



# The Levant Trilogy

*Olivia Manning*

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## **The Levant Trilogy** Olivia Manning

As Rommel advances in wartorn Egypt, the lives of the civilian population come under threat. One such couple are Guy and Harriet Pringle, who have escaped the war in Europe only to find the conflict once more on their doorstep, providing a volatile backdrop to their own personal battles. The civilian world meets the military through the figure of Simon Boulderstone, a young army officer who will witness the tragedy and tension of war on the frontier at first hand. An outstanding author of wartime fiction, Olivia Manning brilliantly evokes here the world of the Levant - Egypt, Jerusalem and Syria - with perception and subtlety, humour and humanity.

## **The Levant Trilogy Details**

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Author : Olivia Manning

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## From Reader Review The Levant Trilogy for online ebook

### Naomi Styles says

Another excellent book after the Balkan Trilogy - this one has more plot to it, and because it portrays the war front as well as city life for the non-combatants, I think it's richer and more informative. The descriptions of sounds, smell, temperature and light are so rich that you can imagine yourself there. The characters are annoying, and all the better for it, as they are believable and incite the reader to form a personal opinion of each one. There are many different themes to the book though, and I finished it wondering what the real theme was - was it the destructiveness of war? the banality of marriage? the nature of friendship? different attitudes to money? Changing social Class (and changing attitudes to it)? The unfairness of Nepotism? The nature of the British empire at the time? The difference between the British attitude to life and the attitudes of other nations? Socialism? All these themes (and more) are explored, and no answers given. There's a lot in this book, and worthy of considerable discussion, and several re-reads. Quality prose - not one to give to the charity shop.

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### Lisa Brantly says

Very good. Almost as good as Balkan Trilogy. I really don't think I ever learned about this part of WW2.

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### Ian Laird says

*The review does contain spoilers.*

Someone posited that Guy Pringle is one of the great characters of twentieth century literature. He is certainly an interesting one: a charismatic fellow who attracts people to him, whether they be colleagues, his students or English expatriates far from home. Generally though they are disappointing as company and some of them are not at all attractive. But that is not the point, Guy thrives on conviviality. Absorbed in his work as a British Council lecturer in literature in wartime Cairo, he has time for everybody except for his wife Harriet, whom he takes for granted while thinking he understands her feelings and needs better than she does herself.

I think Harriet Pringle is the greater character: wise and helpful for newly married young soldier Simon Boulderstone, freshly arrived from England; she is the one who counsels Guy to be diplomatic when he is trying to negotiate a job with the odious Gracey; the one who sees Edwina Little for the beautiful, sweet but shallow girl she is; the one who befriends Lady Angela Cooper, not her type at all; the one who accurately reads the feelings and emotions of those around her.

Being with her in her thoughts is the most rewarding place in the narrative. Harriet appreciates her own strengths and limitations, even if less sure about what to do about her circumstances. Like her friends and acquaintances, she is living on the edge of a war: which impacts her life completely if indirectly: she is in a state of permanent impermanence. Harriet is in a foreign land, with a temporary job soon to end and Rommel's army bearing down on Cairo. She feels disquiet because her husband pays her little attention while he thinks he doesn't need to.

When she eventually takes action, spontaneously hitching a ride to Damascus rather than boarding the ship taking her back to England, she realises she is pretty much alone and needs help from others but trusts her judgement about people, especially who she might find attractive.

A pivotal moment comes when Harriet is guided around Damascus by Halal, an educated Arab who does the legal work for his father's silk factory. He aspires to having an English lady by his side and regards Harriet as suitable, despite her being married. They visit a mosque. Reluctant to wear a dusty and not over-clean black robe Harriet dons it but is obliged to use the hood to hide her face. But she asks why she must wear it. Halal replies:

‘...they fear a lady will distract the men from their devotions. The men have, you understand, strong desires.’ (And she replies) ‘You mean they are frustrated. Tell him that you can't make men chaste by keeping women out of sight.’

Halal stared at her, disconcerted, then smiled, not knowing what else to do: ‘You are an unusual lady, Mrs Pringle. Very unusual. You think for yourself.’

‘Where I come from that's not unusual.’ (p448)

They proceed, then the mosque keeper indicates she needs to be barefoot. Harriet says in Egypt they give you slippers, but Halal tells her they are more strict here. I was reminded of Geraldine Brooks remarkable book *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, about the Muslim women she got to know as a journalist in Egypt and the Middle East in the 1980s, which among other things brought out the subtle and not so subtle differences in Muslim practices in the different countries (and even within them). Escorted by Halal she becomes aware that no one is bothering her for a moment

‘no one gave her curious looks or nudged against her or stared into her face with bold, provocative eyes. She was hidden...’ (p449).

For a brief moment she remembers what it felt like back home, unbothered and comfortable. Up to now she has spent years in foreign countries with vastly different customs, usage and culture, always an outsider making do as best she can, dependent on her husband's job. It is noticeable that women in the story are typically dependent or oriented that way: Edwina concentrates on landing an officer. Even Lady Cooper, who has wealth and can therefore guide her own destiny, is in that position because of the divorce settlement from her husband. Her money cannot prevent the humiliating treatment she receives at the hands of Mona Castlebar after lover Bill Castlebar succumbs to typhoid and Mona ploughs in as the grieving widow. Lovers have no status in the eyes of church, employer or law.

The Pringles are in Egypt because they fled Greece as the Germans took the country. As Rommel is poised 50 miles from Cairo they expect to have to move again. Interwoven with the story of the Pringles is the desert campaign of Lieutenant Boulderstone, 20 years old and an innocent abroad. He is, however, not without resource, though he struggles at times to comprehend what is happening around him and to him. We follow his discovery of competencies he never knew he had, as he deals with the reality of war in the desert, including the loss of his brother and ultimately his naivety. Like all the characters major and minor in Olivia Manning's book Simon is carefully and individually drawn. The characters stay with you long after the book is finished. Simon's interactions with Harriet and Guy bookend the trilogy. At the beginning Harriet, with experience and maturity guides the boy in his first days in Egypt. Later, After Simon is severely wounded, Guy attempts to help him, more out of duty than anything else, with less understanding of what the young man is going through.

The authenticity of Manning's writing is beyond dispute, skilfully telling the story of these men at war, as

richly evocative of the life in the desert in the sporadic skirmishes as she is at depicting life in the capital among the expatriates. Only towards the very end does it feel like she was over it, having written the two trilogies for a long period of time.

There was a BBC production made in 1987 entitled **Fortunes of War**, combining the earlier The Balkan Trilogy with The Levant Trilogy, with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson as the Pringles. As I was reading I didn't have anyone in particular in mind who would make a good Guy Pringle but Harriet struck me as being like Tara Fitzgerald, small, slight and dark with surprising strength. Not sure I want to watch the adaptation, but I now need to read The Balkan Trilogy, having just found it in a second hand bookshop.

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### **Ann says**

A good follow-up to the Balkan Trilogy, with some very beautifully-written passages. There were some repetitive references to characters and events, as if Manning had forgotten that she had already mentioned these things. Guy Pringle, Harriet's husband, becomes quite infuriating by the 6th book (as I think he is meant to), as are most of the other male characters, and quite a few of the female characters. But I liked Harriet, the main character, quite a bit (especially when she strikes off to have her own adventures), and Simon, the young officer, was an engaging and sympathetic figure. Angela, Harriet's friend, was also a compelling figure.

I think both this and the Balkan Trilogy were well worth the read, and taken together offer a well-written view of British experience in WWII. The writing was consistently enjoyable and well-crafted, sometimes quite funny, and occasionally terrific, especially descriptions of the landscape. I'm torn between 3 and 4 stars, so I'll give the Balkan Trilogy 4 and this one 3.

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### **Callie says**

Oh how I love reading about Harriet and Guy Pringle! I can't get enough of them and their adventures in various exotic places during World War II. If this book were written by a man and had a male protagonist, you can bet your bottom dollar it would be far more prestigious and known than it is currently. But I will spare you the feminist rant.

If you haven't read this book yet, you may want to move on now because I will probably spoil the ending for you.

Guy continues to be Guy in this trilogy, giving his best to everyone and everything except his own wife. There are a couple of moments when I was simply aghast at the level of his insensitivity. There was the matter of the brooch, and then after they are reunited and he's thought she was dead, and then he can't be bothered to spend the evening with her? Are you KIDDING me? But the thing that's so perfect about Guy, and about Harriet is that they are so real. Guy isn't a bad dude, he just doesn't know how to put his marriage first. And Harriet is slowly but surely figuring out that she's going to have to find something to occupy her time and engage her passion, the way Guy has. She can't keep waiting for him to change and become the person who will make her happy and meet all her needs. In my opinion, most of us have to learn what Harriet finally learns.

I wonder if Manning has an autobiography or a memoir, if so, I would simply love to devour it. I can't get enough of this stuff and I'm fairly certain that Guy and Harriet are based off of Manning and her husband...

"Opportunity to escape was offered and he would not be restricted by the disapprobation of other men."

"The war had abandoned them, leaving them in a vacuum that had been filled by everyday worries. But everyday worries were not enough. They had to invent excitements to make life bearable."

"In an imperfect world, marriage was a matter of making do with what one had chosen."

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## **Susan says**

The three books which make up The Levant Trilogy are "The Danger Tree," "The Battle Lost and Won," and "The Sum of Things." These novels follow on from Oliva Manning's, "The Balkan Trilogy," in which we first met young married couple, Guy and Harriet Pringle. In the Balkan novels, we followed newlyweds, Guy and Harriet Pringle, as they embarked on married life in Budapest – later moving to Greece. "The Danger Tree" sees many of these characters reappear, such as Pinkrose, Dubebat, Lush and Dobson. There are also new characters, such as the young officer, Simon Boulderstone, who has been separated from his unit, and the beautiful Edwina.

"The Danger Tree," sees the Pringles now in Egypt; having fled Greece at the end of the "Balkan Trilogy," As before, the move has not seen them any more settled – there are constant rumours of the planned evacuation of Cairo and the city seems to have become the, "clearing house of Eastern Europe." Guy, so trusting and naïve, is hurt when Gracey appears to have no use for him in the organisation and finds himself shunted off to Alexandria, where Harriet worries he will be cut off by the approaching Germans. Unwilling to accept he is not wanted by Gracey, and always giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, Guy attempts to bury himself in work.

As always, Harriet is in the unenviable position of seeing Guy always admired, and used, by his many friends; while he gives his attentions to his students, his friends and his acquaintances, but never to her. She feels ill-used, neglected and at a loss of how to help, making excuses for her husband, while the war continues to cause chaos around her. Simon Boulderstone is a good new character, whose attempts to find his unit, his struggles with the life of the army, and the sheer confusion of war, open up a new vista to these books, in showing us the men who are fighting, as well as the civilians who are coping with the encroaching war.

The second in the trilogy, "The Battle Lost and Won," follows seamlessly on from, "The Danger Tree," and begins with Simon Boulderstone arriving in Cairo on leave. Simon had been under the belief that his brother, Hugo's, girl was Edwina, who has a room in Dobson's apartment, as do the Pringles and Lady Angela Hooper. Edwina though, is a frivolous girl, currently obsessed with a titled beau, called Peter, and the minor embarrassment caused over Simon's uncomfortable arrival, results in his later being promoted to a liaison officer.

As in the other novels though, it is Harriet Pringle who remains centre stage in the story. She watches Edwina's doomed pursuit of Peter and Angela's odd obsession with the drunken Castlebar, both married men, with concern. As always, Guy is obsessed with work – he has now also been promoted and relishes his

new responsibility to run the organisation. Giving lectures, finding teachers, organising entertainment for the troops. He pays little attention to Harriet and treats her as though she is little more than a nuisance. When she becomes ill, and Guy takes a gift Angela has given her to pass on to Edwina, Harriet decides to return to England.

With all these books, Olivia Manning tells the story of war from the personal level. We are aware of rising Egyptian nationalism, of the tide of war turning as Rommel retreats, of how locals sneer at the English before the war turns in their favour, but this is cleverly done. Manning is not as interested in the main theatre of war – she is in the dressing room with the actors, who hear everything in whispers and snippets and rumours. As such, shocking events – such as an assassination – take on an air of farce.

“The Sum of Things,” is the third in The Levantine Trilogy. In this concluding volume, Harriet heads for Damascus, having failed to board the ship to England that Guy wanted her to take. Unbeknownst to her, the ship was torpedoed and there are only a handful of survivors. Meanwhile, Harriet has no idea that Guy imagines she is dead.

Many of the characters in earlier books also appear here, including the frivolous Edwina, Dobson, Angela Hooper, Castlebar, Aidan Pratt and the young officer, Simon Boulderstone, who was injured at the end of the last book. Guy finds his comfortable existence interrupted by news of Harriet’s death and is injured at any criticism of how he treated her. While Edwina attempts to use Harriet’s absence to integrate himself, Guy attempts to “take on” Simon.

This book follows both Harriet’s journey and her encounters, as she travels from Damascus and eventually to Jerusalem, and Guy’s continued life in Cairo. Eventually, the two are reunited and the novel ends with how the war has changed all of the characters. This is a moving, but realistic, conclusion to the war of Guy and Harriet Pringle and the cast of supporting characters. The war has made many grow more mature, has made others attempt to use the time they have to advance themselves and has brought others death, changed circumstances and different opportunities. I enjoyed this book very much and, indeed, the entire six volumes. Harriet Pringle is certainly one of the fictional characters that will stay with me and I found her journey fascinating. Overall, I think I preferred “The Balkan Trilogy,” to this series, but both are expertly written and well realised accounts of a young couple coping not only with married life in insecure times, but with a war which chases them continually from one precarious existence to another. These are books I return to every few years and, each time, find more to enjoy

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## **Dpdwyer says**

These three novels pick up, in Cairo, the story of The Balkan Trilogy. It is the story of a deep but flawed marriage set against the backdrop of World War II, always interrupting and disrupting their lives in unforeseen ways. Given the length of the entire project, I would occasionally put it down and read something else. The characters are so well developed that I found I could easily pick it up after many weeks and get right back into the story. Manning is a master of evocative descriptions of people and places, and without

straining for aphorisms she repeatedly achieves the same end.

Sample quotes:

“Every marriage was imperfect and the destroying agents, the imperfections, were there, unseen, from the start.”

”Guy and Major Cookson were the only people to follow Pinkrose’s coffin to the English cemetery and neither could be described as a mourner.”

“He not only had more confidence and more to say for himself but he had lost the seedy look of the alcoholic for whom any money not spent on drink was money wasted...but he still chain-smoked, placing the pack open in front of him with a cigarette pulled out ready to succeed the one he held in his hand. He still hung over the table, his thick, pale eyelids covering his eyes, his full, mauvish under-lip hanging slightly with one yellow eye-tooth tending to slip into view.”

“Beneath his confident belief in himself, beneath his certainty that he was loved and wanted wherever he went, he was deprived. She saw the world as a reality and he did not.”

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## **Rick Slane says**

British diplomatic life in Egypt as well as a description of how Rommel is driven back

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## **Dan Leo says**

This year I read Olivia Manning's Balkan and Levant Trilogies, and, in short, I loved these six books, which in their total make up one rather long novel, telling the tale of a young English couple caught up in World War II in its first four years – first in Romania (where the husband returns to his pre-war teaching job), and then buffeted and chased down to Greece, and then to Egypt, with excursions into Syria, Lebanon, and what was then known as Palestine. I highly recommend the books, and if you're interested at all, I strongly urge you to start at the beginning with The Balkan Trilogy. The second trilogy is perhaps a half-step less rich than the first, but still well worth reading. Typo-warnings: the second volume of the Levant Trilogy (which I read in its original single-volume edition) is rather poorly proof-read as far as typographical errors go, and the third volume (which was released around the time of Manning's death) has fewer typos, but a couple of major ones. I only hope that these errata were corrected in later editions. Manning was a major author, and she deserves better treatment!

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## **Fiona says**

A must-read after The Balkan Trilogy, this sees Harriet becoming her own woman - eventually. Manning's experiences in Egypt and the Levant give the books an air of authenticity. The third book is largely an indulgence which gives her the opportunity to describe wartime Damascus, Beirut and Jerusalem but the descriptions are beautifully written and read just as well as a travelogue as fiction. I'm still not sure if



Manning is a great author but I have thoroughly enjoyed taking this wartime journey with her. I've learned a great deal about many of the events of WWII and quickly became involved with the characters. I'm really sorry to have finished these books and I'm sad that there aren't any more in this series.

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## **Nooilforpacifists says**

Better than the Balkan Trilogy, Manning writes with searing honesty about Guy and Harriet Pringle -- the thinly fictionalized version of her own marriage. Unlike the first three books that comprise the Balkan Trilogy, the focus here is almost entirely on Harriet. Especially in the middle book (the fifth of the six total books in the Fortunes of War), she is relentlessly self-examining. And, in the course of the fifth and sixth book, she learns something about herself.

"Perhaps she had expected too much from marriage, but were her expectations reasonable?"

"This,' she thought, 'is marriage: knowing too much about each other.'"

"She wanted a union of mutual devotion, while he saw marriage merely as a frame merely to hold an indiscriminate medley of relationships that, as often as not, were too capacious to be contained."

"She wanted a large, comfortable man as friend and companion, like Guy, but without his intolerable gregariousness."

Yet, in the end, his very inattentiveness becomes a positive: "Could she, after all, have borne with some possessive, interfering, jealous fellow who would have wanted her to account for every breath she breathed? Not for long."

Manning's language is worth the read:

In Egypt, Guy was "Lecturing on English literature, teaching the English language, he had been peddling the idea of empire to a country that only wanted one thing: to be rid of the British for good and all."

One character receives a "Dear John" letter from his wife in England, seeking a divorce, signed "Ever Yours, Anne".

"The little black triangle of the pyramids came out of the mist as they had done every evening for some four thousand years."

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## **Marita says**

As with the earlier The Balkan Trilogy: "Great Fortune", "Spoilt City" and "Friends and Heroes", Harriet and Guy Pringle's experiences echo those of the author, Olivia Manning and her husband, Reggie Smith. At the end of The Balkan Trilogy Harriet and Guy board the *Erebus* and leave Athens Harbour as the Germans arrive on that city's doorstep. This was their last view of the city they had come to love:

**“The hills of the Peloponnesus, glowing in the sunset light, changed to rose-violet and darkened to madder rose, grew sombre and faded into the twilight. The Parthenon, catching the late light, glimmered for a long time, a spectre on the evening, then disappeared into darkness. That was the last they saw of Athens.”**( The Balkan Trilogy)

Author Olivia Manning and her husband Reggie Smith had travelled from Athens to Egypt on the *Erebus* under similar circumstances, and Harriet’s experiences are much like those of the author.

Harriet, Guy and the other refugees arrive in Egypt, but now Ms Manning introduces another dimension to their tale. Enter Simon Boulderstone, aged twenty, who will take us to the battlefield. Unlike The Balkan Trilogy which focuses on the Pringles and their experiences in Bucharest and Athens, this trilogy alternates between Harriet and Simon’s stories which at times intersect.

*“Simon, waiting at the station, was numb with solitude.” “He had never before seen such a wilderness or known such loneliness.”* Young Simon newly arrived in Egypt suddenly finds himself alone (early in Chapter 1, so not a spoiler). In **The Balkan Trilogy** Harriet had been newly married when she left England for Bucharest, and Simon married his wife a week prior to going to the Front and leaving his new wife behind. He had made some friends on the journey to Egypt, but they had become separated. He didn’t have friends here, and his brother who was a year older was already with his unit in the desert. Simon was a junior officer, but to date his war had just been theoretical. This trilogy sees Simon leave his boyhood behind and become a man. He will fight battles, see the dead of the enemy and of Allies, he will suffer losses and he’ll learn to deal with grief. He will find that: *“The need to survive was their chief preoccupation – and they did survive. In spite of the heat of the day, the cold of night, the flies, the mosquitoes, the sand-flies, the stench of death that came on the wind, the sand blowing into the body’s interstices and gritting in everything one ate, the human animal not only survived but flourished.”* Simon will also have to think about that marriage made in haste and now almost forgotten (there are some interesting parallels between Simon and Harriet). Simon will come of age actually and metaphorically.

Harriet too is alone. She is an alien in Egypt, an alien in her job and she feels isolated in her marriage. She is in Cairo working at the American Embassy and it is there that she later learns about the attack on Pearl Harbour. Her immediate concern though is the capture of Tobruk by the Germans, and she fears for Guy whose job has taken him to Alexandria. For the moment she is reconciled with the status of her marriage and she tries to be more supportive: *“Harriet, who might once have feared that Guy promised more than he could perform, was now confident that what he said he would do, he would do. Walking back to Garden City, he asked her, ‘Was I all right?’ ‘You were splendid.’”* She more or less accepts that Guy shares himself and his time with all and sundry but not with her. According to his philosophy she is part of him and therefore there is no need to spend his time with her: *““But you’re part of me - I don’t have to be courteous to you.””* But *“She wanted a union of mutual devotion while he saw marriage merely as a frame to hold an indiscriminate medley of relationships that, as often as not, were too capacious to be contained.”* This trilogy continues the examination of the Pringle’s marriage. As events unfold, choices and decisions will have to be made.

Once again there is very good characterisation. Various interesting characters were introduced in **The Balkan Trilogy**; some died and others moved on. Of those who remained, several travelled with Harriet and Guy on the *Erebus* and are now in Egypt. Amongst others, there is Professor Lord Pinkrose, puffed up to the extreme with his own self-importance. There is also Dobbie Dobson who the Pringles can always count on. Harriet also meets other people, one of the first being Simon Boulderstone whose story is told here. Harriet has a room in the house where the delectable Edwina Little lives. Simon is under the impression that Edwina

is his brother Hugo's "girl", and he himself is most impressed by the young lady. Edwina, however, has her own agenda: finding a rich husband with a title, and having an impressive wedding. Another arrival in this trilogy is Lady Angela Hooper. She is an interesting, fun-loving character and a good friend. Angela attracts (and repels) various other people and she has her own story in this book. Some characters who initially don't impress turn out to be kind and generous, and others who are generally accepted as being kind and generous are shown to be extremely selfish. Guy Pringle, I'm looking at you! Guy is well known and loved:

*"He was on leave from Damascus.*

*'Damascus? Then how did you come to know Guy?'*

*'Doesn't everyone know Guy?' he gave a laugh. 'Last time I was here someone told me a story: two men were wrecked on a desert island. Neither knew the other but they both knew Guy Pringle.'*"

**"Cairo had become the clearing house of Eastern Europe. Kings and princes, heads of state, their followers and hangers-on, free governments with all their officials, everyone who saw himself committed to the allied cause, had come to live here off the charity of the British government. Hotels, restaurants and cafés were loud with the squabbles, rivalries, scandals, exhibitions of importance and hurt feelings that occupied the refugees while they waited for the war to end and the old order to return."** Harriet is as observant as her author, and she notices the behaviour of those British citizens newly arrived in Egypt: *"They believed that the British Empire was the greatest force for good the world had ever known. They expected gratitude from the Egyptians and were pained to find themselves barely tolerated."* She converses with Egyptian servants, as well as employees at the American Embassy, and she is interested to know what is happening and what their views are. Harriet highlights prejudices that Olivia Manning perceived. Harriet also likes to visit interesting places and monuments, and through Harriet's eyes we see these as Olivia Manning herself had. Harriet wants to know what is happening in the real world whereas Guy prefers to concentrate on his work as lecturer, and on providing entertainments.

Ms Manning employs the vernacular of that time and place. The reader will find offensive words such as 'Gyppo', 'wogs', 'dago', 'popsie' and 'bint'. These terms are not overused, but they are there and they add to the veracity of the story, whether we like them or not. There is a strong sense of time and place in these novels, which is not surprising as much is based on Ms Manning's personal experiences. Here is a scene at a railway station: *"The train was sighted and a groan went through the crowd. The train came at a snail's pace towards the platform. The groan died out and a tense silence came down on the passengers who, gripping bags and babies, prepared for the battle to come. As the first carriages drew abreast of the platform, hysteria set in."* Many of the characters and events in this trilogy are fictitious, but several of the characters are modelled on people Ms Manning knew. They all have to battle heat, flies and mosquitoes. Harriet visits places that Ms Manning visited, and frequents restaurants, bars and clubs that Ms Manning frequented.

The first part of this trilogy takes place in Egypt, but later places such as Damascus, Baalbek, Galilee and Jerusalem feature. This is at the Sea of Galilee: *"Hidden among the lupins were irises of a maroon shade so deep they looked black. Farther on there were other irises, purple and pink, and a buff colour veined with brown. The field ended in a downslope of grass starred like the Damascus Ghuta with red, white and purple anemones, and in the distance there was a lake of pure lapis blue."*

**The Levant Trilogy** includes social commentary, examines relationships and there is a substantial amount of history.

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## Hana says

Three and a half stars. The Levant Trilogy is a wonderful coda to The Balkan Trilogy and a delicate, beautifully rendered portrait of a struggling marriage and the final chaos of war. Psychologically the Levant Trilogy may in fact go deeper than the Balkan Trilogy. It kind of depends on your favorite style but for me it was a bit of a let down after the The Balkan Trilogy, which I loved and devoured with unseemly haste. Harriet and Guy Pringle did not wear particularly well in this second trilogy, nor did their tiresome friends. By the third book in the trilogy I was quite ready to abandon the whole lot of them although (view spoiler)

The new characters lacked the dash and vibrancy of Prince Yakimov, the displaced European nobility, the crazed Rumanian agitators who peopled The Balkan Trilogy. Now, as the World War II drags through its final years, Egypt seems to be filled mostly with worn out remnants of a fading British Empire.

Guy's tireless campaigning for Shakespeare, poetry lectures and silly revues seems more pointless than ever. Harriet spends much of the series deeply depressed and sick with amoebic dysentery and when she goes off on her own in the third book she has no money, which rather limits the sightseeing and fine dining. It was realistic, but it reminded me of the saying that life is what happens while you're waiting for something else.

Among the new characters my favorite was Simon Boulderstone, a twenty year old officer facing his first combat experience in the North African campaign. The battle scenes were very convincing, as were the descriptions of the dreary life in camp in between fighting: the flies, the impossible heat, the mingled anxiety and boredom. Unfortunately Simon (view spoiler)

The BBC mini-series The Fortunes of War was better than the The Levant Trilogy. It's not often I say that the movie was better than the book, but the last three episodes of the BBC's 1987 dramatization cover the events of The Levant Trilogy superbly and make the characters more accessible. Kenneth Branagh's Guy Pringle is simultaneously infuriating and lovable, while Emma Thompson gives Harriet an amused, sardonic edge--and makes her character's slide into depression entirely understandable. The superb ensemble cast, notably Charles Kay as 'Dobbie' Dobson and Robert Stephens as Castlebar, bring welcome humor and warmth to characters who seemed sterile and even repulsive in the novel.

Content rating PG: Some sexual encounters mostly heard rather than seen (this is a hilarious scene in the mini-series, much funnier than the book), some drearily clinical mentions of body parts, etc. Graphic battle scenes. Scatological and prurient language.

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## Diane Barnes says

"In an imperfect world, marriage was a matter of making do with what one had chosen."

In this second trilogy of Guy and Harriet Pringle, we learn more of their marriage, their travels from

Budapest to Greece to Egypt during WWII, their friends, and the Battle of El Alamein (both of them).

Guy continues to be self-centered and blind to the needs of his wife, but always on call for his friends. In "The Balkan Trilogy", they were newlyweds and Harriett was learning that romance didn't last when real life came barging in. In this second set of books, she takes action on a marriage that has been disappointing. And along the way, we meet some of the people thrown together because of the war. We also travel through some beautiful scenery in the land of the pyramids and the dawn of civilization.

I really enjoyed this second set of novels. The whole series together gave me a view of WWII that I was unaware of before; the fight for the Balkans and the action in North Africa. And yes, Harriet finds a way to save her marriage and fight for her independence at the same time.

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## Tony says

This is the second trilogy in an hexalogy about (mostly) Brits in the Second World War being expatriates. We've picked up a soldier in this one and he takes us to the war in chapters that alternate with the continuing story of Guy and Harriet Pringle and their revolving cast of characters. The setting is Cairo, mostly, but there are sidetrips to Damascus and Jerusalem, because all sunshine makes a desert, they say, and they'll have tea in Syria, won't they?

I wondered, and still do wonder, how much of what Manning wrote here is scorching satire. A reader can't be quite sure how much was intentional. It's almost as if Manning was saying, "Look, I was there and this is what I saw and heard, and it's unadulterated. But you tell me what it means." I show, you tell. And she does that with war, with Britishness, and with marriage.

An example:

Guy is almost caricature-ish in being insensitive to Harriet's needs and desires. He's not a lout, not a bad man, just unaware because he's far too busy explaining Finnegans Wake to a couple of Egyptian students and otherwise prepping the Levantine soil for a Marxist garden. As a kind of Aw Shucks apology, he develops the habit of calling Harriet *my little monkey's paw*. Manning never shares Harriet's thoughts on this little endearment. Not once. But I'm absolutely convinced she hated it.

She does the same thing with Guy's Marxist pronouncements. She neither condemns nor endorses them. But you know Harriet must have some opinion.

Sometimes she's not that subtle though. An example here, where a British soldier helps Harriet find accommodations in Syria:

*He led her across the square and into a side street. There was more rifle fire and she asked what the trouble was.*

*'Just the wogs. They're always ticking.'*

*'What's it like here in Damascus?'*

*'Same as everywhere else. Lot of bloody foreigners.'*

Unsaid is that the British are never foreign. But how far does Manning want the reader to take that? Perhaps very far. Harriet and the naïve new soldier are having this discussion about the 'gyppos':

*'You don't think they'd turn on us after all they've done for them?'*

*Harriet laughed at him. 'What have we done for them?'*

*'We've brought them justice and prosperity, haven't we? We've shown them how people ought to live.'*

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*'What have we done here, except make money? I suppose a few rich Egyptians have got richer by supporting us, but the real people of the country, the peasants and the backstreet poor, are just as diseased, underfed and wretched as they ever were.'*

*Aware of his own ignorance, Simon did not argue but changed course. 'Surely they're glad to have us here to protect them?'*

*'They don't think we're here to protect them. They think we're here to use them. And so we are. We're protecting the Suez Canal and the route to India and Clifford's oil company.'*

This led me to think about a character who never appears in the book: Franklin Roosevelt. Historians have painted him in heroic hues, but Roosevelt was a pragmatist, a politician, a charmer. He could lie, too, if he had too. He would need all these skills to deal with his new best friends, Stalin and Churchill. Hero-worshippers like to think that Roosevelt and Churchill acted in collusion, wary of Stalin, and that's certainly true to some extent. Lost often, though, is that Roosevelt played Churchill as much as the pair of them tried to play Stalin. Roosevelt did so because he was well aware that Churchill did not want to lose the war, but perhaps not secondarily, did not want to lose the Empire. I thought of that as I heard a seasoned soldier in this book speak: *Fresh blood and fresh equipment: that's what we need. Give us both and we'll manage somehow. They've got Hitler's intuition and we've got Churchill's interference: 'bout evens things up, wouldn't you say?*

Before I end, this:

War brings death. And death came here. In each trilogy an adult civilian is killed by a gunshot, each time a sort of mistake. But early in this last trilogy, a young boy picks up a grenade in the desert while his mother, oblivious, paints nearby. There is a hole on the side of his face when he is brought home. He will be dead, he is dying. The guests in the home know this. The teller of the story knows this, yes she does. But the parents do not. They are not blinded by grief. They are, instead, unaware of what's been really done. Instead they think a cool drink will help. The father pours water into the hole. But the water keeps spilling out.

Yes, I believe the teller of the story knows this.

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