoping to regain a sense of this childhood paradise. Sure enough, Le Clézio spends 300-plus pages doing exactly that: mooring Alexis on bleak landscapes so that he can indulge (and yes, I mean *indulge*) himself in metaphorical fantasies of primitivism and treasure-seeking. I GET IT: YOU'RE REALLY SEARCHING FOR THE PAST. So imagine my reaction when I finally read this line on page 322: "Everything I had done, everything I'd searched for, was all so that I could be there at the entrance to Mananava [a mysterious forest Alexis played in during his childhood:]."

Oh *really*. You don't say.

Darryl says

This novel about a man's search for a lost treasure and personal fulfillment begins on the island of Mauritius in 1892, where the eight year old Alexis L'Etang lives with his parents and beloved older sister Laure in an isolated house, surrounded by rich foliage and close to the sea, which nurtures and draws him in every night. His older friend Denis, the son of the black cook who lives nearby, teaches him about the mysteries of the sea and the local flora in the mountainous forest above it. His father also passes on to him his dream to find the hidden treasure of the Unknown Corsair, through maps and stories.

The family's idyllic existence is disrupted by tragedy, causing it to sink into poverty, and Alexis is forced to

take on responsibilities in advance of his years. However, he does not abandon his father's dream, and he eventually travels to the island of Rodrigues to seek the treasure that will ensure his family's good standing. There he meets Ouma, the love of his life, but his search is disrupted by the onset of the Great War, and he must abandon his search, and Ouma. Eventually he is able to return, as an older man whose dream and love have not been diminished by time, but his family's continued poverty and changes in the region cause his dual goals to become more distant and seemingly unachievable.

The Prospector is filled with evocative descriptions of the sea and island life, which was its main strength, along with the love that Alexis and Ouma shared for each other, and the description of the horrors of trench warfare. However, the other characters, especially Laure and Alexis' mother, were not portrayed as richly, and I had some difficulty in understanding Alexis' motivations and actions. Despite this, I thoroughly enjoyed, and would highly recommend, this beautifully told story.

Jim Fonseca says

Translated from the French, this book is set around the turn of the Century in the former French colony of Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean, off of the island of Madagascar. This is a many-themed book. If you ever dreamed of life on a tropical isle, a man and woman, living an isolated life, swimming naked, sleeping on the beach and spearing fish for food, here is a story for you.

The book has a couple of love stories, one between a brother and sister, so close from their isolated upbringing that some folks kiddingly call them "lovers" (but they aren't). It's also a love story of this brother and sister, in love with the place where they grew up, the tropical valley of their youth. I can't think of another novel that is so closely tied to love of place. The book is also a seafaring story - a substantial portion has the narrator on deck behind the wheel of a sailing ship describing the response of the ship and the wind in his hair. And the book is a story of a search for buried pirate treasure - literally step-by-step, clue-by-clue.

When the main character goes off to fight in World War I, it becomes a saga of the horrors of trench warfare, akin in its graphic depictions to *Fields of Glory* by Jean Rouaud. On top of all this, the book is structured as a historical novel describing the brutal life of the various immigrant groups that were serfs/slaves on the island's sugar plantations in the early 1900's. It kept my attention and I learned a lot from it.

metaphor says

As far back as I can remember, the sound of the sea has been in my ears. Mingled with that of the wind in the needles of the sh-oaks, the wind that never stops, even when you leave the coast behind and cross the cane fields, it's the sound of my childhood. I can still hear it now, deep down inside of me, it accompanies me whenever I go. The slow, tireless sound of the waves breaking out on the coral reefs in the distance and then coming up to die on the sand of Black River. There's never a day I don't go down to the sea, nor a night that I don't wake up, sit up in my cot, back damp with sweat, pull aside the mosquito net and try to hear the tide, fretful, filled with a yearning I don't understand.

I think of the sea as a person- in the darkness- all of my senses are alert to better hear i coming, better welcome it. The giant waves leap over the reeefs, come crashing down into the lagoon, and the noise makes the earth and the air quake like a blast furnace. I can hear it, it's moving, breathing.

*

Nothing exists any more, everything stands still. This is all there is, what I' feeling, seeing, the sky so blue, the sound of the sea struggling against the reefs and the cold water flowing over my skin.

*

There would be the sea, the smell of the sea borne along on the wind, the sound of the sea and, shuddering, we would listen to its forgotten voice, saying don't leave again, don't leave again...

*

Now I wish I could remember every detail about that day, so I could relive it, because that was one of the most important days of my life.

*

Now I understand what I've come in search of: it is a force much greater than my own, a memory that began before I was born.

*

Now it's as if all of that were part of some other life.

Barbara says

This novel is surprising slow for a story packed with childhood bliss, loss of fortune, death of family members, sea adventure, buried treasure, hurricanes, violent uprisings, an island love affair, WWI, loneliness and isolation. Wave after wave of beautiful prose washes over you, and the effect is sometimes mesmerizing but sometimes tedious. I found the overall effect to be sobering and depressing, but at the same time one of reverent celebration of nature and a primitive way of life.

3.5 stars.

Bettie? says

The cover is a detail from Paul Gauguin's 'The Bathers' 1898

Description: *It is the turn of the century on the island of Mauritius, and young Alexis L'Etang enjoys an idyllic existence with his parents and beloved sister: sampling the pleasures of privilege, exploring the constellations and tropical flora, and dreaming of treasure buried long ago by the legendary Unknown Corsair. But with his father's death, Alexis must leave his childhood paradise and enter the harsh world of privation and shame. Years later, Alexis has become obsessed with the idea of finding the Corsair's treasure and, through it, the lost magic and opulence of his youth. He abandons job and family, setting off on a quest that will take him from remote tropical islands to the hell of World War I, and from a love affair with the elusive Ouma to a momentous confrontation with the search that has consumed his life. By turns harsh and lyrical, pointed and nostalgic, The Prospector is a parable of the human condition (Le Monde) by one of the most significant literary figures in Europe today.*

Translated from the French by Carol Marks

For my grandfather, Léon

Opening: **Boucan, 1892: AS FAR BACK as I can remember I have listened to the sea: to the sound of it mingling with the wind in the filao needles, the wind that never stopped blowing, even when one left the shore behind and crossed the sugarcane fields. It is the sound of my childhood.**

Tijana says

Evokativan, gust lirizam koji, naročito u prvoj polovini knjige, podseća na književnu verziju ranih albuma o Kortu Maltezeu - i južna mora, i potraga za gusarskim blagom, i brat i sestra koji odrastaju u tom idiličnom romantičnom pejzažu, i približavanje Prvog svetskog rata.

E, ali: dosadno do bola. Ne znam kako je to autoru pošlo za rukom, piše kao anđeo, ali do.sad.no. Mnogo mi je krivo i osećam se kao čak Galkjevič iz Ferdidurki (- Kako te to ne oduševljava, Galkjeviču, jesam li ti hiljadu puta objašnjavao da te oduševljava? - Ali kad to mene ne oduševljava!) i jedino što imam da kažem u svoju odbranu jeste da me smara kad neko svojim likovima od karakterizacije dodeljuje alegorijske funkcije i toliko, ali nije ni to dovoljno objašnjenje za ovako epsku dosadu od zapravo sasvim pristojne knjige :(

Joe says

This book makes you want to do things. You want to go live on a remote island. You want to get on a boat and spend nights sleeping on the deck, waiting for the dawn. You want to find old treasure maps and look for the gold no one else was smart enough - or crazy enough - to find. Le Clezio's naked description of the islands in the Indian Ocean where the action takes place will fill you with a sense of wonder and life that could only be matched by being there.

The story itself is circular and simple, and its existential course is set extremely early in the book. But that's what makes it so fascinating to follow.

What truly stands out is the narrator's voice. The book seems so empty of humanity, alone in nature, that it is not until it's over that you realize how intimate your mind had become with that of the narrator, whose voice is so rationally obsessive that you follow his path regardless of its obvious futility. More than a triumph of nature writing, *The Prospector* is a flawless example of the flawed first-person narrator.

Bruce says

Published in 1985 by this 2008 Nobel Prize winning French author, *The Prospector* is a fascinating and beautifully written work. Taking place between 1890 and 1925, largely in and near the island of Mauritius, it is told in the first person by Alexis L'Etang, beginning when he is eight years old and concluding when he is about forty. Structured in literary quest form, the book has seven distinct sections, beginning with "Bouran," an Edenic paradise where Alexis spends most of his childhood. Here there is even an explicit tree of good and evil, and Alexis with his beloved sister Laure seem to fill the roles of Adam and Eve. But there is also an undertone of foreboding, and eventually, due to their father's bankruptcy, a cyclone, and ultimately their father's death, they are forced to leave. And their leaving entails a descent into poverty. Having been enchanted since early childhood by his father's "research" into the location of treasure hidden by the "Unknown Corsair," Alexis devotes his life to a hunt for this will-of-a-wisp. His search takes years, many on the island of Rodrigues, and although he repeatedly seems on the verge of success, it always eludes him. During these years he develops a love affair with an outcast named Ouma, herself mysterious and strange. As in many typical quest narratives, this one includes a trip to the Underworld in the form of Alexis' spending years fighting in the trenches of France during the First World War.

If there is a constant during the entire novel, it is the presence of the Sea, a haunting and seductive presence for Alexis and a force that never seems to leave his consciousness. The prose in this novel is lovely, often movingly poetic, and the atmosphere this creates is dreamlike and mesmerizing. Always nature seems more real and certainly more desirable than civilization, and Alexis spends most of his life alone and reclusive.

The end of the novel is inconclusive and raises many questions. What is each of us searching for? Are dreams and memories more “real” than “reality?” Are satisfaction and bliss always elusive and transient? Are we ultimately left with only memories and fantasies? At the end of the story, is Alexis simply lost in fantasy, or is he descending into madness? Ultimately, each of us must decide for himself what he is seeking and whether in the seeking he is missing life altogether. This is a wonderful and fascinating book, beautifully written, poignant, haunting and captivating.

Mohamed says

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Jim says

This book by the 2008 Nobel Prize winner J M G Le Clézio is suffused with a combination of magic and a gentle irony. It begins with one of the most luminous childhoods imaginable, with young Alexis L'Étang and his sister Laure growing up in a remote corner of Mauritius with their dreamer of a father and their gentle mother. But if there is anything that life teaches us, it is that joys are fleeting. Alexis is gripped with the same *ignis fatuus* as his father: a feverish desire to dig up the mythical buried treasure of the 18th century pirate known only as The Corsair.

In his search for pirate gold, Alexis finds two treasures, his family and the love of a primitive Malaf girl on Rodrigues Island, where he digs for the treasure. These two treasures he loses, punctuated by the horrors of the First World War. I think back to these lines by Edna St Vincent Millay:

What now -- what now to me
Are all the jabbering birds and foolish flowers
That clutter up the world? You were my song!
Now, let discord scream! You were my flower!
Now let the world grow weeds!

This bitterness does not emerge in the course of **The Prospector**, but the withering irony of a life wasted hunting for an elusive treasure did hit me with the force of a blow to the head as I finished Le Clézio's wonderful novel.

There is a touch of this when Alexis thinks to himself:

Now I understand how deluded I was: history happened here [Mauritius] as it did everywhere else; the world was not the same anywhere. There have been crimes, transgressions, a war, and because of it our lives have come apart.

It is not just history -- World War I and its dire effect on the colonial peoples -- but nature herself. There are two great hurricanes in the novel, one on Mauritius in 1892 that destroys the L'Étang cottage at Boucan, and

one on Rodrigues Island in 1922 that puts an end to Alexis's second attempt at seeking the treasure.

How many of us lose the treasures that are at hand looking for treasures that may not exist? Treasures that nature herself buries ever deeper in the muck of life to remind us of the madness of our dreams.

Ben Jaques-Leslie says

Had I read this book when I was 16, I may have thought it a masterpiece. Now, I think it is boring and navel-gazing. In short, this is the story of a man of French decent who grew up on Mauritius. After recounting his childhood, the happiness of which is cut short by a hurricane and an evil uncle (seriously), he tries to recapture the magic of his boyhood for the rest of the book. He hunts buried treasure for years, goes to war, and has an affair with a beautiful woman. The affair is especially annoying. She is constantly appear, quickly disrobing, and then diving into a pool of water. The author is constantly describing her like this: "Ouma with her beautiful x-colored body," where x was brown, copper, coffee, and any other word he could think of. The moment when I actually audibly scoffed was when the narrator realizes that the valley is the universe and vice versa. Blah!

the gift says

now here is a book that uses no particular structural innovations, that on occasion slips to present tense, that sometimes has a certain awareness of its form- but none of this is noticeable, distracting, enervating. this work spurs my own nostalgia and thoughts and feelings of my childhood as the narrator recounts his own childhood idylls...

'boucan' is what/where he names his memories...

every christmas or so when i was a child- until we lived for a year of my father's sabbatical from u on the windward side of oahu, my freshman year at high school- we came to my mom's hometown of waimea on the island of kaua'i for a few weeks. every year, for a few weeks, i came to know the island life just as sugar cane was declining industry and tourism rising, came to know my cousins, my aunties, my uncles, my grandparents when we stayed at their house facing the beach...

those days seem longer in memory, more meaningful, even as i still go every february to my mom and dad's condo, even as i can look with a mature eye on this part of paradise, even as i can see how for my cousins it is just a small unexciting town in the middle of nowhere- except people from around the world come and look in your back yard. i do not lose this place through natural disaster or exile or poverty or war, such as this narrator alexis, i lose this through the natural passage of time, but this is no less irreversible...

so, i only read this today, i have only read this once, i can look at the photos here, i can skype my parents there, it is not too long until i visit- though i might call it return despite the fact most of my childhood was here in cold canada- but reading brings aching heart when i must recall who is no longer there, how the sleepy island has lost this or that magical distant isolation from our north american modern world, how my memories will meet with loss as soon as the flight from seattle or vancouver or san francisco, comes to the international airport of lihue, and that oppressive smell of the planes is overcome by the thousands of tropical smells of the island...

so, of this lyrical recall, this eden-plot is romantic, elegiac, not ultimately important as it becomes clear it is not the dreaming search for gold, it is recovery of past idylls, that draws alexis on to some kind of final acceptance of loss. do all great books cause similar effect for all readers, i do not know, i know only this does for me- for you? i do not know, i can only revel in the way his words do this for me. does not everyone, eventually and inevitably, come to sense nostalgia? here, there, wherever? i do not know...

so, images come of those times, images overlapping, images not less real if i can never date them with any certainty. moments all seem to be from my childhood, for in recall i am always again a child, even when we are talking about books written and read later, or my grandma or my grandpa are no longer alive and perhaps yet even then they ride in our car as we drive home... because of the latitude night falls just after supper and we are driving home on the two-lane blacktop from kapaa or anahola or just hanapepe... and to either side rise the walls of sugar cane and we are embraced in tropical night and breezes and a thousand scents...

i can only hope everyone has similar memories. if not, perhaps, you can follow them here in this book, find them as you lose them in fruitless search for some way home, find them recalled not in money or power, but find them here waiting forever...

???? ?????? says

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Walter says

Where have all the aesthetes gone?

That's troublesome. It seems these days there are entertainers and artists; both forgoing the idea of beauty. What's odd is that this time on Planet Earth is probably the softest time to be alive in its history and when, if one wanted, being into the pursuit of beauty is at its most accessible point to people. And yet for the most part, from popular entertainment to art there is rampant unhinged cynicism running around, lots of ugly, that I see bleeding into the minds of people. A little bit ago, someone asked what I thought the world needed, and I said, flowers. The gentlemen became sort of engaged, "YOU ARE A DREAMER!" Huh? Flowers are the sign of a dreamer...as if this is bad? Potted plants are available at your local greenhouse for a couple dollars. This struck me as sad, he did. Maybe it's what people have in terms of expectation as to what life is, what it was going to be, or maybe they are still working off a base that never was; as Mason Cooley said, "Cynicism is full of naive disappointments."

The Prospector is beautiful. A work of an aesthete, glorious prose, but one that can think. As it answers why people like ugly, as at some point during this novel, about for the most part a childhood home, all the answers to modern day cynicism are present: the myth of independence.

As Charles de Gaulle said: "Authority doesn't work without prestige, or prestige without distance". The author illuminates this true philosophical understanding of the human mind: it's why God and childhood have such unforeseen and dangerous power.

Tony says

It begins here:

As far back as I can remember I have listened to the sea...

And it begins here:

The island of Mauritius.

It is Alexis L'Etang who listens to the sea. First on Mauritius in 1892, a multi-cultural boy on a multi-cultural island. But you know how these things go. Even there are racial strata. Alexis is not black. There are early lessons.

The idyllic life of Alexis is shattered, first by a storm, then by the death of his father. His family (Alexis, his mother and sister) is financially ruined, and beholden now to Uncle Ludovic, not so much a character as an abstract idea of harsh capitalism.

His father's legacy is a fool's quest: a cryptic map and notes by the legendary Unknown Corsair, a hidden treasure.

And so, when things seem bleakest for the family, Alexis quits his position with Uncle Ludovic and takes to the sea, to the nearby island of Rodrigues, to look for gold.

"On the west coast of the island at a spot where the sea pounds the coast there is a stream. Follow the stream to its source, where you will find a tamarind tree. Eighteen feet from the tamarind tree the stonework that hides an immense treasure begins."

Sounds adventurous, if self-centered, but Alexis is no Maqroll. He finds the Corsair's hiding places*, and he finds himself bewitched by the beautiful Ouma, a Manaf.

Ouma dives into the lagoon, harpoons an octopus for them to roast. She rubs sand over her black body, then his white one. A local custom.

It is Ouma who imparts what wisdom there is:

"Gold is worthless. You mustn't be afraid of it. It's like scorpions who only sting those who are afraid of it."

And:

"All of you out there, you desire gold above everything because there is nothing more powerful. You make war for it. People everywhere will because of this obsession."

Prescient she is. Soon there is indeed talk of war. Alexis signs up. Why not? He is at Ypres, he is at The Somme. There are no novices by that time. Eventually he is sickened. *Typhoid*. The doctor takes his temperature and squeezes his stomach, then says with a certain sadness, "*In the end it's lice who win the war.*"

That's as much of the story as I'll tell, except to say that he finds himself on a beach wailing *Ouma-ah! Ouma-ah!* Kinda like Rocky and Adrian. It's told in a first-person somnambulist style - *As I walk on the blood pounds in my head and I feel feverish.* - which I'm told is a rich French literary tradition.

This is best read as a kind of reverse nesting doll, how a small story or vignette exposes a larger idea, and then a larger one.

Reading this, that stink bug of colonialism kept popping into my mind. Le Clézio draws a kindly colonial (Alexis' father) as distinct from the brutal one (Uncle Ludovic). Ouma teaches us they are one and the same.

* Not saying if he found the treasure.

Connie says

Had to see what all the hoopla was about this Nobel prize winning author. This book, translated from French, is about a young man's relationship with nature (mostly in and around Mauritius.) Many of the passages are lovely and the chapter describing his experiencing a hurricane with his mother and sister is fabulous, as if suddenly the book got "plugged-in". Primarily, though, the reading is slow and repetitive. The main character's inability to grow up, or beyond his senses does in the end make him a stunted and un-heroic character. He doesn't seem to fit in anywhere and it is sad to see his memories of how things were, or at least how he thought they were, slipping away. I kept hoping he would mature into action, or the hope of positive action to support his professed passion for the island, if not his family.

Kati Stevens says

Ugh, cloying, nostalgia overkill. I can't believe it's the translation that makes this book so unlikeable. The protagonist lives in a dream state, or that's how the writer works his prose. It's repetitive and tedious and you feel as if both you and the writer and the protagonist have wasted time being dreamy instead of taking action or thinking of something other than oneself.

Not rec'd.
